Leading across language barriers: Managing language-induced emotions in multinational teams

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This study shows which negative emotion language barriers can provoke among multinational team (MNT) members and investigates how MNT leaders can successfully mitigate these detrimental effects. Multilingual teams constitute a leadership context of paramount importance in today’s organizations, which prior research has neglected. Our study contributes to the literature on MNT leaders’ emotion regulation strategies by investigating the specific challenges they face in this setting. We advance research on leadership in teams by exploring successful leadership strategies geared towards addressing language-induced emotions and by demonstrating the positive outcomes of MNT leaders leveraging their power in this context. Our study contributes to research on language barriers in multinational corporations by introducing the interplay of language-induced emotions and leadership to this area. Furthermore, it contributes to emotion-sensitive organizational studies by specifying previously established emotion management models for multilingual environments. On this basis, we draw conclusions for the development of future MNT leaders.

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Introduction: motivation of the study

Given that most multinational corporations (MNCs) are also multilingual (Harzing, Köster, & Magner, 2011; Luo & Shenkar, 2006), the management of language barriers constitutes a key leadership challenge in these companies (Zander, Mockaitis, & Butler, 2012). Despite the fact that languages are “the basic means of communication in organizations [and] the basis for knowledge creation” (Vaara, Piekkari, Tienari, & Säntti, 2005: 595), language barriers have surprisingly long been neglected both by researchers and practitioners (Harzing & Pudelko, 2013; Harzing et al., 2011). Only recently have management scholars started to explore the multifaceted role of language in MNCs (Brannen, Piekkari, & Tietze, 2014). A particularly active sub-stream within this emerging area is concerned with the impact of language barriers on multinational teams (MNTs). Given that teamwork “has become the contemporary ‘modus operandi’” in MNCs (Zander & Butler, 2010: 258) and considering that MNTs depend on the interaction between members speaking different mother tongues, the effective management of language barriers in these contexts is very important. The task of bridging linguistic boundaries in MNTs is mostly assigned to MNT leaders (Butler, Zander, Mockaitis, & Sutton, 2012; Zander et al., 2012), but there is a paucity of specific guidelines on how they can address the challenges of language barriers.

The negative emotions language barriers can trigger among MNT members present a particularly acute leadership challenge. Recent studies indicated that language-induced emotions can erode collaborative efforts and lead to losses in productivity and performance of MNTs (Hinds, Neeley, & Cramton, 2014) or even on the MNC level (Harzing & Feely, 2008; Neeley, Hinds, & Cramton, 2012). Whereas management studies have only recently taken a “linguistic turn” (Tietze, 2008: 2), the “affective revolution” in...
Whereas specific research on the competencies of MNT leaders is still quite limited, pioneering studies in the field (Zander & Butler, 2010; Zander et al., 2012) borrow from the broader stream of literature investigating global leadership skills at the top management level. This research area centers on the concept of a leader's "global mindset", which is often defined in terms of cross-cultural and linguistic boundaries, creating links and establishing communication between multiple groups in their organizations (Mendenhall, Reiche, Bird, & Osland, 2012; Zander et al., 2012). Leaders in the middle management, particularly the leaders of multinational and multilingual teams, are also expected to motivate and inspire, to blend diverse collections of individuals into effective teams and to leverage the creative potential of team diversity (Butler et al., 2012; Zander & Butler, 2010; Zander et al., 2012).
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