

## The Courage to Lead: Increasing Positive Leadership by Developing Courage

Moran Anisman-Razin, University of Limerick

Sim Sitkin, Duke University

Positive leadership is crucial to address the big challenges of our time – whether internationally or in one’s community. In an age of polarization, climate change, and economic turmoil, positive leadership is essential to addressing these issues and to foster a stronger, perhaps better, society. This is not limited to those in formal leadership positions. Rather, to tackle these grand challenges, society needs ‘regular citizens’ to become positive leaders – to influence others to take action, pursue excellence, and do the right thing. The goal of the proposed research is to explore ways to achieve that.

Being a positive leader not only involves exhibiting shared virtues, but also sometimes involves challenging negative norms, conventions, and expectations that can involve risks for the individual. For example, speaking up can involve risk to one’s career and relationships (for a review see Morrison, 2014). More generally, stepping up as a leader can be challenging for individuals, if they anticipate that it may damage their image (Lee Cunningham et al., 2022). The question then is – *How to develop individuals to act as more courageous, positive leaders in their organizations and communities?* Our research focused on this question, testing the promotion of *courage as a key to increasing positive leadership in practice*.

Courage is defined as *the pursuit of something meaningful under conditions of perceived risk to the actor* (Anisman-Razin, Sitkin, & Kark, Working paper). While people often think about courage as heroic and extraordinary, in our work we find that courageous behavior often takes more everyday forms, such as asking for a raise, having difficult conversations, and being authentic (Anisman-Razin & Sitkin, Working paper). Thus, *people act more courageously than they may think*, as these forms of everyday courage are quite common. Building on this insight, we hypothesized that by redefining courage and expanding an individual’s definition of what courage is, they can reframe their own actions as courage and change their perceptions of themselves. Thus, we designed an intervention program that builds on these principles and examined the extent to which it affected their perception of themselves, their motivation to act courageously, and the specific actions they take to act courageously. The ultimate goal is to examine its impact on their positive leadership behaviors.

We hypothesized that:

**H1:** participation in a courage-increasing intervention will increase participants’ positive leadership behaviors compared to their courage before the intervention (pre/post) and compared to a control group who will not receive courage-increasing intervention.

**H2:** participation in courage-increasing intervention will increase participants’

**H2a:** courageous identity.

**H2b:** self-efficacy.

**H2c:** motivation to act courageously.

**H3:** participation in courage-increasing intervention will increase individuals' proactive behaviors to increase their courage.

**H4:** the effect of participation in courage-increasing intervention on positive leadership behaviors will be explained by increases in participant courageous identity, self-efficacy, motivation to act courageously and courage-oriented proactive behavior, and this increase in turn will increase the likelihood of positive leadership behaviors.

### **The intervention**

This research provided a pilot for developing and testing an intervention program. The procedure developed included 2 key stages:

- 1) Stage 1 – Intervention session: participants viewed an 8-minute video by the researchers that focused on defining and reframing courage as involving both heroic and ordinary, everyday behaviors. Once they viewed the video, participants were guided to reflect on their own behavior and identify instances of courageous actions that they engaged in.
- 2) Stage 2 – Daily diaries – for two weeks, participants were sent daily diaries (on workdays) in which they were asked to report on any incidents of courageous behaviors they engaged in throughout the day. These diaries provided additional reinforcement of the intervention, providing participants with prompts to think about opportunities for courage in their daily lives, as well to reflect and reframe their actions.

Our key study variables were measured before participants began the intervention and after they completed it, with key mediators measured at the end of each week in stage 2.

**Sample.** We recruited participants for the intervention and control group through Prolific and were paid for their participation based on the time they spent completing the different parts of the research. 150 individuals completed the pre-intervention surveys, and from them a random sample of 50 participants were selected and invited to participate in the intervention, after an additional round of invitations, a final group of 27 participants completed the intervention session and were therefore included in the intervention group. After the intervention was completed, we contacted a similar number of participants who completed the pre-intervention surveys and were not invited to participate in the intervention, of this group, 19 participants completed the post-intervention survey and were therefore included in the control group.

The intervention group included 15 women and 12 men, ranging in age from 25-62 ( $M=37.74$ ,  $SD=9.99$ ). the control group included 12 women and 7 men, ranging in age from 25-67 ( $M=44.47$ ). All participants live in the USA.

## Results

As the intervention development is in early stages, we consider this study as a pilot providing an initial examination of our research hypotheses, generating valuable insight that will allow us to further develop the method, materials, and surveys used in the intervention. Because of the small sample size, the statistical tests reported here are under-powered, while we report the results (both significant and non-significant), with this sample we are not offering any conclusions, but will point out some of the main trends and directions offered by the results of the study. We treat this as initial results that allow us to improve our intervention and measurement.

To examine H1, we conducted a Two-Way Repeated Measures Analysis of Variance, with intervention group (intervention/control) as between subject independent variable and time (pre/post-intervention) as within participant independent variable, and the 5 sub-scales of positive leadership (Kuzuhara, 2022) as dependent variables. The results were large non-significant. For the ‘uplifting’ subscale, we found a marginally significant effect for the interaction between condition and time ( $F(1,38)=3.21$ ,  $p=.08$ ,  $\eta^2p=.08$ ). Follow up analysis revealed that for the control group there was a significant increase in ‘uplifting’ from pre- to post-intervention ( $p=.026$ ). None of the other effects were significant (see Table 1). As we found no effect of the intervention on positive leadership and due to the small number of participants, we did not test the mediation hypothesis (H4). We aim to do that in future research, once we establish the intervention and collect data from a larger sample.

We tested the effect of the intervention on the proposed mediators – courageous identity, self-efficacy, courageous motivation, and proactive behaviors to increase their courage. In examining the effect of the intervention on courageous identity (measured through a scale we developed) we found a significant effect for time (pre-/post-intervention),  $F(1, 38)=4.512$ ,  $p=.04$ ,  $\eta^2p=.11$ . Follow up analysis revealed a significant difference for participants in the intervention group between their courageous identity pre-intervention ( $M=3.27$ ,  $SD=1.02$ ) and post-intervention ( $M=3.55$ ,  $SD=.96$ ),  $SE=.124$ ,  $p=.029$ ,  $\eta^2p=.12$ ,  $CI\ 95\% .03, .53$ . While the difference between the intervention and control group post-intervention was not significant ( $p=.122$ ), the intervention group scored higher ( $M=3.55$ ,  $SD=.96$ ) than the control group ( $M=3.12$ ,  $SD=.74$ )<sup>1</sup>. Thus, hypothesis 2a was partially supported.

Next, we examined the effect of the intervention on self-efficacy (measured using the self-efficacy scale, Schwarzer & Jerusalem, 1995). No significant differences were found between conditions ( $F(1,38)=.008$ ,  $p=.93$ ,  $\eta^2p=.000$ ) and across the two time points ( $F(1,38)=.008$ ,  $p=.93$ ,  $\eta^2p=.000$ ), while the interaction of the two was marginally significant

---

<sup>1</sup> It is important to note that the intervention group also scored higher (but not significantly) in the pre-intervention survey, suggesting that even though we randomly allocated participants to the two groups, there may be some pre-existing differences between participants. In future research we will further explore this difference and work to ensure that the baseline of the two groups is the same.

( $F(1,38)=2.71, p=.108, \eta^2p=.07$ ), none of the simple effects was significant. Thus, hypothesis 2b was not supported.

We examined the effect of the intervention on courageous motivation (scale developed by us, focusing on individuals' motivation to act courageously). The analysis revealed a significant difference for condition,  $F(1,38)=8.84, p=.006, \eta^2p=.18$ . Participants in the intervention (compared to the control) condition were significantly more motivated to act courageously both pre-intervention ( $B=.43, SE=.19, p=.03, \eta^2p=.18, CI\ 95\% .04, .82$ ) and post-intervention ( $B=.62, SE=.21, p=.005, \eta^2p=.19, CI\ 95\% .20, 1.05$ ), see Figure 1. While we find pre-existing differences between the groups again, it is important to note that the effect size of the difference is larger post-intervention, with change noticeable only for the intervention group, suggesting some effect of the intervention on participants' courageous motivation. Thus, hypothesis 2c was partially supported.

Finally, we examined the effect of the intervention on the 4 sub-scales of proactive behaviors to increase their courage (adapted from proactive goal regulation scale; Bindl, Parker, Totterdell, & Hagger-Johnson, 2012). We measured participants' pursuit of proactive behaviors only in the post-intervention surveys (so that we do not prime or affect participants in any way). Thus, we only compare between the two groups. As hypothesized, in a One-Way ANOVA, we found that for the 4 sub-scales (envisioning, planning, enacting, and reflecting), the intervention group scored significantly higher than the control group, demonstrating that this group tended to engage in more proactive behaviors aimed at assisting them to behave courageously. See Table 2 for results. Thus, hypothesis 3 was supported.

## Summary

This research is a first step in developing an intervention that would help individuals to incorporate more courageous behaviors into their lives. The findings of the study provide initial support for the positive effect of the intervention program on immediate outcomes (such as courageous identity, courageous motivation, and proactive courage increasing behaviors); however, we did not find support for other hypothesized effects. This could be due to two reasons. First, as this research focused on developing the intervention and conducting an initial test of it, the sample size is very small, thus any results (both significant and non-significant) should be interpreted with caution. The small sample size could have led to the non-significant effect for some of the outcomes and variables reported, it is possible that with a larger sample size we would have found more significant effects. In addition, it could be that certain aspects of the intervention design contribute to the non-significant results, as they may not yet be effective in creating the desired outcomes of the intervention. Building on the work we have done as a part of this study, we plan to continue to develop the intervention, refine and revise the procedure and measures, and recruit larger samples for testing, thus addressing the two potential causes of the non-significant results. As we continue to develop and improve the intervention, we hope that the next steps will provide stronger evidence for a broader set of outcomes, supporting its usefulness as a tool to increase individuals' courage and as a result – positive leadership.

### References

- Anisman-Razin, M., & Sitkin, S. B. (Working paper). Ordinary Courage in Organizations: Beyond Moral Courage: University of Limerick.
- Anisman-Razin, M., Sitkin, S. B., & Kark, R. (Working paper). A Typological Theory of Courageous Behavior in Organizations: University of Limerick.
- Bindl, U. K., Parker, S. K., Totterdell, P., & Hagger-Johnson, G. (2012). Fuel of the self-starter: how mood relates to proactive goal regulation. *Journal of Applied Psychology, 97*, 134-150.
- Lee Cunningham, J., Sondag, L., & Ashford, S. J. (2022). Do I Dare? The Psychodynamics of Anticipated Image Risk, Leader Identity Endorsement, and Leader Emergence. *Academy of Management Journal, 66*, 374-401.
- Morrison, E. W. (2014). Employee voice and silence. *Annual Review of Organizational Psychology and Organizational Behavior, 1*, 173-197.
- Schwarzer, R., & Jerusalem, M. (1995). Generalized Self-Efficacy scale. In J. Weinman, S. Wright, & M. Johnston (Eds.), *Measures in health psychology: A user's portfolio*. Causal and control beliefs (pp. 35-37). Windsor, UK: NFER-NELSON.

**Table 1.**  
*Effects of intervention on positive leadership*

		Selfless- ness Scale	Authenti- city Scale	Uplifting Scale	Encoura- ging Scale	Positivity Scale	Modeling Behavior Scale
Interven- tion group	Pre- intervention	3.45 (.88)	4.26 (.51)	4.12 (.51)	4.04 (.43)	3.95 (.67)	4.19 (.56)
	Post- intervention	3.48 (.82)	4.14 (.42)	4.11 (.47)	4.06 (.46)	4.02 (.73)	4.26 (.64)
Control group	Pre- intervention	3.44 (.56)	4.21 (.51)	3.96 (.53)	3.94 (.52)	3.63 (.66)	4.24 (.58)
	Post- intervention	3.64 (.63)	4.26 (.51)	4.14 (.53)	4.03 (.59)	3.74 (.80)	4.34 (.60)

**Table 2.**  
*Effects of intervention on proactive behaviors*

	Envisioning	Planning	Enacting	Reflecting
	F(1,38)=11.94, p=.001, $\eta^2$ p=.24, CI 95% .04, .43	F(1,38)=4.49, p=.022, $\eta^2$ p=.13, CI 95% .001, .38	F(1,38)=6.21, p=.017, $\eta^2$ p=.14, CI 95% .004, .34	F(1,38)=7.15, p=.011, $\eta^2$ p=.16, CI 95% .01, .36
Intervention group	3.11 (.70)	3.01 (.84)	2.70 (.84)	2.55 (1.00)
Control group	2.23 (.91)	2.31 (1.00)	2.01 (.88)	1.77 (.83)

**Figure 1.**

*Effects of intervention on courageous motivation*

