

**Self Perceptions of Women and their courageousness:  
Some implications for pragmatic management**

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# Self Perceptions of Women and their courageousness: Some implications for pragmatic management

## ABSTRACT

Courage is often equated in popular culture all over the world with acts of bravery, usually exhibited in combat or dangerous situations and presumably by mainly ‘manly’ men. In this study 750 women were asked to choose up to but no more than 9 characteristics out of a list of 36 that they felt best described them. Only 11% selected the word *courageous*. Self-identified courageous women were very similar to women who did not identify themselves as being courageous. This has both interesting philosophical and pragmatic implications. The paper examines the concept and characteristics of different types of courage, and comments on the implications for management and for courage-building education and training for both gender groups.

**Keywords:-** courage;management;education;training;pragmatic;perceptions

## INTRODUCTION

The origins of the word ‘courage’ , from the early French word *corage* meaning “heart and spirit,” is significant. Courage is one of the more ancient virtues of both individuals as well as managers. Importantly, the specified emphasis on exhibiting and indeed championing the ‘ heart and spirit’ of oneself and significant others indicates that courage is only in small part about the commonly-held view that it is about bravery in threatening situations This research assesses and discusses why continuous recognition of this inner , though wide-ranging, virtue is vital to women in this instance, as well as its critical role in both managers and employees of both genders inviting new experiences and tasks in an increasingly uncertain world.

Philosophically, the first researcher has gone through several significant experiences in her own life that required her to seriously call upon inner courage. Embracing a new life’s work she set out to discover if other women were aware of and consciously used this hidden energy source, and how this could be nurtured in both genders as well. This research started with a survey of 750 women of all ages and backgrounds. The second researcher had previously done some work on courageous marketing in business, and while this was not

gender specific, clearly about half of these cases involved women. The two researchers decided to collaborate. The research question became: how did women view their own courageousness, and in this case, what could be the implications for management, especially in regard to courage development, education and training?

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

### **Courageousness**

The virtue known as ‘courage’ has been discussed and lauded by philosophers ( eg Aristotle), prophets ( eg Kahlil Gibran), philanthropists ( eg Mother Theresa), wartime leaders ( eg Golder Meir), entrepreneurs ( eg Kylie Minogue), and politicians ( eg Margaret Thatcher) over the ages (Kidder 2005, James 1998, Duigan and Bhindi 1997, Walston 2001, Servan-Schreiber 1987), but it has generally been accepted as a ‘given’ or an axiom in ‘courageous or brave people’, rather than having ever been subjected to challenge. This is especially the case with regard to the wider aspect regarding ‘heart and spirit’. Similarly the virtue of management making pragmatic use of (and nurturing) a variety of courageous behaviours has also been under-explored. This study is one attempt at helping to fill that gap.

There would seem to be several main elements or justifications for courageous behaviour from the extant literature ( Kidder 2005, Walston 2001, Jackson 1990):

- “Everyday courage” is necessary and logical in a complex, competitive, and uncertain set of environments; it is not an oxymoron.
- Appreciating the etymology of courage and its belated effects especially to advancing the learning of females is useful, since much of the literature in the past has linked courage more with males in war and other like situations.
- Learning advances when there is a shift in mental scripts. Scripts reveal a set of beliefs that you hold about yourself, how the world works (worldview) and versions of them

when under stress. Set scripts have been observed (Walston 2001) to limit the opportunity to learn the merits of courage.

- Distinguishing between being foolhardy on the one hand, and acts of courage that reveal heart and spirit on the other, is relevant.
- Observing the cumulative value of courage in the community has been valuable.
- Missed opportunities are also critical (since they rarely can be reclaimed). Denial is effectively a negation of courage.
- Courage learning seems to liberate an acceptance that the human condition requires that we all keep making small courageous steps.
- Effective functioning is often a series of ‘learning but also letting go’ in order to diminish regret. Regrets reveal lost courage and drain effectiveness.

Importantly, the stereotypes of courage being restricted to very dangerous situations exhibited only by heroes (often tough or bold men) are not appropriate to or compatible with the considered literature.

### *Pragmatic Management*

Without getting into the philosophical debate about pragmatism, the most consistent characteristics of pragmatism in management itself are: a direct link to usefulness, practicality, consideration of the objective consequences of one’s actions, an affirmation of the interdependence of means and ends, acting on the basis of evidence and probability, and (most importantly for this paper) with an emphasis on personal growth and learning useful skills from experience (Buchanan and O’Connell 2006, Badaracco 2005, Jacobs 2004). Buchanan and O’Connell initially imply that they might think that pragmatic management and courageousness could be mutually exclusive when they say that “pragmatists act on evidence; heroes act on guts” (2006:40). However they go on to characterise great leaders by

saying that “ people don’t admire gut decision-makers so much for the quality of their decisions so much as for their courage in making them”(p.40).

Bell (2006:7) supports this by emphasising that “real leaders have the courage to be authentic”, and it is this authenticity theme that this paper returns to frequently and emphatically. One of the central characters in the ‘pragmatism in education ‘ debate , Dewey ( 1983:150) concludes that “ in short, the thing actually at stake in any serious deliberation is not the difference in quantity, but what kind of person one is to become, what sort of self is in the making, what kind of a world is one making”. Hence courageousness, pragmatic management, and management education and development would appear to be a natural conceptual and practical fit worthy of further exploration.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This paper referred earlier to ‘courage’ as an inner virtue, and thus self-perceptions of one’s courageousness are more relevant than the opinions of other people. To identify courageous women and self-selecting women who saw themselves as courageous, this study randomly distributed a survey to close to a thousand women at seminars and various other gatherings across the U.S. A high sample of 750 usable responses was achieved, as the questionnaire was of direct interest to ‘seeking’ women of from twenty-one years and up and all backgrounds.

Respondents were asked to choose up to but no more than 9 characteristics out of a list of 36 that they felt best described themselves. The choice of about 9 attributes was essentially based on the widely recognised attention span rule of ‘7 plus or minus 2’. It was at the upper end of this rule of thumb, as the researchers wanted to ‘stretch’ the respondents’ thinking to match the subject matter of the study. The choice of a total of 36 attributes to make their selection from ( as well as the items in the listing) was made on the basis of both again wanting respondents to deeply consider a widely-used array of human attributes, while also not

wanting respondents to easily notice from a shorter list alternative that ‘courage’ was the main virtue of interest in the research.

The study’s purpose was three-fold: (1) to gather information to examine a suggested premise that relatively few women perceive themselves as courageous; (2) to identify women who perceive themselves as courageous to interview for a book; and (3) to ponder the implications for management.

The research subjects were asked to circle up to nine words from the list of descriptive words below that represented their perception of themselves.

charismatic	energetic	conservative	active	honest
goal-oriented	gregarious	reserved	mature	risk-taking
intuitive	approachable	athletic	complex	emotional
practical	bold	ordered	courageous	moderate
humble	fair	happy	creative	gutsy
determined	intelligent	independent	liberal	insightful
fulfilled	resilient	visionary	sensible	private
open-minded				

Sampling was achieved by passing them out at national training seminars and women’s business meetings. These women were encouraged to pass on the survey sheet to other women across the U.S. Thus the study did not use statistical random sampling procedures, but the researchers did distribute the questionnaire widely and without any specifically targeted respondents. The age range of women responding was between 21 and 87. Survey respondents were predominantly between the ages of 31 and 50. Ages 21 to 30 were moderately represented, and ages 51 to 60 represented the smallest category of respondents. Most respondents reported having attended some college or University, while a smaller number had achieved various degrees.

## RESULTS

The results suggest that the 750 women who completed the survey claimed to possess the following positive perceptions of themselves.

The most frequently circled adjectives were:

- honest • open-minded • intelligent • happy • determined • intuitive
- independent • goal-oriented

A large percentage of women may have circled these adjectives for two reasons. First, many of these adjectives represent socially desirable traits in our society, especially within female circles. Most individuals today want to be perceived as capable, competent, having strong ethics, and willing to get along with others. Second, these adjectives may be more socially desirable for women because together they represent effective relationships personally and within the community — the two dominant aspects of women's social role in our society (Walston 2001, Chesler 2001, James 1998, Stockdale 2004) ).

Much less common perceptions included:

- courageous • moderate • gutsy • ordered • humble • bold • reserved
- fulfilled • liberal

Women may not have identified with adjectives like *liberal* and *moderate* because these adjectives may suggest some type of political affiliation. They may not have identified, or may not have reported their identification, with adjectives such as *courageous*, *gutsy* and *bold*, because these adjectives are more stereotypical of masculine rather than feminine traits in our society. Few women chose words like *gutsy*, *bold*, and *fulfilled*. And only 71 out of these 750 women (i.e. about 10%) selected the word *courageous*. Interestingly, as a group, self-identified courageous women were very similar to women who did not identify themselves as being courageous. This tended to support the premise that courageous women are not a distinct breed of women, but rather they embraced the concept of courage as a tool to fulfil their lives. The results of the research support the common expectation that courage is not a common adjective for women to use when describing themselves.

Courageous women, like non-courageous women, rated themselves as being *intelligent, open-minded, honest, happy, and independent*. At the other end of the spectrum, courageous women circled the adjectives *ordered, liberal, reserved, and moderate* less frequently, just as the non-courageous women did.

Non-courageous women reported being more practical (27.4% versus 12.7%) and sensible (33.1% versus 14.1%) than courageous women. Courageous women reported being more bold (12.7% versus 5.4%), gutsy (9.2% versus 8.3%), and visionary (26.8% versus 11.0%) than the non-courageous women.

## **DISCUSSION**

Why is it that about 90% of this fairly large sample of women would not ascribe to themselves such a generally applauded virtue as ‘courage’? It is our experience that the main reasons for this are: courage is often wrongly equated with larger-scale physical feats of (male) bravery or bravado; there is often a connotation of foolhardiness or rash activity in courageous actions (and women are much less willing to proclaim their moments of foolhardiness and rashness); and that courage is something exhibited only by heroes when faced with extraordinary risks and dangers rather than in everyday activities (and women are much less likely to claim themselves as ‘heroes’ than men). With the exception of work done on female leaders in extraordinary situations, none of the above stereotypes are ones that ‘the average woman’ identifies with or aspires to be involved in. Had this sample of women been fully conversant of the etymology of courage, including its everyday ‘doing what you believe in’ authenticity aspect, its cooperative sharing aspect, of freely expressing one’s ‘heart and spirit’ (which is at the core of the original meaning of the word ‘courage’), we have no doubt the percentages may have been very different, though it is the first author’s long-term experience that ‘lost courage is part of a woman’s DNA’.



Once women (and men) accept their misconceptions of courage and then give themselves permission to accept their every-day acts of authenticity and spiritedness, they can pragmatically move on to both further enhance their courageousness and also educate or mentor others in this. But how does one do this, and what are the implications for pragmatism in management?

Individuals and groups can notice all their acts of everyday courage and 'celebrate' them. Reinforcing courageous attitudes and behaviour is just as logical and pertinent as the use of reinforcement in any other form of learning, motivation and management. Of course courageous behaviour that is likely to fail practically or ethically should not be reinforced; one must always 'pick one's fights'. Enough of this wise reinforcement and documentary support over time can help shift cultural tenets about courageousness in business interaction situations, homes and the workplace.

So what are the other implications for management theory and practice? The first thing to emphasise is that, in our view, management is inherently more of a courageous activity than most people realise at first glance. Jackson (1990) has documented an extensive array of situations where marketing managers require considerable courage ( including wondering whether they should receive 'danger pay'), and most other managerial discipline areas would have a similar listing.

It has been found over almost a decade of research and consultancy by the first author that the following help women in particular to better recognise their everyday courage instances:

- Small accumulated courageous steps in every day life go unnoticed by the unobservant (we recognise only the big steps), and one needs to be more cognizant of our courage consciousness and its design;

- It is helpful for women to experience the value of contemplation (silence) to discover “personal courage.”
- They can acknowledge (confess) that women are their own worst enemy when it comes to claiming their natural courage (also Chesler 2001).
- One approach that has been found to be very advantageous is for women to discern and apply the 12 behaviours of courage revealed on the “Source Wheel” diagram (Walston 2001) to develop and draw from a reservoir of courage.
- They can notice the suffering the ego creates to thwart courage.
- Women can practice awakening an energy field of courage consciousness that lives more frequently in “yes mode” (rather than “yes/no”).
- And they can embrace “challenged” leadership areas that push a woman outside her comfort zone. This clips the potential for complacency—a courage killer.

There are certain well-tried pragmatic guidelines or ‘tips’ for women on how to be more courageous in work environments more specifically (Walston, 2006, 2001):

- They can ensure that dialogue about courage in social situations around work and at work are no longer phrased as heroic behaviours by “famous” people.
- They should declare their courageous intention in manageable portions. For instance, they could commit to a period of time to live life purposely, such as 60-90 days. It has been found helpful for women to ask themselves: “How willing am I to summon my courage, and on what, and not only accept the consequences but in time revel in them?”
- They should use the language of ‘giving themselves permission to claim their courage’. Interestingly, subsequent research has shown that women feel they must give themselves permission to exhibit courage, while men say they don’t feel they need permission (Walston 2006).

- They should deliberately notice and realize that their courageous acts, however small, make a difference.
- Like all learning curves, a conscious effort is required to claim one's courage. To awaken courageous awareness, pragmatic ways of doing this that have been cited by respondents and others in other research ( cited in Walston 2006) are to choose to read an autobiography of a believably-courageous person, observe from a distance someone one admires, watch a movie exhibiting normal courage, or attending classes which include courageous leadership.
- Managers and their organisations can empower people to be “courage change agents.”
- Firms can design and implement believable courage leadership standards of success, in order that people/employees will no longer feel ambivalent about ‘standing tall’.

Seeing that so many women disproportionately play the roles of mentor, coach, educator and nurturer in so many contexts, special attention needs to be given to the everyday and ongoing courageous activities that accompany each of these roles. They need to keep appreciating that there is a correlation between the fact that managerial skills are lifelong and that courage is similarly an everyday (i.e. ongoing) process as well. Clearly this lifelong daily involvement in these demanding roles requires considerable endurance, as well as a system of ongoing rewards.

But for women, this has been found by Walston ( 2006) to require that they first need to actually ‘give themselves permission’. This is reflected in the survey result that less than 10% were giving themselves this permission (and even then, when asked to be quoted in a book based on the research, most of this small group asked to be identified ‘by first name only’). This is a powerful argument with women, as they do not seem to like to give themselves permission. The first researcher discovered while writing her second book that 95% of

women allowed first names only while 92% of men didn't flinch at the use of their full name. Once they see the small accumulating courageous steps that they make that simply go unnoticed, a different perspective is usually exhibited. They notice that not only is everyday courage not an oxymoron, but that it is in fact the normal healthy way of viewing the world. The "Girls can do anything" campaign appears to have helped a great deal for younger women in this regard, and now needs to be tailored to other age groups.

Having said that, however, one must not forget that "learning begins with an element of self-doubt" (Srikantia and Pasmore 1996:42). Thus, there needs to be an awareness that the required knowledge or habits are not yet known or inculcated. They continue: "we know that if conviction grows too strong, that sustained learning will be blocked". Thus a certain degree of humility is required in management, and that it is pre-requisite or co-requisite of everyday courage.

It has been shown in various research studies with both genders in the military, in education, and in commerce (Rachman, Weingartner, in Jackson 1990) that the following courage-building tools and techniques can be introduced and practiced with successful results:

- adapting training to be 'as realistic to battle conditions as possible';
- the use of discussions about one's fears;
- the inclusion of 'modelling', 'required helpfulness' and 'not letting the side down';
- and moral courage as exhibited in the pursuit of justice and truth as a motivating force.

Thus to enhance courageous behaviour in women ( and men) within each phase of their lifelong managerial choices, they and their mentors must try as much as possible to simulate the reality of 'battle 'conditions. Experiential learning via role playing and role taking are amongst the proven approaches taken. Stockdale (2004:211) found that "in our fearlessness test where success was measured in seconds, it made sense to use this (detailed visualisation) technique".

Within these activities, deliberate opportunities must be made for the discussions of their fears. Role models, especially of courageous women (but also of men with whom they readily can identify), can make the courageous steps much more palatable and even appealing. Very importantly, experiences where the women are 'required to be helpful' by 'not letting the side down' are particularly powerful. Linking the authenticity of their values and sense of justice and truth to their actions should result in courageous acts coming more naturally. For example, English and Sutton (2000:213) report in their study of "one public sector mentor who reminded themselves 'to think of the tax payer' when they were required to do anything that was difficult or anxiety producing".

### **LIMITATION AND SUGGESTED FUTURE RESEARCH**

This study used convenience and judgemental sampling; any future research would assist the credibility amongst neo-positivists if a random sampling procedure was used in a follow-up project. Secondly, probe interviewing with the present respondents matched with confirmatory cross-checking with their bosses and /or sub-ordinates would have added further richness, and could be considered in future research. Thirdly, as courageousness is 'easier said than done', it would be helpful to have a follow-up experimental or action research study to observe which guidelines are more effective than others and under what conditions.

### **CONCLUSION**

That over 90% of the study's women would not rate themselves as courageous seems a very disappointing result. However, a converse view is that this constitutes an enormous opportunity once these women in time adjust their conception of what constitutes 'courage'. A greater realisation by both women and men of the authentic commitment and pursuit of the 'heart and spirit' aspect of courageousness (rather than only the common fascination with the bravery aspect) is supported by this research, and has valuable managerial implications. It would seem that this same pragmatic opportunity exists simultaneously for managers of and from both genders.

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