CHAPTER 9

Courage and Work
Breaking Routines to Improve Performance

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Organizations are social systems designed to preserve themselves and their status quo. The pervasive influence of norms provides a ready means of control over what people think, say, and do (Hackman, 1992; Gersick & Hackman, 1990). Routines for doing work proscribe the possibilities for accomplishment (Bourdieu, 1990; Cyert & March, 1963; March & Simon, 1958; Nelson & Winter, 1982). Roles create strong scripts for how people behave toward one another (Goffman, 1959). Divisions of labor give rise to divisions of power that enforce subtle rules for relating to one another and to work (Sandelands, 2001; Tiedens, 2000). Expectations for appropriate behavior are formed from the ongoing pattern of routines, norms, roles, and scripts (Bourdieu, 1990; Cohen & Bacdayan, 1994). Given that organizational systems are designed on such pervasive and scripted control, where does courage fit into organizational life? Is courage a meaningful concept in work performance?

In his indictment of the morality of managerial cultures, Jackall (1988) illuminated ways in which managers, dependent on an organization for their economic means and social stature, suppressed their personal morality and courage in the work context. In Jackall’s portrait of organizations, managers rely on expectations, scripts,
roles, and routines to sabotage the common good and preserve the status quo. All in all, when scholars think about organizations, they do not often think of them as places that can bring out the best in people. Yet as emotion researchers have begun to point out, organizations are sites of life, with all of its richness and variety (Ashkenasy, Hartel, & Zerbe 2000; Fineman, 1993, 2000). High-quality performance in organizations often requires people to be at their best. In this chapter, we argue that sustaining high-quality performance in organizational contexts requires employees to act with courage. Building from stories taken from over two hundred employees in the high-technology sector, we create a model of courage in organizations. We propose that courageous action in an organizational system results in changes in the enactment of agency in one’s work, the connections between people in the workplace, and the collectively shared conception of the organization as a whole.

**Defining Courage for Organization Studies**

Courage has been the topic of centuries of philosophical debate, poetic treatment, and political treatise. Becker (1973) proposed that the whole development of social science was a clarification of human heroism, and Tillich (1952) wrote of courage that “few concepts are as useful for the analysis of the human situation” (p. 1). These centuries of writings, however, have not resolved some central questions about the definition of courage. Miller (2000) opens The Mystery of Courage with an illustrative quotation from a soldier’s autobiography: “It is hard to be brave. It is hard to know what bravery is” (p. xiii). Courage has been most interesting to psychologists because of its intimate relationship with fear. William James thought of courage as energizing the will to allow people to face fear (Connell, 1997). In James’s view, courage gave humanity the ability to persist against the unknown.

Although courage has not received much empirical attention in psychology since James, most psychologists have defined it as the ability to persist in spite of fear (Rachman, 1990). The notion of courage implicitly relies on the presence of danger, loss, risk, or potential injury. Without a sense of danger, risk, or vulnerability, there is no courage in an act; hence, we tend to think of courage together with the emotion of fear (Fingfeld, 1999; Shelp, 1984; Van Eynde, 1998). Fear is an emotional response to danger, risk, and vulnerability that theorists have proposed sparks a flight response (Frijda, 1986). Courage is valuable in that it allows us to dampen our immediate response to danger, halting the flight response in order to evaluate the appropriate course of action (Szagun & Schauble, 1997). A courageous person has a proper respect for fear and is able to act or persist in the face of fear (Pears, 1978; Walton, 1986; Yearley, 1990).

Shelp (1984) proposed an extended definition of courage that comes as close to a consensual definition as exists in the psychological, medical, and philosophical traditions: “Courage is the disposition to voluntarily act, perhaps fearfully, in a dangerous circumstance, where the relevant risks are reasonably appraised, in an effort to obtain or preserve some perceived good for oneself or others, recognizing that the desired perceived good may not be realized” (p. 354). Using the insights distilled in this definition, to understand an act or a person as courageous, we must take into account whether (1) free choice is involved in taking the action, (2) some sort of risk is present in the situation, (3) the risk has been adequately appraised, and (4) the action serves worthy aims. In this definition, courage is different from a “pure” emotional state because it must involve certain kinds of cognitive judgments. Szagun (1992) defines courage as an emotion-related mental construct that involves multifaceted emotional experience along with an understanding of risk taking. Szagun finds that by the age of eleven or twelve, children share a belief that something courageous must be somewhat reflective, freely chosen, and not automatic.

In accord with this definition, a courageous person must have a disposition to take risks (Shelp, 1984) yet must also overcome a disposition to take unconsidered risks (Yearley, 1990; Szagun & Schauble, 1997). In philosophy, Aquinas concluded that disregarding fear would hinder the development of courage because it would lead one into foolhardy situations (Yearley, 1990). Little empirical work addresses individual differences in courage due to the difficulty of creating and controlling courage in typical psychological studies. In a study comparing whistleblowers to people who do not object to organizational wrongdoing, Rothschild and Miehe (1999) find no significant individual differences between
uncertainty is a prime consideration in organizational processes (Galbraith, 1973), making this approach to courage highly applicable in studies of organization.

When we address courage in organizational settings, we are addressing everyday action that involves risk, has been freely chosen, demonstrates considered assessment of consequences, and pursues excellence within the circumstances where it occurs. One implication of such a definition is that courageous action will stand out from the routine flow of activity in an organization. Courageous activity, being freely chosen, worthy, practical action in the face of risk, is likely to call for effortful interruption of the scripts, norms, roles, and routines that pattern organizational life. This kind of exceptional action is likely to trigger strong emotions in organizational settings (Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996). We propose that emotions are crucial mediating factors between courageous activity and the transformation of agency at work, connections between people, and the organization as a whole.

**Courageous Actors Influence Observers**

In order to explore courage in the workplace, we rely on an analysis of accounts that were solicited from 201 managers and employees in high-technology companies who were attending training sessions on critical thinking skills. At the beginning of each training session, a one-page questionnaire was given to the participants that contained the following four open-ended questions, modeled after Szagun and Schauble's study (1997) of the experience of courage:

1. Have you ever seen courage at work? If yes, please tell a story about what happened.
2. What made the event or situation seem courageous to you?
3. How did you feel during the event or situation?
4. Did anything in your work change as a result of the event or situation you described?

In response to these open-ended questions, we received 184 stories about events in the workplace that our participants would identify as courageous in some way. Of these stories, 85 percent are interpersonal, in the sense that they were stories about someone
We propose an analogous regulation system operating at a social level, with cognition, emotion, and action intertwined to mutually constitute work performance. As depicted in Figure 9.1, our model takes into account that people in organizations motivate and regulate their behavior based in part on the norms, roles, scripts, and routines that come to be taken for granted in the organization. When people encounter behavior that is discrepant from the taken-for-granted norms, roles, scripts, and routines, they emotionally sense and cognitively monitor features of the exceptional action to determine progress toward worthy goals and feelings and values that are important in the organization (Brissett & Edgley, 1990; Gardner & Avolio, 1998; Grove & Fisk, 1989; Rosen, 1985). This monitoring process is part of ascribing courage to exceptional organizational activity, as people make inferences about the risk involved, the amount of free choice available to the actor, and the quality of judgment that motivates the behavior, along with the purposes of the exceptional action.

In Carver and Scheier’s (1990) psychological model, it is the movement toward a goal, and the speed of that movement, that determine affective response. In developing a dynamic model of work performance that weaves threads of cognition, emotion, and action into a social fabric, it is important to remind ourselves that workplace sense-making processes are both emotional and cognitive, created through work cultures, routines, values, and interactions that are not solely individual (Bartel & Saavedra, 2000; Huy, 1999; Katz, 1999; Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978; Rafaeli & Worline, 2001;
Weick, 1995). Thus, in our model, people use their emotional and cognitive presence to monitor the social world, and violations of norms, roles, scripts, or routines prompt sense-making processes regarding meaning, as well as progress and speed toward desired goals.

Since discerning courage requires an ability to be both actor and observer, it is not surprising that we can more readily see courage in others than we can in ourselves. Especially in organizations, where action is at a premium, people can easily observe others’ performances (Brissett & Edgley, 1990; Gardner & Avolio, 1998; Giacalone & Rosenfeld, 1989; Goffman, 1959; Rosen, 1985; Rosenfeld, Giacalone, & Riordan, 1995). The stories of courage that we gathered demonstrate that people feel strong emotion when behavior is outside normative bounds and use their inferences about levels of risk, free choice, quality of judgment, and worth of the activity to determine whether exceptional action is courageous. The combination of emotional response and cognitive inference about exceptional activity in the organization creates the possibility for changes in self-directed thoughts and feelings. The dynamics described here and depicted in Figure 9.1 provide the basis for our proposition that courage in organizations transforms people’s enactment of agency in their work, their connections with others in the organization, and their sense of the organization as a whole.

**Courage Changes the Possibilities for Agency in Organizations**

An influenced observer, in our analysis, is someone who sees courage in an organizational environment, experiences the emotions that are sparked by the courageous action, and is changed by the experience. We believe these actor-observer dynamics can take place in regard to oneself, but as evidenced by the large number of interpersonal responses to requests for stories about courage, it is easier for employees to observe such things as risk, choice, judgment, and worthy ends in others. We think it is likely that people who have witnessed courageous action on the part of others in similar roles will be able to act with courage themselves in a future situation (Bandura, 1977; Nemeth & Chiles, 1988), in part because they may be able to perceive more clearly the effort that they could take on behalf of worthy ends in the organization. A quintessential example of this dynamic in the stories we collected comes from Sonja, a graphic designer in a software firm (all names of research participants have been changed):

My manager had the courage to tell the corporate branding people that the visual direction they had chosen for packaging and advertising was not good. He went on to tell them that we wouldn’t be following their direction and that we would ship our own designs. If they wanted everything to match, they would have to follow our lead. He explained why this was better for the company. This seemed courageous to me because it was very bold and in some ways seemed “inappropriate.” The branding people are experts and here we were telling them that their entire effort was going to fail.

I felt two things during this event. One, I felt very proud of my manager and proud to be on his team. I also felt a bit exposed, because it was my design skills that he was gambling on. I felt scared because the tension in the room was extremely high, and I didn’t want to be part of a controversy. After this event, I realized that my job and responsibilities are so much larger than I see them. It also made me realize that if you believe in what you are doing or designing, then it doesn’t matter who you need to defend the design to or how high you want to push it because it is okay to do that. It made me feel very qualified and capable to do this work, where before I felt like there were so many other people who could do a better job than me.

Sonja experiences this incident as a violation of the corporate routine. In noting that the “branding people” are “experts,” she reveals her expectation that their opinions will hold weight and usually win out in such decisions. The fact that the “experts” are made to change their usual mode of operating is a violation of routines in the design world. In response to this exceptional action, Sonja senses and monitors the situation for the kinds of elements we have already described that will help her determine whether her manager is acting with courage. For example, she notes that the manager is doing something risky, as marked by her description of it as “bold” and her feeling that something is “inappropriate.” In addition, she infers that the manager is using wise judgment in pressing...
this issue, which she notes by stating that the manager can explain why his decision is better for the company.

In response to this incident of everyday courage in the organization, Sonja’s agency in her role is changed. She reports that her responsibilities feel enlarged and that she has a heightened sense of willingness to push for the validity of her own designs. After witnessing this incident, Sonja describes herself as feeling increasingly qualified and capable, indicating a renewed sense of self-efficacy and worth in regard to her role. Sonja’s feelings of efficacy go hand in hand with her realization that she can enact a larger role for herself in the organization. Sonja’s sense of agency is buoyed by this incident, building her ability to carry out her work competently.

Creed and Scully (2001) use the term situated embedded agency to describe how people engage in competent behavior in organizations. Rather than seeing employees as passive actors or prisoners of organizational scripts, they note the ways in which people navigate within institutional norms and routines and use their discretion to make a difference in collective outcomes. Sonja’s story relates to Creed and Scully’s notion of competence in that it demonstrates how Sonja and her manager move within the routines of the organization to get their work done. Experiencing courage in an organization changes people’s views of the expanse of action available to them. This widened vision of the discretionary room within the institutional practices enhances people’s agency in their work roles. For instance, Sonja’s realization that it does not matter “who you need to defend the design to or how high you want to push it” is a re-visioning of her discretion within the institutional practices of the design world. Her way of noting this is that “it’s okay to do that.” Her widened view of discretion in the organization is accompanied by emotions that buoy her confidence and sense of competence, helping to create a dramatically enlarged picture of what is possible in her role. The process by which the experience of courage changes the enactment of agency is depicted in figure 9.2.

Our claim that experiencing courage changes the possibilities for agency is not intended to imply that such changes are always positive. Seeing activity that is outside expected roles, norms, scripts, or routines can also trigger a dampening of vision about what is possible in a role, as illustrated in a story told by Juan, a programmer in a software company:
Years ago, I was working for a guy who started his own company out of his home. He was new to the business and made a fixed bid on a consulting job without knowing the full extent of the problem. The customer insisted on extra work that wasn’t explicitly spelled out. This guy could have found some way to get out of the situation, but instead he spent many hours of unpaid time to give the customer what he agreed on.

Doing that extra work almost killed his young company, but he insisted on doing it, even after being offered an out. He risked his company to keep his word. I would have taken the out if it were me at the time. This probably made me extremely cautious in making my own promises for years afterward.

As Juan experiences the emotional pull between keeping a commitment and the vast amount of work created by a mistake, he is discerning that the perseverance on the part of the entrepreneur is courageous. The perseverance of the entrepreneur violated Juan’s scripts for work activity, as he indicated when he noted that he would have “taken the out.” In response to this exceptional action, Juan senses the risk to the company, as illustrated in his comment that the “extra work almost killed his young company.” Juan infers that the choice to persist was made freely by the entrepreneur, even in the face of ways to opt out of the situation. Juan also monitors the worth of the perseverance, as illustrated in his comment that the entrepreneur “risked his company to keep his word.”

In response to seeing courage in the entrepreneur’s persistence, however, Juan writes that his own choices became more cautious. Juan’s sense of agency and what is possible in his role were limited rather than expanded by witnessing this instance of courage. Social learning theory (Bandura, 1977) suggests that Juan’s view of making choices is changed by seeing the implications of another’s choices. In Juan’s story, we see this change accompanied by a feeling of cautiousness. Creed and Scully (2001) offer an addition to a social learning explanation of Juan’s experience in their view of skilled embedded agency as a source of competence. Juan creates competence within his role through taking precautions in making a work commitment. Through his experience of courage, Juan may become more competent in how he enacts his role, although the changes in his sense of agency are very different than those that Sonja described.

Emotion Mediates Changes in Agency

Sonja’s and Juan’s stories are accounts of changing agency in response to experiencing courage at work. The striking difference in tone and impact between Sonja’s story and Juan’s story highlights the mediating role of emotion in these experiences. Juan does not use many emotion terms to describe his feelings at the time, yet the overall tone of the story is cautious, anxious, and dejected. In contrast, Sonja writes that she feels proud of her manager and her position in the group. Although her pride is tinged with fear, the overall tone of her story is positive and upbeat. The affective tone and emotional response to experiences of courage at work is an important determinant of the resulting changes in agency.

We have discovered through these stories of courage at work that modern technological work involves deep and powerful emotions. In relying on stories, we call on a psychological tradition that values the conversational nature of our social lives (Edwards & Potter, 1992; Harre & Gillett, 1994). Stories are powerful modes through which we make sense of our experiences of and with others (Veroff, Chadiha, Leber, & Sutherland, 1993; Weick, 1995). Stories are also a dominant medium for storing and communicating information to others about things that have occurred, reasons for success or failure, and general principles of behavior (Baumeister & Newman, 1994). By describing the nature of courage in a story form, our respondents were “closer to the experience itself” (Baumeister & Newman, 1994, p. 677) and thus were more connected to the emotional content of the event they were recalling. Stories of courage are a particularly good method to reveal the holistic, dynamic, emotional nature of work performance. Because emotion is so prominent and influential in these stories, they clarify the ways in which work performance is constituted in and through emotion.

Emotion researchers argue that the experience of emotion goes along with specific action tendencies (Frijda, 1986; Lazarus, 1991; Levenson, 1994). Essentially, the idea is that when we experience an emotion, we are simultaneously moved toward an action, such as fear creating the impulse to flee (Frijda, 1986). Fredrickson (1998), in what she calls the broaden-and-build model of positive emotion, has expanded this idea into “thought-action repertoires,” in which both
positive and negative emotions are accompanied by an impulse toward specific thoughts and actions, such that fear is associated with the urge to escape, anger with the urge to attack, joy with the urge to play, pride with the urge to achieve, contentment with the urge to savor, and so on (Fredrickson, 1998, in press). The association of emotion with specific thought-action repertoires is important to the experience of courage in organizations. When solely negative emotion is generated by the experience of courage at work, it will generate particular thought-action repertoires that limit activity, close the range of options, and dampen creativity. And when positive emotion is generated by the experience of courage at work, it will generate particular thought-action repertoires that expand activity, broaden the range of options, and heighten creativity.

It may be rare that people experience solely positive emotion in response to organizational events. Researchers looking into the role of emotion in sport have discovered that high performance is often accompanied by a mix of positive and negative emotions (Hanin, 2000), similar to that described by Sonja. It appears that a combination of positive feelings about an activity and negative feelings related to the demands of the situation seem to result in heightened performance (Hanin, 2000). Juan, in contrast to Sonja, does not report any positive emotions in response to the entrepreneur’s courageous persistence. That Juan experienced solely anxiety or distress when observing courage implies that his thought-action repertoire would involve limiting his engagement, escaping from the situation, and carefully avoiding a similar situation in the future. In contrast, Sonja’s positive emotion of pride may have triggered a different thought-action repertoire such that she was moved to expand her activity, heighten her creativity, and strive to accomplish more in the organization. Pride, in particular, Fredrickson (in press) suggests, is an emotion that opens the door for the advancement of achievement-related goals.

Carver and Scheier’s (1990, 1998) theory of self-regulation further suggests that emotion arises from a sense of the rate of progress toward desired goals. Analogizing this process at a social level and assuming that monitoring can be an interpersonal process, Juan would sense that the entrepreneur is not quickly moving toward his desired goals, giving rise to negative affect in relation to his perseverance. According to Carver and Scheier (1998), this negative affect would signal to Juan that the entrepreneur should disengage from this activity and that continuing may be destructive. Sonja, on the other hand, would sense her manager’s and her own movement toward valued goals at a rate faster than expected, due to the manager’s unexpected leapfrogging of the expert designers, giving rise to positive affect. In turn, this positive affect acts as a cue for Sonja to engage in further activity in accord with these goals (Carver & Scheier, 1998).

In organizational settings, this observed relationship between emotion and activity appears as a constant performance stream that is continually interwoven with feeling (Sandelands, 1988). Moments when norms, roles, scripts, and routines are violated, however, give rise to powerful emotional responses. These exceptional actions have the ability to create change in organizational performance. When people experience negatively valenced emotions in response to courageous activity, agency may be narrowed, decision making may become more cautious, and creativity may be limited. In contrast, when positively valenced emotions are experienced in response to courageous activity, agency may be broadened, decision making may be less cautious, and creativity may be enhanced.

**Courage Changes the Quality of Connection in Organizations**

Many accounts of work performance focus on individual outcomes. Yet organizations are composed of relationships and connections (Bradbury & Lichtenstein, 2000; Feldman & Rafaeli, 2001; Simon, 1981; Sandelands & Stablein, 1987), suggesting that performance is often more interpersonal than our theories allow. Because we can see organizations as networks of connected people (Burt, 1982, 1992; Dacin, Vantresca, & Beal, 1999) and as compositions of relationships (Bradbury & Lichtenstein, 2000; Kahn, 1998), a large portion of work performance is tied to the establishment and maintenance of interpersonal connections. The quality of these connections has a great deal of impact on people’s ability to get work accomplished and on the functioning of the organization as a whole (Gersick, Bartunek, & Dutton, 2000; Kahn, 1998).

High-quality connections between people develop from a combination of knowledge, emotion, and interaction (Miller & Stiver,
Some researchers describe the quality of connections in terms of knowledge and emotional attunement (Benner, Tanner, & Chesla, 1996; Fletcher, 1998; Jacques, 1993). Knowing when to create rapport and when not to, when to initiate creative action and when to make quick decisions are part of what constitutes valuable, high-quality connections (Benner et al., 1996; Fletcher, 1998; Jacques, 1993). Connections are also created and maintained through interaction within organizational routines. Feldman and Rafaeli (2001) argue that routines create connections between people that facilitate shared understandings about tasks and the larger organizational mission. When courageous activity in organizations upsets routines and disrupts taken-for-granted roles and scripts, it may also disrupt the emotion, knowledge, and interaction patterns that sustain connections between people.

Siri, a new employee in a software firm, offers an example of the way in which a courageous action can change the quality of a connection between people:

At school, after having an argument with a teacher that was clearly my fault, he apologized to me for his part in the argument. It seemed courageous to me because it was against the run of authority and something that was above his moral right. It taught me the concept of responsibility for a person's part in any incident, and made me feel very admiring and respectful.

For Siri, this apology is outside his expectations for the role of teacher and outside the routine activity for someone on the winning side of an argument. Siri senses and monitors the situation for the factors that are important in ascribing courage. He infers that the teacher freely chooses to apologize, which he notes by indicating that there was no fault on the teacher's part. He similarly infers worthy ends on the part of the teacher, describing the activity as above his "moral right." He captures some of the feeling experience of this exceptional action when he describes the apology as "against the run of authority." In the wake of Siri's interpretation of this activity as courageous, he experiences feelings such as respect and admiration for the teacher. He writes that this interaction taught him basic lessons about accepting personal responsibility and resolving conflicts.

As a result of a courageous apology, the quality of the connection between Siri and his teacher is changed. Knowledge between the interactants is changed, as Siri now understands the teacher differently and thinks differently about his own moral responsibility (Benner et al., 1996). Emotions between the interactants are changed, with enhanced respect and admiration offering Siri and the teacher emotional resources to build a higher-quality connection (Miller & Stiver, 1991). Routines for interaction are also changed, as evidenced by Siri's reexamination of responsibility and its implications for how to handle conflict resolution in the future (Feldman & Rafaeli, 2001). As a result of the combination of changes in knowledge, emotion, and routine, the connection between Siri and the teacher is strengthened. Siri is drawn toward the teacher and may come to regard him as a kind of intellectual role model (Cavanagh & Moberg, 1999; Nemeth & Chiles, 1988). The process by which courage in an organization changes the quality of connection between people is depicted in frame 2 of Figure 9.2.

As with potential changes in agency, changes in the quality of connection between people in response to an experience of courage are not always positive. Sara, an engineer in a software firm, offered an example of connections being both diminished and strengthened through observing courage:

A coworker was called in to meet with a new vice president for our group. The employee had approximately two years of experience with the company, while the vice president had approximately three weeks of experience. The vice president accused the engineer of not doing her job and outlined her ineptitude in general. Shocked by the accusations, the engineer listed her work and education, qualifications, and experience. She then asked the vice president for specific examples to support her opinion. The vice president had no examples.

This seemed courageous to me because the engineer could have simply taken the "abuse" and apologized, although she was not in fact guilty of such behavior. Rather, she questioned the basis of the vice president's assumptions. This decision set the tone for their future working relationship. I felt shocked and disbelieving as this was happening. Afterward, I worked harder to prove myself to this vice president and to document my own activities for a similar encounter. I lost respect for the vice president and gained respect for the engineer.
For Sara, the behavior of the vice president was unexpected due to her senior role and for her level of experience in the organization. The vice president's attack was also a violation of the "get to know you" routines that exist in most organizations. The violation of the roles and routines transforms the quality of the connection between Sara and the vice president. While Sara discerns courage on the part of her coworker, her response to the vice president's action in this incident is one of shock and disbelief. Her immediate reaction is to engage defensive routines in the connection, such as preparing for confrontation and documenting her abilities and activities (Argyris, 1982; Miller & Stiver, 1991). The negative emotion that Sara feels in response to the initial incident is carried into a lasting change in the emotional tone of the connection, as represented by her comment that she "lost respect" for the vice president. The loss of respect between Sara and the vice president diminishes their emotional resourcefulness and weakens the quality of the connection (Miller & Stiver, 1991).

The multiple connections that compose organizations are evident in Sara's story. In addition to the change in quality of connection between Sara and the vice president, Sara's connection with her coworker is enhanced through this incident. Sara sees her coworker as courageous and takes her response to the vice president as a kind of model for her future behavior (Nemeth & Chiles, 1988). The quality of the coworker's connection to the vice president is also changed by this incident, as illustrated in Sara's comment that this interaction "set the tone for their future working relationship." As illustrated by both Siri's and Sara's stories, witnessing a courageous incident in everyday organizational life has the potential to transform the quality of connections between coworkers and between employees and managers.

**Emotion Mediates Changes in the Quality of Connections Between People**

Evans and White (1981), setting out to create an empirical definition of courage, found a potential actor-observer difference in the perception of courage. Regardless of age level, people seem to use their own sense of fear of a situation to understand how brave another person is being. Whether the same sense of fear is present in the courageous actor, people seem to use their own feelings as a guide to understanding others. This research brings into relief the organizational reality that emotions such as fear and qualities such as courage are created as much through social observation as they are through individual difference (Fineman, 1993; Katz, 1999; Rafaeli & Worline, 2001). In fact, few researchers grapple with the quandary that an action may be perceived as courageous yet the person carrying it out will deny having courage. This paradox seems to be common in everyday settings (Finfgeld, 1999; Worline & Wrzesniewski, 2001). Understanding how courage transforms the quality of connections in organizations reveals the ways in which emotion transcends individual-level analysis and social realities are interpersonally and mutually created (Edwards & Potter, 1992; Gergen, 1994; Harre & Gillett, 1994; Rafaeli & Worline, 2001; Sampson, 1998).

Instances of courage in organizations spark emotion in many people—onlookers as well as those involved. The multiple audiences in organizations create, as Rafaeli and Worline (2001) recently argued, the virtual impossibility of treating emotion as an individual force in social organization. Exploring the history of emotion research in organizational scholarship, Rafaeli and Worline point out that the inability to distinguish between individually "felt" emotion and organizationally required "displayed" emotion, along with the multiple audiences who participate in emotional interactions, creates situations in which emotion seems to be generated and sustained by the life of the organization. Socially created emotion generated in work interactions has a mediating role in transforming the quality of connections between people. Siri's and Sara's constructions of their own and others' emotions affect the quality of their connections with others in their work organizations.

Emotions that mediate changes in the quality of connection are vital to work performance. Such emotions may enhance or diminish work engagement (Kahn, 1990), respect (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1999) and trust (Kramer, 1999; Uzzi, 1997), which have been shown to be crucial to organizational performance. Baumeister and Leary (1995) suggest that forging high-quality connections with others is a way to introduce meaning into work life. Benner and her colleagues
Whistle-blowers often feel strongly connected to their organizations and talk about their action as serving the overarching purposes of the organization or of society (Glazer & Glazer, 1989; Rothschild & Miethe, 1999). Shepela and her colleagues (1999) note that courageous resisters such as those who sheltered potential Holocaust victims are distinguished by a strong sense of "wesness" with humanity, and hence may be inclined to take risky action in order to serve the whole of society. Finfgeld (1999) finds that people who are terminally ill sustain their courageous persistence by engaging in community service. Across numerous contexts, courageous action is connected to perceptions of service to a social whole.

In the stories we gathered from employees and managers in the high-technology sector, courageous activity is often tied to the broader aims of the organization. When assumptions about work norms, routines, roles, and scripts are disrupted, attempts to understand and make sense of the disruption ensue (Weick, 1995). One of the factors that people consider is the worth of the action, whether or not disruptive activity is directed at aims that serve a broader purpose or an aim espoused by the organization as a whole. Our analysis of courage stories suggests that behavior "outside the grooves" of routines seems to be evaluated for not only its punishment potential (Deutsch, 1961), as psychologists have suggested, but also for its service to the group or organization.

An example of a courageous activity that serves the broader mission of the organization is offered in Kurt’s account of a test manager who was working with his team of engineers:

The test manager took a stand for his position to not let any new features creep into the product, despite the entire war team against him, even his manager’s opposition. One could say he’s inflexible, but in this case, the inflexibility was ultimately needed to ship the product on time, which was by far more important than the new features.

This seemed courageous to me because against all odds, against authority, and against the majority, he made his point and did the best for the product. It felt confrontational, I felt a little sympathy for him, and he gained a lot of respect from me afterwards. After this, I try to take a stronger stand whenever needed and whenever I believe I’m right and the results matter to the bottom line.
Kurt sees his coworker’s ability to take a stand against pressure to expand a product as courageous. Kurt monitors the violations of the routines and role responsibilities in the organization for unreasonable or self-serving behavior, as noted by his admission that this could simply be “inflexibility” on the part of the test manager. Kurt also senses the risk in his coworker’s action, as noted by his description of it as “against all odds, against authority, and against the majority.” Because Kurt concludes that this risky violation of organizational protocol serves the broader purposes of the whole organization, he comes to see the test manager as courageous. Kurt describes the test manager as a kind of hero, protecting the overarching goals of the organization against the whims of people who would jeopardize it. When Kurt observes this instance of courage, his feeling of respect for the test manager is heightened, and he finds in himself a renewed sense that he too can serve the best interests of the organization. The process by which courage changes the possibilities for the organization as a whole is depicted in frame 3 of Figure 9.2.

Wrzesniewski and Dutton (2001) have recently argued that people use the organizational mission as a part of how they craft the accomplishment of their work. In their example, when hospital cleaners see themselves as connected to the organizational mandate of healing, they do their job tasks differently so as to help patients and visitors heal. Experiencing courage in an organization may be one way in which the mission and mandate of the organization become visible and viable as a part of people’s everyday work. In order for people to craft their work according to the mission and goals of the organization, a vision of the mission must be accessible even to people in positions that are removed from the formal leadership. In Kurt’s story, courageous work performance is one way in which people see, feel, and experience the values, standards, and possibilities of the organization in action. When people experience the organization’s mission and vision in relation to themselves, their resources for action change. Kurt is prompted to attend to ways in which his silence affects the organization’s goals. As a result, he comes to view his own opinions and skills as important to the organization’s overall performance.

Courageous work performance may be a kind of informal leadership that has the potential to affect formal leadership as well. Max, a software developer, offers an example of courage that created interaction between formal and informal leadership:

A colleague of mine questioned the complete product line and direction of the product. He was a software developer with less than two years of experience. He told our manager (and later the chief technical officer directly) that the technology was all wrongly focused.

It was courageous to stand up and question the purpose of the whole product line, to question a senior manager. He prepared data, articles, reviews, and market research to back up his claim. He did this just a month before the company’s initial public offering.

I felt inspired and motivated to stand up and vocalize my thoughts and doubts. For any question or issue, it is important to have backup information to validate the stand. It also changed my thinking that upper management knows everything. I learned to ask good questions and prepare supporting data.

In my workplace, management acknowledged that the technology and product lines needed revisiting, and a number of reviews and follow-up alignments of product line and technology followed.

Max finds courage in a junior member of the organization risking confrontation with the senior leadership in order to make the organization’s vision and product line more successful. Max sees his coworker’s action as a strong violation of the role of junior engineer and the routines of carrying out orders that accompany hierarchical organizations (Mintzberg, 1979; Sandelands, 2001). Max monitors the exceptional action of his coworker for good judgment, as he indicates when he describes that the engineer is well prepared with multiple sources of evidence to support his claims. Max reveals the tension he sensed in this experience when he notes that this was just a month prior to the company’s initial public offering, a time of great stress and urgency when people are expected to fall in line in support of the organization. Max experiences strong emotions of inspiration and motivation in response to this incident. Inspiration is an emotion related to a sense of the whole, similar to “elevation” that Haidt (2000) described. Inspiration and elevation are sparked by seeing someone go beyond what is expected or beyond what seems humanly possible (Haidt, 2000). The feeling of inspiration changes Max’s connection to the organization as a whole, changing his view of the role of management, how the organization should be run, and how he should participate.

Max further indicates that the organization’s technology and strategy are transformed through this interaction of informal
and formal leadership. For Max, and potentially for many others who witnessed this incident, the organization is both materially and socially changed. It is materially transformed, as the technology and product line changes, and socially transformed as the “management knows everything” myth vanishes. This courageous act that brings the informal leadership into interaction with the formal leadership sparks strong emotions that may be related to an organization’s overall emotional capability (Huy, 1999). Through the action of his coworker, Max not only sees his ability to participate in the organization differently, but also witnesses the transformation of the direction, mission, and mandate of the organization.

Emotion Mediates Changes in People’s Sense of the Organization as a Whole

In Kurt’s and Max’s stories of courageous work performance, strong emotions are interwoven with the “doing” of the work and the mission of the organization. These emotions play an important mediating role between the experience of courage and a changed sense of organization. Kurt writes that he feels confrontation, sympathy, and increased respect as he experiences his coworker’s courageous resistance. Max writes that he feels inspired and motivated as he sees his coworker influence the organization’s strategy and product line. These emotions help facilitate a changed sense of participation in the organization as a whole and a deepened connection to the aims of the organization. In keeping with scholars who have proposed that we perceive social wholes largely through feeling (Sandelands, 1998), we propose that violations of routines are often interpreted through a feeling of the whole. Actions that violate routines in order to serve the group or the organization’s larger purpose are felt as courageous. Merely self-serving behavior, however, is not felt in the same way (Finfgeld, 1999). Accounts of courage in organizations, like those from Kurt and Max, tend to emphasize feelings such as confrontation and inspiration, which are emotional responses to seeing “good” or “moral” activity (Haidt, 2000). Courageous activity makes the social whole present through feeling.

Emotions sparked by the experience of courage in organizations help people interpret action in the organization (Fineman, 1993; Weick, 1995). As an important feature of the organization’s culture and context, emotion is one factor that shapes what people notice and helps determine how they will interpret what they notice (Daft & Weick, 1984; Starbuck & Milliken, 1988; Rafaeli & Worline, 2001). When people feel inspired by action in an organization, they interpret their own actions as important contributions to the organization as a whole. In addition, emotions in response to courageous activity become part of the feeling of the whole that guides future thought and action. The construal of feelings in response to exceptional action—that is, whether the observer experiences a courageous incident as inspirational or defeating—has a direct impact on the accomplishment of work and the interpretations of the whole that are sustained over time (Harre & Gillett, 1994; Katz, 1999).

As with changes in agency and connection, changes in the organization in response to courageous action may not be positive. In some instances, seeing courageous activity in the organization generates feelings of guilt or displeasure rather than feelings of awe or admiration. As we have argued, when people experience negative emotions in response to the experience of courage, the negative emotion triggers avoidance patterns (Carver et al., 2000) and narrowed thought-action repertoires (Fredrickson, 1998). In relation to participation in the organization, when people experience courage and feel emotions such as inspiration and admiration, approach routines and broadening thought-action repertoires ensue, and people are likely to invest in the organization. In contrast, when people experience courage in the organization and feel emotions such as anxiety, despair, or guilt, avoidance routines and dampening thought-action repertoires ensue, and people are likely to withdraw from participation in the organization.

Conclusion

Courage is part of the texture of the workplace. Tight deadlines, difficult relationships, admitting mistakes, accepting failures—these are the kinds of challenges that people in organizations face daily. In contemporary work, courage is not simply the greatness of leadership or the goodness of moral authority, but rather is a lens into strength, skill, and agency in organizations. Courage contains a destructive edge, of which we cannot lose sight (Rorty,
Yet demanding work situations also create the possibility for challenge, growth, and resilience (Dweck & Leggett, 1988). This chapter makes a case that understanding how people respond to challenging work environments requires organizational scholars to explore understudied human qualities such as courage.

Seeing courage in work performance reveals a deep emotional current in everyday work life. Performance is interwoven with emotion. Hodson (1998) finds that emotions such as pride and shame are highly important in promoting desirable organizational outcomes. Pratt and Barnett (1997) report that Amway distributors rely on emotion to produce organizational learning. Hirokawa, DeGooyer, and Valde (2000) find that emotions figure as a major reason that people cite for the failure or success of small groups.

More clearly than ever before, research is documenting the importance of emotion in organizational performance. Emotion is integral to organizational life (Rafaeli & Worline, 2001).

In this chapter, we have used the concept of courage in organizations to build a dynamic model of work performance from interwoven threads of thought, feeling, and action. This model demonstrates that moments of high-level performance in the organization disrupt taken-for-granted roles, scripts, norms, and routines and prompt cognitive and emotional sense-making processes that create the meanings attached to the disruption of taken-for-granted patterns. When exceptional action in an organization involves free choice, risk, or vulnerability, features accurate assessment of the consequences, and is directed at worthy aims, it is interpreted as courageous. Courageous activity has the potential to transform people’s sense of agency in their work by widening their vision of the discretionary action available within their role and triggering emotions that buoy feelings of competence. Courageous activity has the potential to transform the quality of connections between people in organizations by changing the relational knowledge, beliefs, and routines that people use in their work, as well as triggering emotions that sustain resourcefulness between people. Courageous activity has the potential to transform the organization as a whole through changing people’s participation and felt connection to the organization’s mission and goals.

A recent study of the introduction of new technology in a large midwestern health care organization revealed that employees who fear making mistakes are less likely to experiment with new technology systems and by extension are less likely to become proficient with the technology (Lee, 2001). The failure of courage in organizations is directly tied to failures in organizational performance. In order to meet the challenges of the contemporary marketplace, organizations across all types of industries are going to have to find ways to foster courage. Our model of courage at work suggests that the emotion created by disruption in routines in the organization is critical to the agency and adaptive capability that people exhibit in the wake of change. Broadened possibility, expanded agency, higher-quality connections, and a vital sense of the organizational whole are possible when courage is an accepted part of the organizational landscape.

As organizational scholars, we will not fully understand the highest levels of organizational performance until we examine factors in the organization that foster an ability to respond to challenge with courage and generate positive emotion that inspires others to see broadened possibilities for agency, connection, and change.

Postscript: Courage and Work After September 11

This research was completed prior to the terrorist attacks in the United States on September 11, 2001. It will be read through new eyes after the events of that day. Before September 11, we were too often guilty of thinking of courage as irrelevant to the workplace or simply a concept that mattered for the study of leadership. Events in the world have reminded us of the shortsightedness of such a perspective. Too often, organizational research disregards work that serves the public, such as that done by firefighters and postal workers. Too often, organizational scholars ignore public servants such as politicians and soldiers who spend their time in service of creating and sustaining a free and democratic society. The events of September 11 and afterward remind us that courage is a staple of all such work, and it deserves our time, care, and attention.

September 11 brought us more stories of courage on the part of bond traders and business managers and corporate secretaries too—different from those featured in the bulk of this chapter yet similar in their themes. One of the moving stories in the wake of
the events at the World Trade Center, featured in the September 16 edition of the *New York Times*, was that of a corporate manager, Harry Ramos, who gathered people from his floor into the stairwell and began leading them down the seventy flights of stairs that they would have to descend to safety. Along the way, Ramos and his companions picked up others, strangers, who were also trying to find a way out of the building. One of these strangers, Victor, stopped on the thirty-sixth floor and could go no further. Harry Ramos sent the others ahead to continue down the stairs, turning back as Victor pleaded not to be alone. The last words that his coworkers heard from Harry Ramos were, “Victor, don’t worry. I’m with you.” Harry Ramos understood the power of human connection and chose to give comfort to a fellow human being, even in the midst of terror and destruction. Stories such as this one demonstrate that courage is indeed born from and sustained within human connections. They give us a terrible and powerful view of how courage can transform human relationship.

When we read the stories from September 11, we privately ask ourselves if we could have acted in the same way. In that private questioning is the seed of the reflective process of courage we have proposed in this chapter. We cannot know, of course, how we would act. The philosopher Thomas Aquinas wrote that it was impossible, through schooling or even through faith, to instill courage. The best we can do, Aquinas concluded, is to prepare ourselves daily for moments that involve fear by cultivating wise judgment and valuing the shared humanity of others. We know that work such as firefighting is an example of daily practice in preparation for situations that involve fear, discerning judgment, and the value of shared humanity. The November 2001 edition of *Men’s Journal* features stories from firefighters about their experiences on September 11. In introducing their stories, the journalist writes that the firefighters’ most common response to questions was, “We’re just doing our job.” This response echoes the responses from our research on courage in all kinds of workplaces—that daily preparation for difficult situations changes one’s perspective on what comprises courageous activity. Given this difference in perspective between onlookers and actors, between firefighters and laypeople, it becomes even more necessary to develop models of courage that take into account the social and interpersonal dimensions of this most human virtue.

As we slowly begin to gather and tell all of the stories of courage from September 11, those stories will undoubtedly buoy us and help us to heal. They will offer us additional lessons about the nature of courage and work, lessons we have only begun to explore in this chapter. One such lesson is that courage is not the opposite of fear. September 11 shows us that only insanity could produce fearlessness in the wake of such a tragedy. Quoted in the *New York Times Magazine* on September 23, 2001, a New York City firefighter says, “Every fire is scary. That’s the way it is. You’re a damned liar if you say you’re not scared.” Firefighters, and probably many other workers as well, develop an intimacy with fear so that it becomes a guide to doing work on the edge of what is possible. The Mohawk tribe of Native Americans, who are famous for their ability to walk tightrope-thin beams of steel to build skyscrapers, refuse to work with anyone who is not afraid. In such situations, with such training, fear becomes a way to remain mindful and not lose focus. Organizational theory often loses this emotional perspective on demanding work. Working heedfully and mindfully (Weick & Roberts, 1993; Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 1999) must in some way involve this relationship of courage and fear. Complex emotional processes such as these certainly deserve more attention in our research on all kinds of organizations.

September 11 presents the world with a great leadership challenge. Our leaders now need courage too. They must be mindful, walking the cliff edge of danger. They must honor the connections between people. And they must find a way to use their judgment to sustain a sense of the society as a whole. In order to sustain a society’s courage, our leaders need a richer vision of the social dimensions of courageous activity. Organizational scholars might contribute to the response to September 11 by uncovering how leaders in the twenty-first century sustain courage in their societies and in their organizations. Our theories and research have usually focused on the leader as a separate entity, looking for courage as an internal attribute that distinguishes one leader from the next or influences some limited task. In the wake of September 11, we see that leaders must summon up their courage and that as they do so, the rest of us are changed as well.

Courage is wise action in the face of danger that honors the visceral connection of human being to human being. The firefighters who gave their lives demonstrate this. The story of Harry Ramos
is a tribute to it. The leadership choices that our society makes must reflect as much. Organizational scholars are called, more than ever before, to understand how we can build wise, effective, courageous organizations and how such organizations can develop, sustain, and support wise, effective, and courageous people.

References


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