



How leader displays of happiness and sadness influence follower performance: Emotional contagion and creative versus analytical performance

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ABSTRACT

Previous studies have found mixed results regarding the influence of positive and negative leader affect on follower performance. We propose that both leader happiness and leader sadness can be beneficial for follower performance contingent on whether the task concerns creative or analytical performance. This proposition was put to the test in two experiments in which leader affective display was manipulated and the performance of (student) participants was assessed. The results supported our hypothesis that a leader's displays of happiness enhance follower creative performance, whereas a leader's displays of sadness enhance follower analytical performance. Contrasting these findings with evidence for a subjective rating of leadership effectiveness, in line with an implicit leadership theory interpretation, leaders were perceived as more effective when displaying happiness rather than sadness irrespective of task type. The second study showed that the effects of leader affective displays on followers' creative performance and perceived leadership effectiveness are mediated by follower positive affect, indicating that emotional contagion partly underlies these effects.

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1. Introduction

Inevitably, people in leadership positions display their feelings—facially, vocally, and in more subtle nonverbal communication. Such *affective displays* may play a role in leadership effectiveness that research has only recently started to address. An important question that emerges from these recent research efforts concerns the contingencies of the effectiveness of leader displays of positive affect (e.g., a team leader in a happy mood) as compared with negative affect (e.g., a team leader in a sad mood). This is the issue that we address in the current study. In doing so, we focus both on the performance effects of leader affective displays and on their influence on subjective perceptions of leadership. We develop the propositions that the creative versus analytical nature of the performance task moderates whether the display of happiness (creative performance) or sadness (analytical performance) is more conducive to follower performance, whereas subjective ratings of leadership effectiveness are more favorable following happy than following sad displays regardless of the nature of the task. We provide experimental evidence for these propositions as well as partial evidence for the hypothesis that these effects are mediated by emotional contagion.

Leadership effectiveness has been a core topic in leadership research (Bass, 2008). Leadership, by definition, implies that a leader influences one or more followers (Yukl & Van Fleet, 1992), and leader affect (i.e., moods and emotions) may be a key issue

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in understanding how leaders influence their followers and why leaders with equal skills and competences sometimes succeed and sometimes fail (George & Bettenhausen, 1990). The effects of leader affect on their followers are not fully uncovered yet, but critical to understand (Sy, Côté, & Saavedra, 2005). Humphrey (2002) has argued that a key leadership function is to manage the affect of followers, and that this is one of the main ways in which leaders influence performance. Thus, affect is a core issue within leadership, but unfortunately also one where our understanding is least developed. The most important criterion for leadership effectiveness is typically understood to be follower performance (Kaiser, Hogan, & Craig, 2008), and our goal in the current study is to contribute to the development of our understanding of the role of affect in leadership effectiveness by zooming in on what arguably is a key issue here: the nature of the task. We advance and test the hypotheses that leader displays of positive versus negative affect influence follower performance differently on creative versus analytical tasks, and that this effect is mediated by emotional contagion.

Previous studies have shown that leader affect influences leadership effectiveness (Bono & Ilies, 2006; Gaddis, Connely, & Mumford, 2004). However, the specific direction of this influence remains unclear. Both positive and negative leader affect have been shown to increase and decrease leadership effectiveness. We propose that this ambiguity is due to the fact that the effectiveness of leader affective displays is contingent on the kind of task that has to be performed by the followers. Our studies integrate different lines of research, and test relationships that have been unaddressed in previous studies, with the aim to contribute valuable new insights on leader affect and leadership effectiveness to the existing literature. Another aim of the present studies is to test our prediction that, despite being used interchangeably in previous research, objective (i.e., performance) and subjective (i.e., perceptions) leadership effectiveness measures may not correspond in terms of how they are influenced by leader affect.

2. Leader affect and leadership effectiveness

The term affect is used to describe feeling states that may range from diffuse, long-lasting moods to specific, acute, short-lasting emotions (Frijda, 1994). For a variety of reasons, leaders may experience positive or negative affective states in the workplace. In interactions with their followers, leaders may express their affective states, either consciously or unconsciously, verbally or nonverbally (George, 1995; Humphrey, 2002; Sy et al., 2005; van Knippenberg, van Knippenberg, Van Kleef, & Damen, 2008). *Leader affective displays* are observable indicators of the leader's affect, and both positive and negative leader affective displays may impact leadership effectiveness. It has been stated that leader affective displays directly impact followers' behaviors and productivity (Dasborough & Ashkanasy, 2002). Empirical evidence showed that a leader's expression of affect influences followers more than the objective content of the leader's message (Newcombe & Ashkanasy, 2002), stressing the major influence of leader affective displays. We can conclude that leader affective displays influence followers in important ways. However, the direction of this influence is not yet fully understood, and a clear answer to the question whether leader displays of positive or negative affect are more effective cannot be given.

Several studies showed that leader displays of positive affect increase leadership effectiveness. For instance, leaders were perceived as more effective by their followers when they made eye contact, and displayed vocal fluency, gestures, and smiles (i.e., displayed positive affect) while giving a speech compared to leaders who avoided eye contact, gestures, vocal fluency, and smiles (Awamleh & Gardner, 1999). Other studies on leader affect specifically showed that leader displays of positive affect result in higher follower ratings of leadership effectiveness (Bono & Ilies, 2006; Gaddis et al., 2004), higher ratings of leader attractiveness, and more positive follower affect (Bono & Ilies, 2006). Moreover, leader positive affect has been shown to increase group performance (Gaddis et al., 2004; George, 1995). Likewise, negative leader affective displays have been shown to decrease both follower assessments of their leader's effectiveness (Lewis, 2000) and follower performance (Johnson, 2009).

However, some studies have indicated that both leader positive and leader negative affective states can be good or bad depending on the situation. For instance, a study by Newcombe and Ashkanasy (2002) showed that ratings of leader negotiation latitude (i.e., an indication of followers' relationship with the leader) were contingent on the interaction of the valence of feedback and the valence of leader affect. Followers rated the relationship with their leader most positively when their leader displayed positive affect accompanied by positive feedback, but most negatively when their leader displayed positive affect accompanied by negative feedback. Thus, leader positive affect does not necessarily increase leadership effectiveness, and may even decrease it. Another study showed that the effects of leader positive and negative affective displays on follower team performance depend on people's epistemic motivation (i.e., a desire to develop a thorough understanding of the situation; Van Kleef et al., 2009). Teams with high epistemic motivation performed better on a command-and-control task when their leader had expressed anger (because the anger made them realize that their performance could be improved), whereas teams with low epistemic motivation performed better when their leader had expressed happiness (because they liked a happy leader better than an angry leader).

These studies suggest that instead of asking whether leader displays of positive or negative affect are more effective, a more appropriate question would be *in what circumstances* leader displays of positive or negative affect are more effective (cf. George, 2011). Some variables have already been identified as moderators of the relationship between leader affect and leadership effectiveness, as indicated above. However, an important moderator, and arguably the most fundamental, has been overlooked so far in research on leadership affect: the role of the task performed.

3. Task types

Follower performance has been brought forward as the most important indicator of leadership effectiveness (e.g., Kaiser et al., 2008) and serves as a relevant output for an organization because performance of an employee adds to the overall performance

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