



NEXT LEVEL
LAB

THE POWER OF AWE AT WORK

How Moments of Awe Can Engage,
Motivate, and Sustain Employees in the
Workforce Development Profession

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

An emerging body of evidence indicates that cultivating a “culture of awe” in the workplace can have significant individual and organizational benefits, including increasing workers’ sense of engagement, motivation, and job satisfaction. In response to this research, the Next Level Lab launched the Experiences of Awe at Work project in 2023 to more deeply investigate the nature and impact of awe experiences in workplace contexts. The project began with a general survey of 100 United States workers across a wide range of sectors. Subsequently, informed by the findings from this broad survey, we designed a study focused specifically on the awe experiences of individuals in the workforce development sector. This project involved a survey of over 100 workforce development professionals representing eight organizations in the sector as well as in-depth interviews with a small subset of participants, with the goal of identifying actionable recommendations based on the findings.

The survey found that most participants reported experiencing awe at work at least occasionally, and some much more frequently. The most commonly cited sources of awe were observing the actions or abilities of other individuals in one’s work context, the perceived meaningfulness of one’s work, and feeling a sense of professional growth or achievement. The primary outcomes of awe experiences identified by both survey and interview participants were an increase in intrinsic motivation and a sense of validation in one’s chosen career. To a lesser extent, survey participants also reported that some awe experiences led to a new understanding or perspective on one’s work. The findings point to the value of making growth and impact visible, prioritizing interpersonal connections, and inviting reflection on “a-ha” moments in the workplace.

The Experiences of Awe at Work project is overseen by Next Level Lab Project Director Megan Cuzzolino. This report was written by Megan Cuzzolino and Jules Becerra with valuable contributions from Tina Grotzer, Tessa Forshaw, Jeff Bachman, Max Ramseyer, Maggie Lorenz, Christine Nanan, and Matthew LoPolito. Kristin Livingston produced the graphic design. Funding support for this work was provided by Accenture Corporate Citizenship. You can learn more about the Experiences of Awe at Work project and other research from the Next Level Lab on our [website](#).



STUDY BACKGROUND

The emotion of awe is 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.¹ Some moments of awe are once-in-a-lifetime experiences, but smaller moments of “everyday awe” can also be impactful. Evidence suggests that experiencing awe increases people’s tendencies toward curiosity, open-mindedness, generosity, and collaboration.² To date, most of the empirical research on awe has been situated in lab-based contexts or in immersive recreational settings such as museums or national parks, and recommendations to incorporate awe into one’s daily life tend to be focused on the personal realm. However, a small but growing body of research makes the case that awe can, and should, also be elicited in the context of work.

While many positive emotions are valuable in work contexts, researchers posit that awe is uniquely positioned to “energize people in the workplace, enabling them and motivating them to find creative solutions and to engage with their coworkers and their projects.”³ The largest investigation of awe at work thus far – a survey of nearly 300 workers from the United States, Canada, and China – found that the most frequently identified elicitors of awe at work included instances of observing the abilities and virtues of one’s colleagues, feeling connected to or impressed by an organizational mission, and one’s own sense of professional growth and achievement.⁴ These findings have been largely corroborated by the Next Level Lab’s cross-sector survey of 100 workers in the United States.⁵

Other research has focused on awe experiences in the context of specific professions. For instance, several recent studies of STEM professionals have found that experiences of awe are closely associated with new or shifting perspectives about one’s work as well as increased intrinsic motivation and purpose.⁶ Another study focused on crisis and hostage

¹ Keltner & Haidt, 2003

² Keltner, 2023

³ Perez & Lench, 2018, p. 51

⁴ Hu & Meng, 2022

⁵ Cuzzolino, 2024

⁶ Carton, 2018; Cuzzolino, 2021; Sheprow & Harrison, 2022

negotiators found that awe was most often elicited by the intensity and gravity of the work, and that these experiences played a critical role in improving workers' sense of resilience in the face of highly stressful and dangerous work situations.⁷

In sum, this emerging body of research indicates that people can indeed experience awe at work, and that these experiences may have a meaningful impact on engagement and performance. Less is known, however, about the role of awe in specific sectors other than the limited few that have been the focus of existing research. Further work is also needed to identify the implications for designing work environments that can cultivate awe.

In an effort to respond to these gaps in the literature, the present study focused on the awe experiences of practitioners in the workforce development sector. Workforce development professionals support the nearly 60% of Americans without a college degree⁸ to build essential skills for the evolving job market, yet they are often overlooked by research and policies that focus on the professional development of (pre)K-12 educators and higher education faculty. On the front lines of economic development, they face daily challenges spanning significant resource constraints, heartbreaking constituent situations, and unreasonable demands on their time. The goal of this study was to leverage our findings from the study of workforce development specialists to both transform their own professional experience and, in turn, better support those striving to find their place in a rapidly changing job landscape. We see workforce development professionals as experts and leaders who can think collaboratively with us to inform future applied research on the role of awe for job seekers.

⁷ Thompson & Jensen, 2023

⁸ Fry et al., 2024

METHODS

To recruit study participants, we began by contacting over two dozen workforce development organizations with ties to the Next Level Lab and our broader professional network; the organizations spanned different roles within the workforce development sector, including direct service providers, intermediaries, and funders. After an initial conversation about the study design and purpose, some organizations expressed interest in participating directly while others connected us with partners in their networks.

Ultimately, eight organizations consented to participate, all of whom were either direct service providers or intermediaries who connected job seekers to learning and/or work opportunities. De-identified descriptions of each of the collaborating organizations are presented in Appendix A. In Phase I of the study, 116 participants responded to the survey across the eight organizations. An overview of the demographic makeup of participants is presented in Appendix B. Survey responses were analyzed using a codebook developed by two researchers based on an earlier pilot study; new emergent themes specific to this sample were also identified. In Phase II of the study, a total of nine participants from four of the participating organizations volunteered to take part in a follow-up interview. Interview responses were analyzed using the same codebook from Phase I; again, new emergent themes specific to this sample were also identified.

In the section that follows, eight of the most significant key findings are outlined, along with illustrative quotes from the data. We have slightly altered some job titles and have omitted the names of all individuals and collaborating organizations in order to preserve the anonymity of participants. Some quotations have also been edited for length and clarity.



KEY FINDINGS

KEY FINDING #1

Most survey participants reported that they have experienced awe at work, some just on rare occasions and others as often as weekly.

Twenty-eight survey participants (24%) said had they experienced awe at work only a handful of times over the course of their careers, 23 (20%) reported feeling it once or twice per year, 34 (29%) said they tended to experience it on a monthly basis, and 25 (22%) said moments of awe occurred weekly or more. Just six participants (5%) said they had never experienced awe at work.

Nearly all of the examples of awe provided were positive and uplifting, with the exception of three survey participants who described moments of “negative awe” (e.g., being in awe of an overwhelming workload or an emotionally draining role transition). When prompted, two thirds of interview participants also described workplaces that had elicited feelings of negative awe for them, though notably, most examples were from previous jobs. The most common sources of negative awe were toxic environments, poor leadership, and negative interpersonal interactions with clients or students. The findings below focus on moments of positive awe given that they comprised the majority of responses.

KEY FINDING #2

The most prevalent source of awe was the experience of observing the strength, courage, dedication, kindness, and/or abilities of other people.

Eighty-two survey participants (70%), as well as five of nine interview participants, described moments of awe that stemmed from witnessing the behaviors or virtues of other individuals. Many participants mentioned characteristics or achievements that they had observed in their students or clients, especially in the context of stories about overcoming adversity to achieve success. Others described being awed by the skills and dedication of their colleagues.

“I watched a student who had struggled to graduate and meet basic requirements finally make it to graduation. She had struggled behaviorally, going back and forth from remote placement to in-person. She also struggled academically, getting frustrated and wanting to give up when she didn’t understand. Watching her two-year-old son run around the audience during graduation as his mom walked across the stage was definitely an awe moment.”

School Leader

“During a snowstorm and power outage, a staff [member] continued to process payment for participants. She went to her car and used her vehicle as a power source so her laptop would not run out of power. ... This was impactful because it showed that even the Accounting Team can positively have an effect on our participants. It is rare that the Accounting Department is mentioned when telling our story that staff cares for our participants. It warmed my heart.”

Accounting Department Member

“I guess whenever I think of [awe], usually I associate it with almost like a loss for words, and something that really stops you in your tracks and makes you just rethink your own world view and perspective on life in certain situations. ... I feel like I’m constantly in awe by how resilient people are.”

Counseling Manager

KEY FINDING #3

Another key elicitor of awe was the perceived meaningfulness or impact of one's work.

Sixty-three survey participants (54%) and all nine interview participants reported that they derived a sense of awe from observing that their own work or the work of their organization had value and made a difference to other people. Their stories highlighted specific moments where they saw evidence of impact; in particular, individuals who work in roles that do not allow for much direct interaction with beneficiaries commented on the value of hearing individual personal narratives versus aggregated summaries of organizational impact. Graduation ceremonies were frequently cited as a context where awe experiences occurred. Many participants noted that these moments were a source of inspiration and motivation, as discussed further in Key Finding 5.

“Every time I have experienced awe at work has involved watching the positive impact of my or my organization’s work. In my current role, the impact is less direct but involves helping others understand complex systems and steps so that the impact of our organization and program can be better worked towards and measured. I’m also highly impacted when I hear directly from the populations intended to be impacted, i.e. when apprentices and their families share the positive impact of an apprenticeship program, or when coworkers express excitement in their role in these systems.”

Program Manager

“[A] first generation graduate joined the school team as an early childhood educator, and since she has graduated, all of her younger children have gone on to also earn their high school diplomas. This experience was impactful because I saw first-hand how important a parent’s education was to her/his children’s educational obtainment. I have read the data yet witnessing first-hand has been special. I have always felt that education is one of the best tools to help change a person’s opportunities in life, and [our program] provides that opportunity for all.”

School Development Team Member

“During our student graduation ceremony, I was overcome with awe and inspiration. The moment came as our class speaker shared his incredible journey. He recounted how he had been homeless, living out of his car, before our program helped him gain the tech certifications he needed to turn his life around. In a few short years, he went from having nothing to a six-figure salary as an instructor. I was deeply moved by his resilience and the transformative impact of education and opportunity. Witnessing someone overcome such adversity and achieve success filled me with hope and renewed my passion for the work we do. This experience solidified my belief in the importance of celebrating individual stories. It’s easy to get caught up in statistics and outcomes, but it’s the personal narratives that truly capture the heart and inspire action.”

Social Support Manager



“ It’s easy to get caught up in statistics and outcomes, but it’s the personal narratives that truly capture the heart and inspire action.”



KEY FINDING #4

In the majority of interviews, the importance of direct exposure to impact created by the job was emphasized as a necessary element to feel awe.

Delving deeper into the specifics of people's awe experiences in the interviews served to illuminate the importance of direct exposure to the impact of one's work. The majority of interview participants (seven of nine) cited direct exposure as a necessary element to register and internalize their work's impact, and therefore feel awe because of it. Most referred to scenarios in which they could tangibly witness the ways in which their work directly affected others, such as "turn[ing] that person's life around."

"Those stories [in the form of videos from alumni] are tangible and real life, and you really know how our individual work has impacted them. So then it becomes a little more real, and a little bit more inspiring. You're not just trying to hit an org KPI, instead, now, you're just looking at one person. You're like, 'Oh, wow, yeah, we turned that person's life around.'"

Marketing Manager

"A lot of times, especially if you work in a remote environment or doing the work you do, you don't really get to see the outcome. And so for me, [direct exposure to the impact is] a validation that I'm doing my job right, and that I'm figuring it out."

Marketing Specialist

"I pour myself into my work, whatever that daily stuff is. And then at some point there's an event, or there's an experience or a talk, or someone presents something where I can see that work impacting people. So it's very clear that my day-to-day stuff is having an impact. ... [In my current role] I'm not in direct contact [with clients]...so it's less frequent. So I'm kind of hungry for that, actually."

Strategy Advisor

KEY FINDING #5

A smaller subset of survey participants mentioned being awed by their own experience of professional growth or achievement.

Twenty-two survey participants (19%) identified moments of awe derived from hard-won professional accomplishments. Often these examples were tied to the impact or meaningfulness of the work, but the emphasis was on witnessing one's own progress, development, or success in a work context.

"I've experienced awe at work on multiple occasions in the past year, mainly due to overcoming obstacles that felt impossible at the time. ... As someone who is early on in their career, these experiences have become immensely impactful in increasing my self-confidence and feeling that I am deserving of the job I have. Overcoming hurdles and having an a-ha moment of realizing that something I spend hours on actually had an easy fix has increased my critical thinking skills, which I've been able to use outside of my work. I no longer question whether I was deserving of my job, and now recognize the potential that my colleagues that interviewed me saw."

Senior Data Analyst

"I had an 'awe' moment when my team and I flagged a user function we need to change to create a better user experience and the product team was receptive and was able to change it for us in the matter of two weeks. I felt heard, and appreciated, and also really appreciate all the stakeholders heard me in putting our users first. It felt good to be heard and seen as a subject matter expert. I do not like a lot of recognition but I like my opinions and thoughts to be considered and heard."

Marketing Manager

"I was giving my first assessment and [my student] was just crushing it and I was so proud and in awe of her. I said, 'Oh my gosh, you're rocking it, who taught you how to read?' And she gave me a funny look and said, 'You did!' It's still the thing I'm most proud of professionally."

Vice President, Strategic Planning

KEY FINDING #6

For many participants, moments of awe were seen as a source of validation in their choice of career and/or motivation to persist in their work.

Fifty-seven survey participants (49%) and seven of nine interview participants stated that their experiences of awe made them feel inspired and/or motivated to persist at work, and served as a valuable reminder of why they have chosen to pursue a mission-driven career. Many participants indicated that these awe moments are a critical source of “fuel” that gives them purpose and combats burnout.

“[I experienced awe from] being at a graduation from a job training program and having the students talk about how much the work of the agency that I love changed their life (and by extension their family and their community). I felt proud, part of something bigger, justified in my decision to work in social services despite the low pay, validated that an intervention that I created had the impact I was hoping for.”
Vice President, Employer Partnerships

“I often think of [certain former participants] when I have moments of doubt and worry if what I am doing matters. I often asked myself those questions even during the journey of those two participants. What I try to remind myself along this is to do my best and success will find a way as well. The awe moments can be life preservers in a stressful time.”
Program Coordinator

“Working with young people, every day is an awe day. To effect change in young people’s lives and to impact the next generation of youth leaders who want to experience the same awe feeling is all I need to motivate me to continue doing this work.”
Career Advancement Coach



KEY FINDING #7

Some survey participants said that moments of awe led to a shift in perspective.

Twenty-eight percent of survey participants described new realizations or understandings about their work that came out of their awe experiences. These “a-ha” moments often helped them approach their work in a new way or think differently about their role.

“Rather than talking about ways around [an expense that our client could not cover], my supervisor said, ‘Why don’t we write that into the grant so that we can pay for it?’. The external partner was stunned that she had suggested that we pay more money, and I was stunned because I never considered telling someone to charge us more. In the end, it left me shocked because I knew she was always thinking about our clients and our work, rather than a bottom line. Her suggestion to include that cost came from a place of knowing that it would only benefit our clients and strengthen our relationship with this partner. It was brilliant and thoughtful and completely changed the way I think about business and partnership.”

Director of Business Development

“I experienced awe at work during an interview I was conducting for recruitment and admissions purposes. I had the privilege to interview a candidate that overcame cancer and kidney failure. Her attitude was awe inspiring. She gave me inspiration and I felt a sense of appreciation that I had never felt before. Witnessing her determination and tenacity for life left me feeling energized. This experience was significant and impactful to me because it shifted my perspective on resilience and determination. The candidate’s ability to overcome such severe health challenges while maintaining a positive and driven attitude reminded me of the power of human spirit and perseverance. It made me reflect on my own challenges and how I approach them, inspiring me to adopt a more resilient and appreciative mindset. Additionally, her story reinforced the importance of empathy and understanding in the recruitment process, highlighting the value of looking beyond qualifications to the persons character and life experiences.”

Recruitment and Admissions Manager

“I have experienced awe several times while working at [Organization]. There have been occasions when I have heard a member sing, or play an instrument, or produce a work of art that leaves me [with] an utter sense of awe at the talent. It’s seeing the unexpected in an unexpected place. Other examples have occurred when a young person who is facing extreme challenges achieves what would be noteworthy in even the most ideal circumstances ... These moments are difficult because you have to question whether you’re in awe because you underestimated a young person’s skills/talents or whether you are genuinely experiencing a one-in-a-lifetime occurrence. Either way, it’s inspiring, by changing one’s perspective and understanding of what is possible.”

Career and Education Managing Director

“It’s inspiring, by changing one’s perspective and understanding of what is possible.”



KEY FINDING #8

Workforce development professionals describe their awe experiences in ways that largely resemble workers from other sectors. However, they place a greater emphasis on the meaningfulness of the work and are less focused on how awe experiences might shift or change their thinking.

In a prior study from the Next Level Lab of 100 United States workers across 32 sectors, we found that moments of awe were most frequently elicited by observing the behaviors and abilities of other individuals in one's work context and by the perceived meaningfulness of the work.⁹ These themes were even more prevalent in our study of the workforce development sector. Most notably, workforce development professionals were nearly twice as likely as those in the general sample to identify moments of awe that were derived from the meaningfulness or impact of their work.

The perceived impact of workers' awe experiences is also similar across the two studies – much like the findings presented above, the primary two outcomes described by participants in the cross-sector study were an increase in motivation or validation of one's career path and a shift in perspective. However, participants in the general sample were twice as likely as workforce development practitioners to say that their awe experiences helped them understand something new or made them think differently about their work.

⁹ Cuzzolino, 2024

IMPLICATIONS

The above findings point to several key implications for cultivating a culture of awe in the workplace. The table below outlines practical steps for incorporating lessons learned from these findings into organizational culture.

Actions to Generate and Leverage Moments of Awe in the Workplace

Action 1: Make Growth and Impact Visible

People want to see the value their work has toward organizational goals.

What to do:

- Highlight individual and team impact in meetings and other communications
- Communicate how specific tasks contribute to organizational progress
- Provide qualitative examples of impact alongside quantitative success metrics

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.

Action 2: Prioritize Interpersonal Connections

People want to see their peers succeed.

What to do:

- 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.

Action 3: Invite Reflection on "A-ha" Moments

People like rewarding challenges.

What to do:

- Broaden vantage points by sharing organizational data and progress
- Support diverse networking opportunities and teams to nurture new ways of knowing
- Model the practice of openly acknowledging learning

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.

This study's finding that awe was most commonly elicited by other people is consistent with prior research on both awe experiences in general¹⁰ and awe experiences at work specifically.¹¹ This highlights the importance of prioritizing interpersonal connections at work and viewing others in the community as sources of knowledge and inspiration. Furthermore, participants frequently emphasized the importance of witnessing the impact of their work first-hand, and also pointed to the value of hearing personal narratives rather than just aggregated data about organizational impact. This was especially true for respondents that were not in client- or student-facing roles.

Our findings about the primary impacts of awe experiences at work also corroborate prior evidence that awe is associated with motivation and a sense of purpose in one's career. The comparatively lower frequency of participants who said that awe moments led to new understandings (versus those in the general sample) suggests that there may be some untapped potential for workforce development organizations in terms of inviting reflection on "a-ha moments" in the workplace. It is important to consider that openly acknowledging a shift in one's thinking at work often necessitates vulnerability, and doing so requires a workplace culture where people feel comfortable admitting a gap in their knowledge and/or changing their minds.

CONCLUSION

At the Next Level Lab, our research on experiences of awe and meaning at work continues. We are engaged in ongoing collaboration with several of the participating organizations to gather their interpretations of the findings and develop a set of tangible resources and tools for use in workplace contexts.

As the President of one of the participating organizations reflected, "At the heart of workforce development, work is an unapologetic desire for changing lives and creating opportunities. The outcomes of the awe study have reinforced how vital it is to not only achieve transformative results but to ensure that all staff involved in the process can see, feel, and internalize the ultimate impact of their collective effort. This research and participation in this group has inspired us to double down on practices like gathering powerful testimonials and inviting staff to graduation ceremonies, so the life-changing outcomes of our work remain deeply felt and shared by all who contribute to it."

¹⁰ Keltner, 2023

¹¹ Cuzzolino, 2024; Hu & Meng, 2022

Appendix A

Description of Participating Organizations

Code	Nature of Organization	Total Number of Employees	Number of Employees Invited to Participate	Number of Employees Who Completed the Survey
A	Direct programming provider	200	32	29
B	Direct programming provider	250	250	28
C	Direct programming provider	350	350	19
D	Intermediary (connects job seekers to opportunities)	17	17	12
E	Direct programming provider	50	50	8
F	Direct programming provider	270	40	7
G	Intermediary (connects job seekers to opportunities)	85	45	7
H	Direct programming provider	1500	250	6

Appendix B

Demographic Overview of Participants

Demographic	Classification	Frequency
Professional Level	Entry level	17
	Mid-level	58
	Senior level	41
Education Level	High school diploma or GED	5
	Bachelor's degree	34
	Postgraduate degree	64
	Other (associate degree, trade school certification, etc.)	5
	No response	8
Age	18-29	16
	30-39	39
	40-49	30
	50-59	17
	60-69	7
	No response	7

Gender	Female	80
	Male	27
	Non-binary	1
	No response	8
Race/Ethnicity	White	56
	Black or African American	23
	Asian	8
	American Indian or Alaska Native	1
	Other	13
	Multiracial	3
	No response	12
Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish Origin	No	80
	Yes	23
	No response	13

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