Keep calm and carry on (ethically): Durable moral courage in the workplace

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ABSTRACT

We develop a model of factors that enable morally courageous actors to carry on even after encountering organizational opposition. The model specifies that durable moral courage facilitates continued moral action and that demoralization inhibits it, and presents the perceived manageability of the organizational response as a factor affecting the extent to which an actor experiences durable moral courage and/or demoralization. It is proposed that moral efficacy, hardiness, and planning for endurance insulate the actor before an act of moral courage, by enhancing the perceived manageability of the organizational response; and that emotional self-regulation fortifies the actor by enhancing the perceived manageability of that response once it comes. It is also posited that moral efficacy and hardiness contribute directly to durable moral courage, hardiness and planning for endurance increase durable moral courage by promoting moral efficacy, and emotional self-regulation augments planning for endurance. Implications for research and practice are offered.

1. Introduction

Unethical behavior tarnishes organizational reputations, creates legal liabilities, and reduces public trust (Burke & Cooper, 2010). Globally, fraud costs trillions of dollars each year (ACFE, 2014), and bribery and corruption persist in the private and public sectors (Ernst & Young, 2016; Ethics & Compliance Initiative, 2016). Meanwhile, within organizations, "[i]ncivility, bullying, and other bad behavior take a psychological, emotional, mental and physical toll on employees" (Porath, 2015, p. 254). Van Buren, Greenwood, and Sheehan (2011) exhort human resource managers to "take up the responsibility of being the advocates for ethical HRM analysis and practice within their organizations" (p. 217; see also, MacDonald, 2015/2016; Parkes & Davis, 2013). Human resource executives, too, call upon members of their profession to play a pivotal role in leading ethical practice (Boudreau, 2015).

Business and professional ethics education and training typically emphasize enhancing the ability to recognize ethical issues in the workplace and/or to apply ethical criteria to make appropriate decisions (see Baker, 2014; Baker & Comer, 2012). Yet, knowledge of the morally correct action does not dependably promote that action (Walker, 2004). Individuals also need to care about moral criteria more than other considerations (Aquino & Reed, 2002; Blasi, 1994; Rest, 1994). But even when members of organizations know the ethically correct course of action and want to behave accordingly, the negative personal consequences associated with ethical action may deter them. "A person may be morally sensitive, may make good moral judgments, and may place high priority on moral values, but if the person wilts under pressure, is easily distracted or discouraged, is a wimp and weak-willed, then moral failure occurs" (Rest,

1994, p. 24). Beyond the desire to pursue the principled path, members of organizations require ethical strength to reach their moral destination. In short, they often need moral courage to behave ethically.

Although the topic of moral courage has begun to interest organizational researchers (Comer & Vega, 2011a; Harbour & Kisfalvi, 2014; May, Luth, & Schwoerer, 2014; Sekerka, Bagozzi, & Charnigo, 2009; Simola, 2015a), how an actor carries on with this form of courage in the workplace has received scant attention. Organizational members seeking to promote fairness, protect the rights of others, and prevent wrongdoing need to be equipped to deal with the rejection, resistance, and/or retaliation that may follow their morally courageous behavior. Backlash is especially likely if powerful people in the organization benefit from the perpetuation of the very practices or systems ethical employees challenge. The harassment, ostracism, and other unpleasant outcomes organizational members may encounter after doing what is morally right can leave them feeling demoralized. Yet others, in similar circumstances, are able to continue with their efforts to effect positive ethical change (Martin, 2009; Rehg, Miceli, Near, & Van Scotter, 2008). What sustains moral courage in the workplace?

In this paper, we begin to address this question. After reviewing the literature on moral courage, we explain how durable moral courage, the capacity for sustained morally courageous behavior, promotes continued moral action; and how demoralization, a deflation in spirits in the face of a distressing situation, inhibits it. We identify the perceived manageability of the organizational response to an act of moral courage as a factor that moderates the extent to which durable moral courage and/or demoralization will follow that act, thereby affecting continued moral behavior. We consider how moral efficacy and hardiness contribute directly to durable moral courage, and how hardiness and planning for endurance increase durable moral courage by promoting moral efficacy. We also explore how moral efficacy, hardiness, and planning for endurance insulate the actor before the morally courageous act, boosting durable moral courage by increasing the perceived manageability of the organization's response. Then we discuss how emotional self-regulation fortifies the actor after the organizational response, bolstering durable moral courage by enhancing the perceived manageability of the organizational response; as well as how emotional self-regulation enhances planning for endurance. Our work contributes to the emerging domain of positive organizational ethics (Sekerka, Comer, & Godwin, 2014), which focuses explicitly on fostering the ethical action of individuals, groups, and organizations. In particular, we respond to the call for research that clarifies how individuals persevere while "engaging in morally courageous actions" (Sekerka et al., 2014, p. 442). That is, we do not seek to identify factors that increase the likelihood that members of organizations will behave ethically in general or, more specifically, that they will initiate morally courageous action. Instead, we explore a circumscribed set of factors that sustain a campaign of moral courage.

2. Moral courage

Moral courage is "the behavioral expression of authenticity in the face of the discomfort of dissension, disapproval, or rejection" (Lopez et al., 2010, p. 23). It requires "the willingness to speak up or take action…for oneself as well as for others" (Bronstein, Fox, Kamon, & Knolls, 2007, p. 661). Moral courage "compels or allows an individual to do what he or she believes is right, despite fear of social or economic consequences" (Peterson & Seligman, 2004, p. 216). As a result, it contributes to consistency between moral intentions and behavior (Solomon, 1992).

Most scholars of courage distinguish between types of courage in terms of what is at stake for the agent (see, e.g., Pury & Lopez, 2010; Solomon, 1992; but see Koerner, 2014). Indeed, moral courage and physical courage do not necessarily co-exist. An individual may, for example, risk social condemnation in the pursuit of a moral goal (moral courage), but face no physical danger. Conversely, a life-imperiling act (physical courage) that involves no chance of social rejection does not call for moral courage (Osswald, Greitemeyer, Fischer, & Frey, 2010; Pianalto, 2012). Moral courage, like other forms of courage, is viewed as a character virtue that can be cultivated (Hannah, Avolio, & May, 2011; Osswald et al., 2010; Sekerka et al., 2009). According to Aristotle (350 BCE/ Bartlett & Collins, 2011), individuals can develop virtue by behaving virtuously. Practice fosters the formation of habits that instill character. Consistent with Aristotle, contemporary moral philosophers (e.g., Moberg, 1999) assert that we can choose to become more virtuous, and personality psychologists (e.g., McAdams & Pals, 2006) explain that because courage and other virtues are tied to motivation, they are amenable to change. Indeed, empirical research confirms that moral development continues well into adulthood (Hill & Roberts, 2010).

2.1. The organizational response to morally courageous behavior

Organizational pressures, ranging from the subtle to the blatant, can discourage individuals from expressing ethical concerns (Burris, 2012; Comer & Vega, 2008, 2011a, 2011b; Detert & Treviño, 2010) and dissuade them from doing what is right (Moberg, 2006; Rossouw, 2002; Tepper, 2010). Employees who believe that candor would be unwelcome are less likely to speak up (Milliken, Schipani, Bishara, & Prado, 2015; Verhezen, 2010; Wang & Hsieh, 2013). Some people, however, follow their moral convictions in spite of deterrents. In the very best of circumstances, colleagues and superiors approve a morally courageous actor's deeds and ideas for catalyzing positive organizational change. Their favorable response feeds the actor's further engagement. Koerner (2014), emphasizing the beneficial outcomes an act of workplace courage can engender, reports that those deciding not to act courageously experience "shame, regret, and frustration" (p. 73; see also Fredin, 2011). It is essential, however, not to discount the possible adverse consequences of morally courageous workplace behavior. Those who exercise moral courage knowingly assume personal risks (Kidder, 2005; Lopez, O'Byrne, & Petersen, 2003; Peterson & Seligman, 2004; Pianalto, 2012). Their display of virtuous behavior may incur the resentment of coworkers, who may feel bad about their own comparatively ignoble behavior (see Monin, Sawyer, & Marquez, 2008). Morally courageous actors may also have to contend with inhospitable and even hostile reactions from