

Women leaders' lived experiences of bravery in leadership

Stories of
women leaders

Michelle E. Bartlett

Old Dominion University, Norfolk, Virginia, USA

Abstract

Purpose – The research aims to understand the stories of women leaders who have demonstrated bravery in leadership. By analyzing their lived experiences through storytelling and narratives, it seeks to shed light on the challenges and motivations behind their brave actions, contributing to a deeper understanding of bravery in leadership within gender and organizational contexts.

Design/methodology/approach – This study adopts a qualitative multiple case study approach, focusing on the autobiographical accounts of three women leaders to explore their experiences of bravery in leadership. Utilizing narrative analysis (NA), it is grounded in ethical leadership theory and narrative identity theory. The research method involves cross-analyzing these narratives to unearth themes that depict a multifaceted view of bravery, including moral courage and ethical decision-making.

Findings – The study reveals various themes of bravery in leadership, such as moral courage, authenticity, resilience and ethical decision-making. These findings enhance the understanding of bravery's role in ethical conduct and transformative change, highlighting the complex manifestations of bravery in women's leadership practices.

Research limitations/implications – This study contributes to the broader discourse on bravery in leadership, especially for women. It offers insights into how bravery is integral to ethical conduct and transformative leadership and sheds light on the influence of gender dynamics on leadership experiences. This study significantly enriches the discourse on bravery in leadership, with a particular focus on women's experiences. It delves into how bravery, encompassing moral courage and authenticity, is crucial for ethical conduct and transformative leadership. By highlighting the stories of women leaders, the research underscores the complex interplay between bravery and gender dynamics within organizational contexts. It challenges traditional perceptions of leadership and bravery, advocating for a more nuanced understanding that recognizes the unique challenges and strengths of women leaders. Furthermore, this study paves the way for future research to explore diverse dimensions of bravery in leadership, encouraging a more inclusive approach that values different perspectives and experiences.

Practical implications – The findings of this study advocate for empowering leadership practices and guide the development of a courageous leadership landscape. Current events show evidence that many organizations lack the integration of bravery as a core leadership trait. These narratives of bravery in women's leadership can serve as a powerful catalyst for inspiring all leaders. These stories can guide leaders across various levels to embrace bravery in their decision-making and leadership styles. The integration of these insights into organizational policies and leadership development programs can lead to a more courageous, ethical and transformative leadership landscape.

Social implications – The research emphasizes the need for inclusive approaches to leadership and bravery, challenging dominant gender norms. It underscores the importance of acknowledging and valuing women leaders' stories, thereby empowering their narratives.

Originality/value – The study adds value to the field by unveiling the often untold narratives around bravery in leadership. Findings can assist in fostering environments where diverse expressions of bravery are recognized and valued. Findings have the potential to inspire a new generation of leaders, across all genders, to embrace bravery in their roles, thereby enriching the leadership landscape with diverse, ethical and courageous practices. This research not only contributes to academic discourse but also has real-world implications,

Received 19 November 2023

Revised 6 January 2024

Accepted 8 January 2024

© Michelle E. Bartlett. Published by Emerald Publishing Limited. This article is published under the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY 4.0) licence. Anyone may reproduce, distribute, translate and create derivative works of this article (for both commercial and non-commercial purposes), subject to full attribution to the original publication and authors. The full terms of this licence may be seen at <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/legalcode>

Corrigendum: It has come to the attention of the publisher that the article, Bartlett, M.E. (2024), "Women leaders' lived experiences of bravery in leadership", *Qualitative Research Journal*, Vol. ahead-of-print No. ahead-of-print. <https://doi.org/10.1108/QRJ-11-2023-0174>, was published with an error. This has now been corrected in the online version of the paper.



Qualitative Research Journal
Emerald Publishing Limited
1443-9883
DOI 10.1108/QRJ-11-2023-0174

encouraging organizations to reevaluate and evolve their leadership models to be more inclusive and effective in today's dynamic and diverse global environment.

Keywords Qualitative, Narrative analysis, Bravery in leadership

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Bravery in leadership, a crucial attribute driving individuals to navigate challenges and inspire positive change within organizations, often remains obscured by gender norms and organizational dynamics, particularly in the narratives of women in leadership roles. This research delves into women's stories showcasing bravery in leadership, aiming to illuminate their experiences and motivations behind their courageous actions. It seeks to deepen our understanding of bravery in leadership within gender dynamics and organizational contexts, potentially informing more inclusive and empowering leadership practices.

Purpose

The primary focus of this study is on uncovering women's stories displaying bravery in leadership. Through qualitative inquiry and narrative analysis (NA), it aims to capture and analyze lived experiences and narratives of women in leadership. It seeks to shed light on challenges faced, decisions made and factors motivating their bravery. This exploration intends to provide insights into their unique experiences and contribute to understanding bravery in leadership amid gender dynamics and organizational contexts.

Research question

The central research question, "What are the stories of women about a time when they displayed bravery in leadership?" explores the remarkable experiences of women's bravery in leadership. Throughout history, women have encountered numerous challenges, making their stories of courage and determination compelling. This research aims to uncover narratives of women fearlessly navigating adversity, shattering stereotypes and showcasing exceptional leadership. Through these stories, it aims to highlight women's strength in leadership and pave the way for a more inclusive future.

Theoretical framework

In the study focused on bravery in leadership, both narrative identity theory and ethical leadership theory served as the theoretical foundation. Narrative identity theory, as posited by [McAdams \(2001\)](#), centers around the idea that individuals construct their identities and comprehend their lives through the creation and internalization of personal narratives. It is a perspective in psychology that explores how people integrate life experiences and events into coherent, meaningful life stories, thereby shaping their sense of self. This theory is especially pertinent in studies aimed at understanding how people make sense of their experiences, attribute meaning to events and connect disparate life episodes to construct a coherent sense of identity. It is particularly apt for research focusing on personal experiences, self-perception, psychological development and the interaction between individual agency and social and cultural contexts. Employing narrative identity theory is beneficial when the objective is to delve deep into individuals' life stories, self-representations and the subjective meanings they ascribe to their life events.

Ethical leadership theory serves as a pivotal framework to explore how leaders navigate moral and ethical challenges. This theory, as set forth by [Brown *et al.* \(2005\)](#), posits that ethical leaders exhibit a high moral standard, influencing followers through transparent and fair

conduct, thereby fostering an ethical environment. Such leaders demonstrate bravery by making principled decisions and taking moral actions, even under pressure or when facing adverse consequences. Within this theoretical framework, the exploration of bravery extends beyond risk-taking and ventures into the realm of moral courage and integrity, examining how leaders uphold ethical values and principles in the face of ethical dilemmas, organizational pressures or external challenges. The application of ethical leadership theory enables a nuanced understanding of the moral dimensions of bravery in leadership, providing insights into the interplay between ethical conduct, moral courage and leadership effectiveness.

Methods

Research design

This study used a multiple case study design, a qualitative research approach that involves the in-depth investigation of multiple individual cases or instances to gain a comprehensive understanding of a particular phenomenon. Each case serves as a unique unit of analysis, and researchers examine and analyze these cases independently to identify common patterns, differences or unique features contributing to a more holistic and nuanced understanding of the research topic. The goal of a multiple case study is to explore a phenomenon from various perspectives, contexts or settings, enabling a broader examination of complex social, behavioral or organizational phenomena. Researchers typically employ diverse data collection methods, such as interviews, observations and document analysis, to gather rich and detailed data for each case. They then conduct rigorous and systematic data analysis to derive meaningful insights and theoretical implications from the collective evidence. Multiple case studies are particularly valuable when researchers aim to generalize beyond individual cases or seek to understand the interplay of different factors and contextual influences on the phenomenon of interest.

Multiple case studies offer several strengths that contribute to their significance in qualitative research. Firstly, by examining multiple cases, researchers can enhance the external validity of their findings, allowing for the generalization of results to broader populations or contexts. Additionally, the ability to compare multiple cases facilitates the identification of patterns, similarities and differences, thereby providing a more robust understanding of the phenomenon under investigation. This comparative approach helps researchers build more comprehensive theoretical frameworks and refine existing theories. Furthermore, multiple case studies allow for a depth of analysis that may not be attainable with single case studies, as the examination of multiple cases provides a broader range of data and perspectives, leading to a richer and more comprehensive portrayal of the research topic. By employing rigorous data collection and analysis techniques, multiple case studies enable researchers to triangulate information from different sources, strengthening the reliability and credibility of their findings. Overall, multiple case studies offer a valuable and rigorous approach for understanding complex phenomena and generating insights that can inform theory development and practical applications in various fields of study.

Multiple case studies, while valuable in qualitative research, also come with certain limitations. One major limitation is the potential for researcher bias and subjectivity during data collection and analysis, as the interpretations of each case can be influenced by the researcher's own preconceptions and perspectives (Yin, 2018). Additionally, the generalizability of findings from multiple case studies may be limited, as the focus is on in-depth exploration rather than on statistical representativeness (Baxter and Jack, 2008). Furthermore, the time and resource-intensive nature of conducting multiple case studies can be a challenge, making it difficult to include a large number of cases, which may restrict the scope and diversity of the research (Stake, 1995). Another concern is the potential for data saturation, where the inclusion of additional cases may not significantly contribute to the emergence of new insights or themes (Morse, 1995). Despite these limitations, researchers can mitigate these issues by employing

rigorous research methodologies, ensuring transparency in data analysis and exercising caution when drawing broad generalizations from multiple case studies.

Interview protocol

The following semi-structured interview questions were prepared and used for data collection. Main interview questions are as follows: 1. Please tell me a story about when you were brave during your leadership. 2. If you were to step into a classroom of aspiring leaders who were to hear this story from you, what are the things you would hope they would take away from that? Deeper dive prompts were prepared if needed, such as, "What do you think others can learn from your story?"

These interview questions are strategically designed to extract personal accounts of courage in leadership, aiming to uncover insights into moments of bravery and the resulting lessons deemed essential for promising leaders. The main questions solicit personal anecdotes with the objective of understanding the teachings they could offer to upcoming leaders. Additionally, supplementary prompts are included to encourage deeper reflection and to draw out more nuanced details, regrets or broader implications of the shared experiences.

Data collection

Contributors who saw the recruitment email or social media recruitment statement and chose to participate were provided with a consent form. Once they agreed to participate, they were given a consent form to sign. Subsequently, they scheduled an interview, which was conducted via Zoom, a video conferencing platform. The interview process took approximately 60–90 min. Throughout the Zoom interview sessions, the conversations were recorded, allowing for transcripts of the interviews to be created. Additionally, with the contributors' approval, video recording was conducted, enabling the observation of body language, in conjunction with the interview transcripts, to enhance the researcher's ability to ensure contextually accurate interpretations of the contributors' words. To maintain privacy, a Zoom link that was not publicly posted was used for the interviews, and a unique link was generated for each interview. These measures were taken to safeguard contributors' confidentiality and ensure a secure data collection process. A crucial phase entailed cross-case analysis, which allowed for the comparison of themes and subthemes across participants. This comparative exploration revealed commonalities, differences and patterns, enriching the overall understanding of the research phenomenon. Throughout the process, rich descriptions of each participant's experiences were developed, grounded in their own words to preserve authenticity.

Online interviews. The decision to conduct interviews via Zoom was driven by several key considerations aimed at enhancing the research process and improving data collection, particularly during the challenging circumstances presented by the COVID-19 pandemic. Firstly, with restrictions on in-person interactions and concerns about public health, conducting interviews remotely via Zoom provided a safe and responsible alternative. This approach ensured compliance with necessary health protocols and safeguarded the well-being of both researchers and contributors. By leveraging the advantages of remote interviews, the researcher could adapt to the unprecedented circumstances, maintain research continuity and ensure the safety and well-being of all involved while still gathering valuable and comprehensive data for the study.

Defining bravery and leadership. At the beginning of the interview, contributors were welcomed. I introduced myself and explained my reason for wanting to facilitate the discussion around bravery in leadership. I intentionally conveyed that, in this conversation, leadership was defined as instances when they were making decisions with or for a group of people, emphasizing that leadership did not require a specific title or power position. Regarding the definition of bravery, I assured contributors that I did not want to impose a

specific definition, allowing each participant to express their perception of “bravery” through their story in a way that felt authentic to them.

Data analysis

In this multiple case study, where each participant’s interviews are analyzed separately, the data analysis process involves several systematic steps to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the contributors’ experiences. Firstly, all interviews are transcribed verbatim, meticulously converting audio or video recordings into written text. Through multiple readings, I familiarized myself with the data, identifying recurring patterns, and becoming immersed in the contributors’ narratives.

NA was used to highlight and share the stories of the women who agreed to contribute to this study. According to [Riessman \(2003\)](#), “narrative analysis does not assume objectivity but, instead, positionality and subjectivity,” (n.p.), and therefore the goal of NA is not to uncover “the truth” but rather to share the truths of the narrators. In this research, individuals who opted to participate in the study are referred to as “narrators,” because they generously shared their personal stories and experiences. These narrators provided invaluable autobiographical accounts that formed the core substance of the inquiry. The initial phase of the study involved inviting participants to verbally share their experiences through storytelling, responding to the first interview question, positioning them as narrators within the context of NA. This act of sharing is not merely a recounting of events. Rather, it is an expressive reconstruction of their lived experiences, with each narrative embedded with personal meanings, emotions and reflections. After narrators shared their stories, other interview questions were posed, aimed at eliciting diverse and rich data, which were then used for cross-analysis to draw comparative insights and enhance the depth and breadth of the study’s findings.

Study narrators

Three women leaders were purposively selected as story contributors, not to primarily focus on their gender, but rather to explore the assumption that individuals identifying as women manifest bravery in leadership in distinctive ways. Although the gender component was not the central theme of the interview questions, it was an underlying factor in the selection process. Narrators were prompted to share instances where they exhibited bravery in leadership roles. However, they were not directly questioned about the influence of their gender on their leadership styles or decisions. The study aimed to explore the nuanced expressions of bravery and leadership while maintaining a broader, more inclusive perspective on the experiences shared.

Mollie

Mollie is the founder and CEO of a small talent development company with fewer than 20 employees. When asked about her role in the company and the topic of bravery, she stated, “We have been this close to calling bankruptcy attorneys twice in 20 years. So, there’s a certain amount of bravery around that.”

Daisy

Daisy holds the position of vice provost for distance learning at a prominent research 1 university, leading a dedicated team in exploring, applying and supporting innovative instructional technologies and teaching methods. In addition to her primary role, she also serves as an adjunct teaching assistant professor, mentoring graduate students, instructing online courses and participating in dissertation committees.

Clara

Clara has extensive experience working with a diverse range of organizations, from small entities with 10 employees to global corporations housing up to 50,000 staff members. She has assumed leadership positions in various domains, including HR, organizational development, talent management and learning, and has played a pivotal role in establishing international organizations in Ireland and the Ukraine. A recognized leader and contributor in numerous professional organizations and publications, Clara has shared her insights at several conferences. She holds a doctoral degree in education, specializing in instructional technology and distance education.

Results

In response to, Please tell me a story about when you were brave during your leadership, here are the stories of Mollie, Clara and Daisy. The decision to quote the narrative as it was spoken, including any grammatical irregularities, has been made by the researcher in order to faithfully capture the authentic voice and expressions of the storytellers.

Mollie's story of bravery in leadership: ethical fortitude

My company was . . . the subject of a possible acquisition about four years ago, and the process of the acquisition, it seemed at first unlikely and a really bad idea. And then it was the way we framed it and crafted it and what it was going to be like, 'This is going to be the best thing ever,' and I invested a ton of capital, not money capital, emotional capital, convincing my team why being acquired by our biggest competitor that we had previously not had a lot of respect for was the best answer for us and how we were bringing that respectability to them. At the same time, they were going to solve a lot of our problems and free us up to be amazing.

And so, we were in the middle of the negotiation, it took six months to get to the point . . . Not six months, eight months, this story starts in July and ends in February. And so, I had my team ready to go and I jumped the gun, we were sharing financial information and recruiting and hiring information and process information. We had not yet formalized any of the paperwork. I had not even gotten a letter of intent that I would be willing to sign yet from them. But we're going along, going along, they even, and this was all supposed to be under a non-disclosure agreement and then at our biggest conference in our industry, they announced a, "We're doing this." And I'm like, "Great, I'll play, we're still in the negotiations, but I'll play because the timing is right." Then as they introduced people coming out and there were some funky weird things like at one point all of the companies that were going to be brand pulled up into this group, were going to take off our own shirts and have their shirt on underneath in Las Vegas with a smoke machine and lasers and I'm the only woman in the group. I'm like, "Have you met me? I refused to take my shirt off, even if there's another shirt underneath it, the implication." And I mean, it was all guys making these ideas. I'm like, "No, that actually sends completely the wrong vibe and I'm just not doing it."

Yeah, it was like it hadn't even occurred to them that that would be a problem. So, they're like, "Oh, oh, oh, yeah, yeah, we won't do that." So, we get there, but when they call me out, they say, "We've acquired < company name redacted for confidentiality >." And I'm like, "You haven't," but I played along. So here in front of my industry and then I had to scramble and get a communication out to all my clients who were here. I mean, there were clients at this conference who had not heard anything about this, the team, I mean, all this stuff, right? So, we were being sucked in more and more to this. At the same time, our underlying business was actually our financials were going south, for a lot of really good reasons that I won't bore you with, our financials were going completely and utterly south. Simultaneously I'm in the middle of a divorce. What they were originally going to pay me for the company would buy my husband out, pay off his house, put my daughter through college, and set me up. And I'm like, there's a lot of win in this. I get to make my life less dramatic because nobody had to fight about money because I could . . . And I was going to give a bonus to everybody on our team. So, I wasn't going to keep it to myself and my ex-husband, it was going to be an all-around great thing. Our

business goes south, the acquiring company, as they're stumbling over the legal paperwork, it is December, it is January, I still haven't signed any paperwork, we closed the year super, super down. And the acquiring company finally gets a lawyer to do this. And the lawyer looks at our financials and said, "Why on earth would you ever acquire this company that is now six figures in debt?" Not a lot of six figures in debt, right? And in business, you get used to being up and down and I've been 150, a couple hundred thousand dollars in business debt before and climbed my way out. So, it no longer scares me. And we made all the right decisions to do the right thing by clients to get us in that spot. And so, I knew we could dig back out, that wasn't a problem for me. But their lawyers were like, "Why would you do this?" So, I get a call from the CEO of the other company, and he is like, "Mollie, we talked to our lawyers," blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. And he goes, "But I believe in this. I believe in this. So, I have an idea." And I remember for whatever reason, it is like eight o'clock at night, I know it was dark here, it is February, I've got this guy on the phone, and I said, "Right," and I really needed this deal to work because I'd invested in my team, I'd invested with all my clients. I bought into this publicly in the industry and my divorce. And this guy, he kind of puts this pause and all of a sudden, I figured out where he was going. And I said, "Look, if you're going to ask me to declare bankruptcy to erase the debt so you can hire my team and me the very next day and all this goes away and you don't have to buy my company, you're just hiring us and saving us, I'm out." And there's like absolute silence on the phone, absolute silence on the phone. And he said, "I'll get back to you." And I did not hear from him for over a year. And so that's exactly what he was suggesting, right? It is exactly what he was suggesting. And it is only because I actually had somebody offer me that in the past that I even knew that that was how people would ever do that. But I just preemptively said, "Yeah, I'm not doing this." And then I had to go back to my clients, my team, my ex-husband who thought he was going to get a portion of a \$1.25 m buyout and instead actually on a book basis, our business was worth nothing, which caused me an amazing amount of divorce attorney strife, right? And so instead of giving him a pile of cash, I ended up having to give up a pile of my retirement and a house in order to keep my business. And I spent years afterwards, people thinking that our company had been acquired by this competitor of ours. And I kept having to say, "Nope, we're still independent, we're still us." So, I guess that was brave. I know it did require a certain amount of decompression afterwards, you pick up the phone, you're just like, "Uhh."

Daisy's story of bravery in leadership: taking a stand

It was important to Daisy that she share with me her definition of bravery prior to sharing her story. "To me, it is about having the moral compass to do what's right even when it is not easy. I guess it takes a lot of courage at work to look at something that you know is not right, that's not going well, and to call it out, especially if you're not in a management position."

A number of years ago, I was not in the position that I'm in now. I was in a lower-level manager position . . . But there was a project that we just kept putting money and time into. And if you were taking notes and paying attention and going to the meetings, you just realized that it was because it was somebody's pet thing. And we were just putting money into it, money into it, money into it. And I kept being one of the few people in the room saying, we can't do this. And I was having to balance my opinion with a really strong personality who was a driver. This is their baby's driver. By the way, not my boss, just for the record, but just someone who's very opinionated, shoving it down people's throats. I mean, I would be the one calling him out in meetings and the one standing up to the . . . To move it forward, I had to build the coalition outside the meetings to come with me and say, you have to amplify my voice because he's overriding all of us. I've talked to enough of you individually to know that this is not the right path for us to take. We just keep flushing money down the toilet here. It is not working. And if the reason it is not working is because we don't have enough resources, we don't understand the product, it doesn't fit our environment. There were so many reasons it was going wrong. But then the person who was really pushing, it is like, well, we just spend a little more, if we spend a little more time, I've already put so much into this. And I was like, as soon as I heard I already put so much into this, she cannot be agile in your decision making and make good decisions if you always feel tied to something that's not working. So, you have to be willing to call that out. And you have to build other voices to help you call that out when you don't have as much power as the person that's loud. So, I mean, that's kind of boring, but I thought that was brave of me at the time. I mean that, this is a number of years ago when I learned that you just got to call it out. That's part of your job.

More on the personal side, human relationship side, I guess. And this was not that long ago . . . I think I was new in the position.

Daisy wanted to share a second story, where she specifically wanted to talk about being brave in leadership as a woman.

I had a campus partner who was extremely rude and hostile to me as a person. And he was also that way to other women in IT. There were just a small number of us in leadership positions at the time. There're just not many of us still, but it is grown. I'll never forget, we were in this small room. And he is a big person. He's no longer on campus. He's since retired, very big physically, big person.

I'm not a very big person. And he got right up into my physical space over the table staring down at me within just not even a face away from me, and just started screaming in a meeting, and raising his voice and everything else. And I was sitting there thinking, okay, so what do I do? It was really interesting, this meta conversation in my head about, do I just sit here and take it? Do I punch him? What is the right decision in this moment? And so, I stood up and I pushed my chair into the table, and everyone else in the meeting was just in shock. Nobody said a word. There were at least 10 other people in there. And I want to say maybe one or two of my colleagues, probably just so in shock they didn't know what to do and people from across campus.

I pushed the chair in and I stood up as tall as I could, but still nowhere near his 6'3" or something. And I said, I can see you're not ready to have a civil conversation today, so I'm going to leave the room. And when you decide to act like a grown man, we're going to meet and talk about this. Slammed my chair, walked out of the room, shut the door really hard. People in that room that are still on campus will tell you that's the only time they've ever seen me show anger at work. But I felt it deserved it. And I felt an exit was the appropriate response, because he was in my physical space. I even called HR and I'm like, look, I had this thing happen. I don't know how to handle it, because I felt threatened physically, even though I don't think that's what he was doing.

He was just really angry. Two days later, he had not gotten back in touch. So, I called him, and I said, look, you and I need to talk because people are talking about that meeting, and I was really pissed off at you for how you acted towards me. And I know you're angry about this decision that you didn't like. That is no way to behave at work, and we're going to have lunch and we're going to talk about this. Boy that took a lot of guts for me to do, because I didn't want to talk to him again. My natural instinct is I just never wanted to see him again. But because of our roles on campus, I had to. And I also knew that for other people around me, I needed to close that loop and they needed to know what happened. Do you know what I mean? They needed to have an outcome. And so, we ended up going out to lunch. He could hardly look me in the eye. He was so embarrassed by his behavior. He was really embarrassed. And we had a good conversation. He thanked me for calling him on it. And we had another meeting of the same group, totally different tone. He didn't act that way. We got it solved. I didn't feel the need to email the group and say so-and-so apologized. We had lunch. Just none of that, just by our behavior going forward, people could tell that we had resolved it. And of course, with the gossip chain, everybody knew I'd taken him out to lunch. I mean, there're even some jokes about, well, she wears silk gloves, but she's got an iron fist under there, so you might not want to go out to lunch with her if you don't want to get a new one. I remember being terrified of the whole situation, trying to figure out how I was going to deal with it. So, that took guts, I guess. That was fun. And then I guess right now, in the current context, I mean, we're in this really terrifying world right now. And I think being brave is just getting up every day and facing it, and then trying to give your team hope for the future, because people get so caught up in the moment of how awful things are for some people. And everybody's dealing with the COVID differently, because they all have different resources. And that means you have a different bandwidth and capacity to deal with it.

Clara's story of bravery in leadership: pushing through fear

I actually was the program director and lead faculty for building an MBA program in entrepreneurship for citizens of the Ukraine. With that, we partnered with the Minister of Education for the country of Ukraine, who happened to also be the president of the largest university.

So, it was like a 14-course MBA leadership on entrepreneur course, and like 25 faculty in both universities that I worked with and managed. So, when I look at bravery, so that's the context, but bravery, for me, involves courage, and courage is an attribute of leadership. And leadership is not a title. But at the end of the day, leadership and management are two different things. Leadership is definitely, in my opinion, a shared vision and it is not has anything to do with what title you have. And I do believe that there's attributes or qualities of leaders of which courage/bravery is a key one, trust being another. So, with that, that courage, bravery piece, totally frightened that I was somebody, I was director, former director of IT training in a company, but I was in academia. I was the only female if we want to look at that from a female perspective in the entire program at either university that was in a quote, unquote, "leadership role." I was asked by the president of this university to do this. And I thought, sure, whatever, this sounds cool. I think if I do an introspective, part of my bravery or courage is that I always want to learn something new, and I traditionally don't say no. And then, I have to rebuild my bravery or courage once I understand the complexity of it. But I never stopped. So, I think it is tenacity is another component there. But anyway, so this was a building 13 courses, getting it approved by the European Union because the country of Ukraine wanted to play in the EU space. So, it meant financial standards for EU, HR standards for EU, changing an entire way that people learned because it was very prescriptive versus collaborative. So, it was intense. But for me, I would say that I was brave or had courage because I believed in what this was going to achieve. Going back to your shared vision thing, I was tenacious and had courage, I think, because I believed that education was a key component to changing that country, and I wanted to be part of that. I probably for two years, slept five hours a day. I would pack the clothes that I needed to when I traveled to Ukraine in a backpack thing, like a carry-on. And then, I had this massive suitcase of books that I had donated because they didn't have books. So, there was constant testing of my tenacity and bravery, even just to get them books. We'd get there and sometimes the government would turn off the electricity to the university because they wanted to play a power play, so we got people to donate generators, that kind of thing. To be brave, I think you have to in every element of who you are, believe that you can impact that vision. Because the government at that time, was shifting from a Russian-controlled government to a democratic government. So, there were still elements of the electric system. Housing was still managed by the Russian sectors. It is deeper than Democrat and Republican. It is much more totally opposite, adversarially opposite. So, yeah. But at the end of the day, it was one of the coolest things I ever did in my life. But at the end of the day, if I boil it all down and put it into this context, I believed with everything that I had, that education would change people in that country, and subsequently, change that country. But the people, we graduated 55 people. Every one of them started a company. Granted, none of them are practicing that in the country of Ukraine, but we made an impact on individuals who subsequently will make impact on other people. We wanted to do a quote, unquote, "American and Ukrainian graduation ceremony." I shipped like 45 gowns over from one country to another, which took a month and a half. And we even recreated an American graduation ceremony in slightly above a third-world country. It was cool. Well, there was personal fear because I was spending a tremendous amount of time. I'm being completely open. A tremendous amount of time on this vision that I had. And I was fearful that I wasn't balancing work and family well. And my husband stepped in, so that got rid of that. When I had to take three planes, and a train, and a bus to get to the university, and when I got there the first time, they lost my luggage. So, I'm sitting there with a raincoat and sweatpants, and I'm meeting the Minister of Education in his office, and I had to have a metal detector scan, and they had to take a picture of me. I was afraid personally. I think he was definitely a more of a democratic leader. So, subsequently, he never traveled with his wife because he was worried for his life. And he would always, every time we went into had dinner with him, they would close the entire restaurant, and we would come into different doors. So, there was personal safety issues there too. And there were always bodyguards outside. And it was kind of creepy, but I was believed in the mission. And he was very charismatic, and he had the ability to make this happen. I was simply bringing the curriculum and going through the national accreditation and stuff. I was playing my part, but I believed in his ability to help achieve this. But he took personal issues too. He never traveled with his wife in a car. How weird is that? Yeah, yeah. I think in that context and that putting yourself on the line, bravery in terms of doing something different, I think is a level of bravery every person or every leader should have. And then, pushing the envelope a little bit more because you . . . And I wonder if they're on equal sides of a pendulum, you know what I mean? Your level of bravery based on your level of risk.

And does that impact, is there a correlation or connection between your belief in the mission or the vision? In all honesty, and I look at it now and it is like, “God, Clara.” I was a little naive too, but to think that I was flown into . . . I was in a car with a total stranger. This guy was . . . They brought me to an air museum, which was not really a museum, it was a bunch of airplanes around a tarmac. It was kind of rough. And there was this guy that used to be a Russian MiG pilot, and he wanted me to go into this MiG with him and fly around. I did say no to that because that had nothing to do with the vision. But there were times when I had personal . . . I was fearful personally for my health and that kind of stuff. Like you never drink the milk, stuff like that. I believe in the vision and the mission. So, I put that to the side, and I didn’t actually even really assess the risk. Was aware of it and was cautious, but the mission drove me to achieve it or try to achieve it. And the fact that I’m Italian and tenacious could be one thing.

Cross-case analysis findings

After transcribing their stories individually, I conducted a cross-case analysis of the transcriptions to identify patterns. This involved comparing and contrasting cases. The generated themes include “hope,” “pushing through fear,” “authority vs. collaboration,” “being authentic/showing emotions,” “knowing your core values and speaking up,” “shared vision,” “bravery during toxic behavior” and “women’s journey to the table.”

Hope

Both Mollie and Daisy mentioned the importance of hope. Mollie recalled, “You’ve got to have hope to get through the day. And so, I think that’s part of it—sticking with your conviction even when publicly changing your mind. You have to stick with your conviction, even if it may not work out well for you in the end. I mean, you also have to change your mind. And really, in one sense, I was sticking with my conviction. On the other hand, I was actually changing my mind dramatically and publicly when this was no longer a good deal for us, right? And I’m a pretty public figure in my industry. So, there were comments like, ‘Did you hear about Mollie?’ . . . So, there’s that.” Daisy talked about the importance of her leadership role in highlighting hope for her employees, “If you don’t give people a vision of hope, then you’re not being very brave either. I mean, people need to see their leaders as vulnerable and as people.”

Pushing through fear

Mollie sighed and then, with a determined face, stated, “I did the right thing in the moment, and while it was scary as hell . . .” Daisy said, “I try to do what’s right instead of what’s easy. I think that’s the bravest thing you can do at work or in life, actually. I think that in the area I’m in, sometimes women are really afraid to speak up. And I do a lot of mentoring and coaching on the side.” Also, in alignment with pushing through fear, Mollie recalled a story about her daughter:

I think there’s also—and it is kind of funny—my daughter, when she was really, really little, actually, we were at a facility, and they had a climbing wall there. And my daughter, I think she was in kindergarten at the time, she climbs up . . . we were sitting there waiting to go, and she’s like, “Mom, I’m scared.” And I said, “Well, of course, you are. It would be kind of dumb not to be scared. Just because you’re scared doesn’t mean you don’t do it.” And that’s been something that—I mean, I kind of came up with that on the fly—and then she goes off and does her rock climbing, and she doesn’t think anything of it. She doesn’t remember that moment. That was a really defining moment for me as a parent, but I’ve also used it in other spaces. Just because you’re scared doesn’t mean it is not the right thing or the thing that you’ve got to do.

Daisy also shared a story about pushing through fear:

Another time I had an employee who had been dismissed, who was not mentally stable, who appeared in our building, and we were afraid that employee had a weapon with them. And so, I had to make the decision to leave my office, because that employee trusted me, tell everybody else to go on

lockdown and escort them from the building till the police got there, while putting my hand in their bag to make sure they didn't have a weapon. Because that comes from growing up on a farm. I can sort through your bag; you'd never know it. That was a weird situation, but it was also a situation where I saw other leaders in the organization shut their office doors and literally cower on the floor. But in that moment, I knew I had to do something to take care of that person that was not stable. I didn't think they really had a weapon and didn't know for sure. But I had 30 other people in the suite that needed to not be worrying about that. So, it was a very weird situation. Don't ever want to do that one again."

Authority versus collaboration

Mollie stated how it is possible that we are seeing a lack of bravery in leaders because we have moved too far into collaboration, and decisions are not being made by the leaders. Mollie mentions, "Not the authoritarian, but the authority decision, saying, 'This is where we are going . . . You have to go forward.' Have we swung so far toward collaboration that we're unwilling as leaders to make decisions? Or are we simply unskilled in making decisions? Or have we spent so much time talking about getting feedback and the divergent process and all this that we're afraid to make a decision?" We see leaders "get skewered for decisions they made 20 years ago . . . but then change their minds and do something differently now, as though they're wishy-washy; instead, they're just responding to new times and new realities and new information, and they made a different decision." Mollie encourages leaders to make decisions even when they are unsure, "You're not always going to be sure you're right. I mean, sometimes you have to make the call, without knowing it'll turn out okay. It drives me bonkers when people tell me, 'That's okay, it'll turn out all right in the end.' you don't know that. Nobody knows that."

Being authentic/Showing emotions

Authentic leadership demands vulnerability and bravery (Byrd and Thornton, 2019; Couris, 2020). However, Mollie discussed a catch-22 for women, navigating the delicate balance between authenticity and displaying excessive emotion. Mollie pondered, "There's an authenticity question in this somewhere too. Does it come off as being less brave if I tell you that I'm scared? I don't know. And then the gendered question is, are women more likely to admit that they're feeling scared in a situation? Or are women more penalized for admitting they're scared in a situation? Because then we get into a double bind, the 'Of course you're scared, you're a woman,' kind of thing."

Mollie shared a story about being perplexed by her own emotions, "Probably, oh gosh, 25 years ago I had a pituitary tumor. It was a benign tumor, but because there's only so much room in your head, it was kind of pushing on things. So, I'm working with an endocrinologist, we're trying to get all this figured out. It was actually right about the time when I had stood up to a business partner. I'm not this person . . . And there was some other situation in which I had uncharacteristically let somebody have it. And I actually called the endocrinologist, I'm like, 'Is there something wrong with me?' We did a testosterone test to make sure. And this guy was so sweet, finally he goes, 'Did they deserve it?' And I'm like, 'Oh, hell yeah.' He's like, 'You're good.' Yeah, every once in a while, and sometimes they all just pile up. And then you think as a woman feel like you're the one who's wrong. Would a guy ever think that there's something chemically wrong with him because he cussed three people out?"

Daisy also discussed the importance of authenticity and displaying emotion at work, "People at work know ". . . a lot about my personal business and things that go on, and they've seen me get emotional at meetings and not crazy or anything, but genuine feeling because an authentic person. But when I need to have a deep meltdown, I don't do it at work. My spouse gets those lovely conversations and

my best group of girlfriends, because I think you do have to be careful there. I'll never forget one of my colleagues who's now since retired, who said to me, "When people see you down, they are worried the world is ending, because you're always such a positive force in moving us forward. And when they see any cracks in your facade, they're like, oh, <bleep>, what's going on?" And I've always been mindful of that comment, and I never took it as don't show emotions at work. I never took it as, because that's not authentic. If you've got something that's a real issue, then you have to be authentic about it. Yeah. So, I mean, I definitely think I'm genuine and authentic at work, but if I need to have an absolute rant about something, it is not going to be in a . . . staff meeting."

Knowing Your Core Values and Speaking Up

Daisy emphasized the importance for leaders to be clear about their core values, as it helps summon bravery in a pinch, "Anytime you're in a situation where you're not sure what to do, you have to have a running list of your head of what you always fall back on that you say matter to you. It is like one of your core values is people matter and somebody's doing something that goes against that core value, you have to call it out. You have to be willing to call it out, and you have to call it out with purpose and clarity and without anger." Daisy cautioned that speaking up might often mean being the first to often when you speak up, you will find out you're not the only person feeling that way. And even if they can't amplify what you said at that moment, they might come in later and then all of a sudden you might find yourself with pebbles in a pond creating ripples that cause an effect later, maybe if not in the moment." Core values help you to bravely speak up, and yet Daisy acknowledged that leaders might require "some mentoring and polishing on how to do it."

Shared vision

Clara stressed the importance for leaders to anchor their decisions around the vision, stating, "Because we often get this vision statement saying . . . Well, it is a statement. You got to live it and be part of it to be able to make effective decisions to get there and encourage others to come with you." "People don't follow somebody, I don't care who you are, unless they are clear with where you're going, and where you're going is your vision." Once you have maintained focus on the shared vision, maintain proximity to those you lead. Clara offered, "Get close to the people that you're impacting because that drives your decision-making, and it drives a clear definition of why you're there. And then, communicate it to the people that are working to help you achieve that." Bravery in leadership can look like servant leadership where you get in the trenches and do the hard work that helps lead the team to the goal. Clara urges, "Go talk to people . . . Be with the people that you're serving. I could have easily built the MBA program in entrepreneurship without traveling to Ukraine. But holy moly, when I did, the why was doing this was extremely clear . . . Take your vision and make it personal."

Bravery during toxic behavior

Daisy shared her approach to addressing inappropriate workplace behaviors, "This one guy told this joke, that's such a bad color. I said, what's funny about that? I don't even get it. It was something like very derogatory toward women. And he didn't say another word. I guess he just thought I was out of place. And thinking that this is a public work funded event at a conference, you have no right to be saying crap like that and making other people feel uncomfortable. So, I made him feel really bad . . . If you say something horrible like that, I'm going to say, well I'll respond with, 'Well, I don't think that's funny. What do you mean? I don't get it.' And that often embarrasses people, which is a good go-to maneuver, make people explain why they think they're funny, often makes them behave better. Sometimes it makes them angry, and they walk away. I've had that experience too."

Women's journey to the table

Daisy recalls, "... it was not a culture that was super welcoming and felt comfortable and familiar. So, the fact that women even forged that path to get there, they have it in them, even if they haven't learned how to refine it yet, to use it strategically without some mentorship, without some coaching, that kind of thing. But I just feel like we've had to be brave just to even get there. We can get to any table really, because people try to shut you out of places where they don't want to change, and *you represent change.*"

Discussion

Hope and pushing through fear

Findings reveal that brave leaders have and impart hope – hope for their own success as leaders and for encouraging a sense of hope among their followers. Bravery in leadership assists leaders in pushing forward through fear (Brown, 2018). Leaders experience feelings of uncertainty, fear and intimidation; however, those who can push forward in the face of fear can clear obstacles and provide direction for their followers (Provitera et al., 2023). Remaining anchored to your core values is highlighted in the findings and aligns with existing studies (Eneanya, 2020; Star, 2016). Knowing your core values will help you speak up as a leader in times that may be challenging or controversial to do so.

Being authentic/Showing emotions

Bravery in leadership is a critical attribute that empowers leaders to make difficult decisions, confront challenges directly and inspire their teams to achieve common goals. According to April and Dalwai (2019), leaders who display bravery through vulnerability are more likely to earn the trust of their subordinates. Alongside bravery, authenticity in leadership holds equal importance. Authenticity in leadership entails being true to oneself, understanding one's strengths and weaknesses and acting in alignment with one's values and beliefs (Steffens et al., 2021). When leaders are authentic, they are more likely to express genuine emotions, fostering deeper connections with their teams. Brave leaders are also more inclined to exhibit vulnerability (Lopez, 2018). When leaders demonstrate vulnerability and share their emotions, they can cultivate an environment of psychological safety, where team members feel valued and understood. Essentially, bravery, authenticity and emotional expression are interconnected qualities that can enhance leadership effectiveness. Through authenticity and emotional openness, leaders can forge stronger connections with their teams, nurturing a culture of trust and open communication (Lopez, 2018).

Bravery toward a shared vision and leading bravely addressing toxic behaviors

Bravery in leadership stands as an essential quality that inspires individuals to stand firm in the face of adversity, challenge the status quo and drive transformative change (Kouzes and Posner, 2023). A brave leader is not merely one who takes risks, but someone deeply committed to a shared vision, willing to make tough decisions to realize it. This vision acts as a guiding light, offering direction and purpose, and a brave leader relentlessly pursues it, even amid skepticism or resistance (Kouzes and Posner, 2023). Furthermore, in environments marred by toxic behavior, bravery becomes even more crucial. Toxicity can derail teams, foster hostile work environments and stifle innovation. A brave leader in such scenarios not only confronts and addresses toxic behaviors directly but also cultivates a culture of respect, inclusivity and collaboration. By establishing clear expectations and leading by example, they ensure the team remains focused on the shared vision, nurturing an environment where everyone feels valued and heard (Kouzes and Posner, 2023).

Women's journey to the table

Bravery in leadership for women is a multifaceted attribute, especially given the unique challenges they often face in securing a seat at the leadership table. Historically and systemically, many professional environments have harbored biases against women. To challenge these deeply ingrained norms, women leaders must exhibit the courage to question established practices and advocate for more inclusive policies (Eagly and Carli, 2007). They frequently face stereotypes that can undermine their authority and competence, requiring them to bravely navigate these biases while maintaining authenticity (Rudman and Phelan, 2008). The journey to leadership is not always smooth, demanding that women leaders build resilience to persevere, learn from setbacks and persist (Ibarra et al., 2013). Often, they must advocate for themselves, courageously negotiating for opportunities, fair pay and recognition. Additionally, they play a crucial role in mentoring and sponsoring other women, ensuring a diverse leadership pipeline for the future (Sandberg, 2013). Balancing multiple roles, both professionally and personally, requires women leaders to set boundaries, prioritize self-care and seek support, demonstrating another aspect of their bravery (Eagly and Carli, 2007). Moreover, they often lead the charge in driving organizational change toward more inclusive cultures. This involves confronting biases, challenging discriminatory practices and championing diversity and inclusion initiatives with unwavering courage (Nembhard and Edmondson, 2006). Essentially, the bravery displayed by women in leadership is not solely about addressing external challenges but also encompasses internal resilience, authenticity and a commitment to fostering more equitable professional environments.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this case study, employing NA, revealed profound insights into the experiences of three women who shared their distinct stories of bravery in leadership. Each narrator enriched the study with personal reflections, perceptions and emotional landscapes, presenting a multifaceted picture of bravery in leadership. Following the narrators conveyed their respective stories, a cross-analysis was performed which generated the following themes: "hope," "pushing through fear", "authority vs. collaboration", "being authentic/showing emotions," "know your core values and speak up," "shared vision," "bravery during toxic behavior," and "women's journey to the table." Each theme was generated through analysis of the individual narratives, illustrating the complex interplay of resilience, transformation and self-realization within leadership contexts. The synthesis of these themes not only shed light on the subjective realities and intrinsic meanings embedded in each story but also constructed a comprehensive and empathetic understanding of the diverse dimensions of bravery, collaboration, authenticity and value-driven leadership experienced by these women. Thus, the individual narratives and the resultant themes serve as reflective mirrors, showcasing the multifaceted nature of bravery in leadership roles.

References

- April, K. and Dalwai, A. (2019), "Leadership styles required to lead digital transformation", *Effective Executive*, Vol. 22 No. 2, pp. 14-45.
- Baxter, P. and Jack, S. (2008), "Qualitative case study methodology: study design and implementation for novice researchers", *The Qualitative Report*, Vol. 13 No. 4, pp. 544-559.
- Brown, B. (2018), *Dare to Lead: Brave Work. Tough Conversations. Whole Hearts*, Random House, New York.
- Brown, M.E., Treviño, L.K. and Harrison, D.A. (2005), "Ethical leadership: a social learning perspective for construct development and testing", *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, Vol. 97 No. 2, pp. 117-134, doi: [10.1016/j.obhdp.2005.03.002](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.obhdp.2005.03.002).

- Byrd, J.T. and Thornton, J.C. (2019), "Humility, vulnerability and authentic leadership: a life stories approach", *Academy of Business Research Journal*, Vol. 2, pp. 73-108.
- Couris, J.D. (2020), "Vulnerability: the secret to authentic leadership through the pandemic", *Journal of Healthcare Management*, Vol. 65 No. 4, pp. 248-251, doi: [10.1097/jhm-d-20-00124](https://doi.org/10.1097/jhm-d-20-00124).
- Eagly, A.H. and Carli, L.L. (2007), *Through the Labyrinth: the Truth about How Women Become Leaders*, Harvard Business Press, Massachusetts.
- Eneanya, A.N. (2020), "Values-based leadership and fight against corruption in Nigeria between 2015 and 2019: public policy implications to good governance", *Public Policy and Administration Review*, Vol. 8 No. 1, doi: [10.15640/ppar.v8n1a1](https://doi.org/10.15640/ppar.v8n1a1).
- Ibarra, H., Ely, R. and Kolb, D. (2013), "Women rising: the unseen barriers", *Harvard Business Review*, Vol. 91 No. 9, p. 6066.
- Kouzes, J.M. and Posner, B.Z. (2023), *The Leadership Challenge: How to Make Extraordinary Things Happen in Organizations*, John Wiley & Sons, New Jersey.
- Lopez, S.O. (2018), *Vulnerability in Leadership: the Power of the Courage to Descend*, Doctoral dissertation, Seattle Pacific University, Washington.
- McAdams, D.P. (2001), "The psychology of life stories", *Review of General Psychology*, Vol. 5 No. 2, pp. 100-122, doi: [10.1037/1089-2680.5.2.100](https://doi.org/10.1037/1089-2680.5.2.100).
- Morse, J.M. (1995), "The significance of saturation", *Qualitative Health Research*, Vol. 5 No. 2, pp. 147-149.
- Nembhard, I.M. and Edmondson, A.C. (2006), "Making it safe: the effects of leader inclusiveness and professional status on psychological safety and improvement efforts in health care teams", *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, Vol. 27 No. 7, pp. 941-966, doi: [10.1002/job.413](https://doi.org/10.1002/job.413).
- Provitera, M.J., Quamina, I.B. and Sayyadi, M. (2023), "Leadership, courage, and ethical behavior: an executive approach", *Journal of Business, Technology and Leadership*, Vol. 5 No. 1, pp. 1-13, doi: [10.54845/btljournal.v5i1.32](https://doi.org/10.54845/btljournal.v5i1.32).
- Riessman, C.K. (2003), "Analysis of personal narratives", in *Inside Interviewing: New Lenses, New Concerns*, pp. 331-346.
- Rudman, L.A. and Phelan, J.E. (2008), "Backlash effects for disconfirming gender stereotypes in organizations", *Research in Organizational Behavior*, Vol. 28, pp. 6179-79, doi: [10.1016/j.riob.2008.04.003](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.riob.2008.04.003).
- Sandberg, S. (2013), *Lean in: Women, Work, and the Will to Lead*, Knopf, New York.
- Stake, R.E. (1995), *The Art of Case Study Research*, Sage.
- Starr, J.P. (2016), "Leadership: values: why do we believe what we believe?", *Phi Delta Kappan*, Vol. 98 No. 3, pp. 72-73, doi: [10.1177/0031721716677268](https://doi.org/10.1177/0031721716677268).
- Steffens, N.K., Wolyniec, N., Okimoto, T.G., Mols, F., Haslam, S.A. and Kay, A.A. (2021), "Knowing me, knowing us: personal and collective self-awareness enhances authentic leadership and leader endorsement", *The Leadership Quarterly*, Vol. 32 No. 6, 101498, doi: [10.1016/j.leaqua.2021.101498](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2021.101498).
- Yin, R.K. (2018), *Case Study Research and Applications*, Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA, Vol. 6.

Corresponding author

Michelle E. Bartlett can be contacted at: mbartlet@odu.edu

For instructions on how to order reprints of this article, please visit our website:

www.emeraldgrouppublishing.com/licensing/reprints.htm

Or contact us for further details: permissions@emeraldinsight.com