

Experiences of Awe and Meaning at Work Reflection Guide

Background Information:

Awe is a hot topic in social science research right now, especially with the recent publication of a [book for general audiences](#) by Dacher Keltner, one of the foremost experts on the subject. While people tend to think of awe as an extreme and infrequent emotion, smaller moments of “everyday awe” are easier to come by, and emerging research indicates that these experiences can have a powerful impact on our thoughts, behaviors, and well-being. This module provides an overview of the burgeoning field of research on awe and invites participants to consider the implications for workforce development. The module introduces the following big ideas:

- Awe is the feeling of being in the presence of something vast that transcends one’s current understanding of the world. It is characterized as an emotion that motivates learning and draws our attention to matters beyond the self.
- Awe is powerful even when experienced in small doses. Moments of “everyday awe” can be elicited through encounters with nature and art, collective experiences like concerts or sporting events, and stories of kindness, strength and courage.
- Emerging research, mainly focused on STEM professions, indicates that awe experiences help facilitate a sense of meaning and purpose at work. Awe seems to enable people to construct a broader narrative framework that connects their individual tasks to something larger, such as the mission of their organization or the collective enterprise shared with others in their field.

The video presentation for this module provides an overview of the research literature on awe and introduces some of the evidence for why awe is such a powerful emotion, even when experienced in small doses. It then takes a closer look at the role that awe can play in work contexts, including an in-depth example of research conducted by the presenter of this module, Dr. Megan Cuzzolino (Next Level Lab Senior Project Manager). The video concludes by connecting the findings from this specific research to more general implications for how awe can enable meaning-making at work. If you would like to go beyond the reflection prompts in the video, you can try out the following exercises, which invite you to think more explicitly about the implications of this work for your own practice.

Exercise 1: Identifying “Awe-Eliciting” and “Awe-Inhibiting” Features

First, considering your own workplace and/or others you have experienced or can imagine, brainstorm a list of “awe-eliciting” and “awe-inhibiting” features – in other words, elements within the work context that are likely to cultivate, or stifle, a sense of awe. This might include aesthetic elements such as the appearance of the physical work environment, social relationships with one’s colleagues and organizational leaders, and the institutional mission. For instance, a workplace culture that celebrates stories of individuals or teams that have overcome challenges might be an awe-eliciting feature, whereas a basement office with harsh lighting and no elements from the natural world might be an awe-inhibiting feature.

After you have identified a set of features in each category, choose one feature that might elicit awe in their work context and brainstorm ways that you could more effectively leverage it. Then, choose one

inhibiting feature and brainstorm ways that you could manage or modify it such that it would be more likely to elicit awe.

Exercise 2: Reflecting on the Bigger Picture

Evidence indicates that “awe encourages us to disengage from our mundane, day-to-day concerns and look at the big picture, not only out there in the world, but also as we fit into that world.”ⁱ The study of professional scientists, and other research on meaning at work, suggests that experiences of awe serve as a tool for facilitating meaning-making by enabling people to construct a broader framework for their experiences and connecting them to something larger than the self.

Consider your own workplace context, or the workplace context of the people you serve. Ask yourself:

- How would you characterize your broader institutional mission?
- Is that mission clearly articulated to employees at all levels, or only to those at the top?
- Do you have a sense that employees across the organization feel that they are contributing to that mission?
- If so, how might this sense of the “big picture” be effectively communicated to workers in ways that feel genuine and awe-inspiring?
- Or, if you feel that some employees are not in fact able to contribute to this mission in meaningful ways, why not, and can anything be modified to shift the nature of the work or the employees’ understanding of it?

ⁱ Danvers, A. F., O’Neil, M. J., & Shiota, M. N. (2016). The mind of the “happy warrior”: Eudaimonia, awe, and the search for meaning in life. In J. Vittersø (Ed.), *Handbook of eudaimonic well-being* (pp. 323–335). Springer.
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