

# Workplace courage is more deliberation than personality, according to study

September 3 2014, by Elizabeth Lock

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Unlike the cowardly lion in the book *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, who simply drank a potion to muster courage, people in real life deliberate through a process when deciding whether to act bravely in the workplace, according to a study involving the University of Colorado Boulder.

Acts of [courage](#) in the workplace might include admitting a mistake to one's boss, divulging that a product is faulty during a sales meeting with a client, or ordering a superior commander in the military to step down because of inappropriate handling of a mission.

When faced with danger or wrongdoing in the workplace, people first ask themselves if they're personally responsible to act, the study found. People's level of attachment to the victim or level of power in the workplace is often what determines their sense of responsibility to step in.

Once a sense of responsibility is established, people then try to assess the costs of behaving courageously, such as job security and professional relationships. People tend to go forward with their acts of courage despite anticipated costs, according to the paper, forthcoming in the journal *Organization Science*.

"What's surprising about the findings is that they tell us courage is not just a personality trait, it's a behavior that can be learned," said David Hekman, assistant professor of management at the CU-Boulder Leeds

School of Business and co-author of the study. "Also, courage is very social. You compare yourself with the people around you and ask, 'Do I identify with the victim, or am I more powerful than the other people?'"

Four major types of workplace courage were found in the study including standing up to authority, uncovering mistakes, protecting those in need, and structuring uncertainty, or taking a stance on a problem that has no clear solution and possibly serious repercussions.

Pauline Schilpzand, an assistant professor of management in the College of Business at Oregon State University led the study. Terence Mitchell, a professor of management at the University of Washington Foster School of Business, co-authored the study with Hekman.

The researchers interviewed 94 professionals, including executives and military personnel, from a range of private, public, government and nonprofit organizations.

The interviewees were asked to talk about incidences of courage in the workplace, either acted out or observed—data that were crunched by the researchers to find common patterns and categories of bravery.

One participant, who managed regional sales plans for her company, told a story about refusing to adjust the assigned sales quotas of her colleagues per the request of her boss, who wanted to favor some staff members so they'd reach their targets and receive bonuses, and cause others to struggle.

Another participant talked about how at a company party, the CEO unexpectedly got on stage, took the microphone, told the band to stop playing and admitted his own leadership mistakes, promising to make changes, in front of a shocked audience of hundreds. The participant said things improved at the company after the confessional outpouring.

Of the four types of courage, standing up to authority was the most commonly reported by study participants with 67 incidences. It also was the most harmful, with 34 percent of the participants feeling they suffered repercussions for their courageous behavior. The second most common form of courage was protecting those in need with an 11 percent harm rate, followed by uncovering mistakes with a 38 percent harm rate and structuring uncertainty with an 18 percent harm rate, according to Hekman.

While managers naturally might not value courage in the workplace because it often involves subordinates speaking up, which is uncomfortable, they—and ultimately the organization—should because it's beneficial, say the researchers.

"Managers might better grasp the significance of our findings by thinking of courageous [workplace](#) behaviors as a type of organizational immune response that identifies and corrects power abuses, errors, ambiguity and needs before they metastasize and threaten the system as a whole," said Mitchell.

Provided by University of Colorado at Boulder

Citation: Workplace courage is more deliberation than personality, according to study (2014, September 3) retrieved 12 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2014-09-workplace-courage-deliberation-personality.html>

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