

# Exploring Awe as a Means for Workplace Happiness and Productivity

*Awe: The feeling of being in the presence of something or someone vast that goes beyond, or makes you rethink, your current understanding of the world.<sup>2</sup>*

## Overview

**The goal of this project is to develop resources for organizations, managers, workforce development practitioners, and individual employees to support the cultivation of awe at work.**

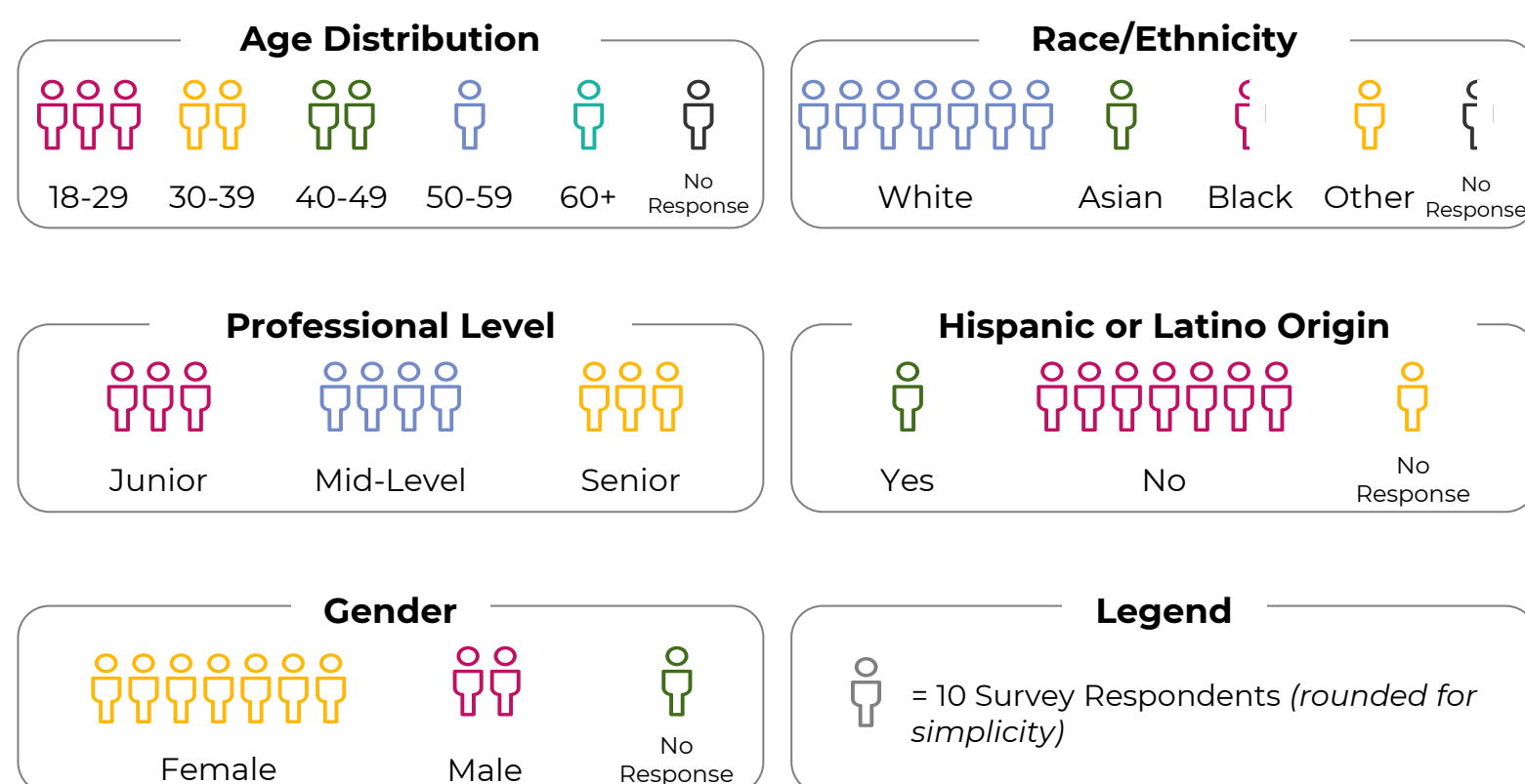
Decades of research indicate that people find the meaningfulness of their work to be “more important than any other occupational feature, including income, job security, and the opportunity for career advancement.”<sup>1</sup> Yet it is increasingly difficult for workers to find meaningful work, especially when they may be required to take on roles that do not align with their skills and interests. This presents a challenge for workforce development professionals tasked with preparing individuals for jobs outside their sense of professional identity.

This study explores a surprising antidote to these difficulties: **moments of awe.** In a survey of 100 individuals across 32 sectors, we found that experiences of awe contribute to feelings of meaning and purpose at work and provide a sense of motivation in the face of challenging circumstances.

<sup>1</sup> Carton, A. M. (2018). “I’m not mopping the floors, I’m putting a man on the moon”: How NASA leaders enhanced the meaningfulness of work by changing the meaning of work. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 63(2), 323-369.  
<sup>2</sup> Keltner, D., & Haidt, J. (2003). Approaching awe, a moral, spiritual, and aesthetic emotion. *Cognition and Emotion*, 17(2), 297-314.

## Sample

100 participants who live and work in the US responded to the survey. In total, 32 unique sectors were represented in the sample, with the highest concentrations in the fields of education (n=28) and health care (n=19).



## Key Findings

Data collection was conducted via an online survey that asked respondents to describe an experience of awe at work. Participants identified moments of awe that were elicited by *others*, the *self*, and the *nature of the work*. Over half of participants (55%) described being awed by the actions and abilities of other individuals. More than one-third (38%) were awed by seeing the impact of their work on their colleagues or the populations they served, while 28% reported being awed by their own sense of professional growth or achievement.

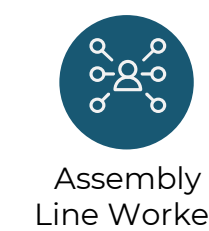
Two significant outcomes of awe experiences at work were *motivation* and *perspective shifts*. 36% of respondents said that moments of awe inspired them to persevere at work, and 35% reported that awe experiences resulted in an “a-ha” moment or new way of looking at a situation.

## Sources and Impacts of Awe

### Virtue or Ability of Others:

*Awe can come from witnessing the actions and abilities of other people*

“Something went wrong with my line, and another employee ran over, and stuck his hands into hot, melted plastic, and fixed the issue for me. I remember feeling shocked (and grateful) that someone would be willing to do that but also impressed by how quickly the whole thing was fixed. **It gave me an appreciation for someone who is masterful at the task before them.**”



Assembly Line Worker

### Perceived Meaningfulness:

*Awe can be derived from seeing one’s work as worthwhile to others*

“Teaching was the first job I had out of college. I was very idealistic going in, and the work was so incredibly hard. **Reading/learning about my students was partly what made the work so difficult, but it also imbued the work with importance.**”



High School Teacher

### Personal Growth or Accomplishment:

*Awe can come from professional development or a sense of achievement*

“I was hosting an event that we had hosted the year before. There was a much larger turn out, five times as many people, and a stronger sense of community. **I felt awe because I was able to see the progress that I had made in the one year.** It made me feel like my work was meaningful and impactful.”



Project Manager

### Motivation:

*Awe can inspire new goals, provide purpose, and help overcome difficulties*

“Any medical case can bring me to a state of awe and astonishment, and frankly, **this experience of awe is what motivates me to get out of bed each morning.**”



Medical Scribe

### “A-ha” Moments:

*Awe can come from new realizations or seeing things in a different way*

“There is a specific method we use to build sturdy walls to ensure the safety of our employees and quality of our shipments to the stores. This new hire I had last weekend built beautiful walls. He didn’t need much assistance from me, and I was speechless every time I saw the walls of boxes he built. **This was impactful for me because it challenged my usual training methods. It was amazing to watch.**”



Retail Distribution Trainer

## Practitioner Takeaways

These findings suggest that awe contributes to a sense of meaning, purpose, and motivation at work across a wide range of industry sectors. We see three takeaways as immediately actionable for leveraging moments of awe in workplace contexts:

### 01 | Make Growth and Impact Visible

#### What to do:

- People want to see the value their work has towards broad goals.
- Highlight individual and team impact in all updates (i.e., meetings and communications)
- Help leaders identify how progress enables change

#### Avoid:

- Celebrating outcomes without recognizing the effort they represent
- Assigning work without stating its broader purpose

**It is working when . . .** employees and leaders understand the organization’s broader mission and how their efforts directly impact progress.

### 02 | Prioritize Interpersonal Connections

#### What to do:

- People want to see their peers succeed.
- Use on-the-job learning as a means for people to connect
- Acknowledge expertise across teams
- Publicly and authentically celebrate career milestones

#### Avoid:

- Over-valuing self-reliance at the expense of collaboration
- Preaching a zero-sum mindset to drive performance

**It is working when . . .** workers are connected to, aware of, and appreciative of each other’s diverse strengths and experiences.

### 03 | Invite Reflection on “A-ha” Moments

#### What to do:

- People like rewarding challenges.
- Broaden vantage points by sharing organizational data and progress
- Support diverse networking opportunities and teams to nurture new ways of knowing
- Allow people to “witness” the work of others

#### Avoid:

- Assuming “a-ha” moments are understood by all
- Hiding “in progress” work

**It is working when . . .** employees celebrate new understandings, are open to rethinking ways of working, and comfortably cross organizational boundaries in their work.

## What’s Next:

### Next, the team will:

- Dive into the awe experiences of workforce development professionals
- Seek to broaden and diversify our sample to better represent the field

## Acknowledgements

This work was made stronger by contributions from Dr. Tina Grotzer and Tessa Forshaw of the Next Level Lab. Funding for this project was provided by Accenture Corporate Citizenship. The perspectives expressed here are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the funder.