



The awestruck effect: Followers suppress emotion expression in response to charismatic but not individually considerate leadership



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ABSTRACT

This study examines how followers regulate their outward expression of emotions in the context of two types of leadership that are commonly associated with transformational leadership, namely charismatic leadership and individually considerate leadership. Based on new theorizing and a series of three studies involving experiments and field work, we show that the two types of leadership have different effects on followers' emotional expressiveness. Specifically, we find that followers under the influence of leaders' charisma tend to suppress the expression of emotions (we call this the "awestruck effect"), but followers express emotions when leaders consider them individually. Awestruck followers may suffer from expressive inhibition even as charismatic leaders stir their hearts.

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Emotion suppression – the “inhibition of one's own emotional expressive behavior while emotionally aroused” (Gross & Levenson, 1993: 970) – is a common emotion regulation strategy through which people attempt to control their emotions and shape their outward expression of emotions. But this strategy is fraught with problems. When people suppress emotions, they experience decreased well-being, increased levels of strain and decreased job satisfaction (Schaubroeck & Jones, 2000; Côté & Morgan, 2002; John & Gross, 2004). Suppressing emotions negatively affects the exchange of information among people and interferes with the establishment and retention of high-quality relationships (Butler et al., 2003; Gross & John, 2003; Srivastava, Tamir, McGonigal, John, & Gross, 2009). Emotion suppression also increases physiological emotional responses, absorbs mental resources, deteriorates cognitive performance and impairs memory (Gross, 2002; Richards & Gross, 1999, 2000, 2006; Schmeichel, Volokhov, & Demaree, 2008). In light of these perils, an important question for leadership scholars is how leaders affect the extent to which followers express or suppress their emotions.

Leadership research tells us that transformational leaders, in particular, lift the constraints on people's emotional expressiveness that are common in the workplace (Mann, 1999; Martin, Knopoff, & Beckman, 1998; Riggio & Reichard, 2008). Such leaders stir enthusiasm and excitement, and “followers are likely to express these positive feelings in a particularly open and pronounced manner”

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(Walter & Bruch, 2008: 247). But, burgeoning research in the area of status suggests that status differences entail the suppression of emotional expressiveness on the part of lower status people (i.e., followers) who defer to higher status people (i.e., transformational leaders) (Keltner, Gruenfeld, & Anderson, 2003). According to this view, transformational leaders, because they are admired by followers, inhibit the extent to which followers express emotions.

Through new theorizing and a series of three experimental and field studies, we reconcile these conflicting ideas about how transformational leaders affect followers' emotionally expressive behavior. Specifically, we resolve the conundrum concerning followers' emotional expressiveness in the context of transformational leadership by disaggregating transformational leadership into two major components – charisma and individualized consideration (Bass, 1985).⁴ We hypothesize that when leaders are charismatic, followers feel “exceptionally strong admiration” toward the leader (Waldman & Yammarino, 1999: 268) and are likely to constrain the expression of their emotions. But when leaders approach followers individually, followers are encouraged to articulate their needs; thus they are likely to overcome the status-induced inhibition and openly express their emotions. Thus our research advances the idea that both charisma and individualized consideration affect followers' emotional expressiveness, but in quite different ways.

By disaggregating the construct of transformational leadership into two components and by examining how each component affects followers' regulation of emotional expressiveness, we advance a more fine-grained understanding of the workings of specific types of leadership. We respond to calls to consider the effects of distinct components of transformational leadership (cf. Van Knippenberg & Sitkin, 2013) – in our case, charisma and individualized consideration. Despite high empirical correlations between charisma and individualized consideration on leadership measures (e.g., Bass, 1999), many charismatic leaders exhibit the absence of individually considerate behavior and many individually considerate leaders are not charismatic (Goffee & Jones, 2000). Our research contributes to transformational leadership by treating charismatic leadership and individually considerate leadership as two separate leadership styles, each with a distinct effect on followers' emotional expressiveness.

We advance a better understanding of followers' emotion regulation in the context of such leadership. A well-established framework (Gross, 1998, 2013) suggests that emotion regulation – whether intrapersonal or interpersonal – occurs at two stages in the emotion process. At the antecedent-focused stage, emotion regulation pertains to generating, amplifying, reducing or changing emotional *experience*. At the response-focused stage, emotion regulation deals with the modulation of emotion *expression* once emotions are experienced; this stage often entails the suppression of emotion expressions. The antecedent-focused stage of emotion regulation has been well examined in the context of charismatic leadership. Charismatic leaders enhance (i.e., up-regulate) followers' emotions, for example, with visionary speeches from the podium or with symbolic acts involving courageous behaviors (cf. Bass, 1985; Conger & Kanungo, 1987). Through shifting attention, reframing and reappraisal, charismatic leaders change the way followers feel (Dvir, Kassar, & Shamir, 2004; Wasieleski, 1985), often communicating positive emotions to followers (e.g., Bono & Ilies, 2006; Erez, Johnson, Misangyi, LePine, & Halverson, 2008). Thus charismatic leaders effectively regulate their followers' emotional *experiences*. But the response-focused stage of emotion regulation in the context of leadership has been neglected. This study shifts attention from the well-examined antecedent-focused stage of the emotion regulation process (i.e., how leaders influence followers' emotional *experience*) to the neglected response-focused stage (i.e., how leaders influence followers' emotional *expression*). This study concerns followers' emotional expressiveness in general, not specifically the expression or suppression of those emotions that the leader evoked or of any other specific discrete emotions, and we assume that the emotionally constraining effect of charisma and the liberating effect of individualized consideration apply to both positive and negative emotions. Organizational contexts bear a great variety of emotions (Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996), and people are likely to suppress not just negative, but also positive emotions in work settings (Clark, 1990; Erber, Wegner & Theriault, 1996; Mann, 1999; Shields, 2005).

Charismatic leadership and followers' expressive suppression of emotion

Extant research on emotional expressiveness in the context of leadership has focused mostly on leaders rather than on followers (Rajah, Song, & Arvey, 2011), emphasizing that leaders who vividly express emotions are likely to be seen as charismatic (Damen, Van Knippenberg, & Van Knippenberg, 2008; Friedman, Prince, Riggio, & DiMatteo, 1980; Groves, 2006; Johnson, 2008). Charismatic leaders use excitement and enthusiasm in their persuasive appeals to followers (Erez et al., 2008; Weber, 1978). Indeed, leaders' emotional expressions tend to be more important than verbal messages in convincing followers (Newcombe & Ashkanasy, 2002). The emotional expressiveness of leaders is thus a key component of successful leadership (Riggio & Reichard, 2008) and an inherent part of charismatic leadership.

In contrast to this relatively comprehensive picture of how leaders' charisma and leaders' emotional expressiveness relate to each other, our understanding of how followers regulate their emotional expressiveness in response to charismatic leaders remains speculative. That charismatic leaders express their emotions openly has been taken to imply that followers, under the influence of charismatic leadership, feel relatively unconstrained in their emotional expression (e.g., Walter & Bruch, 2008). Several studies suggest that leaders transfer their emotions to followers through a mimicry process that involves followers displaying the same emotion as the leader (e.g., Bono & Ilies, 2006; Erez et al., 2008; Johnson, 2008; Sy, Côté, & Saavedra, 2005). A neglected possibility, however, is that emotion contagion occurs by other ways such as emotional comparisons, vicarious affective experiences, or intentional affective influence (Bartel & Saavedra, 2000; Elfenbein, 2014; Gooty, Connelly, Griffith, & Gupta, 2010; Kelly & Barsade, 2001; Niedenthal & Brauer, 2012). For example, a study of audio-taped speeches showed that speech imagery induces positive affect and triggers

⁴ The third component of transformational leadership is intellectual stimulation (Avolio & Bass, 1991). Whereas intellectual stimulation is primarily a cognitively driven process, charisma and individualized consideration are likely to involve emotions and are thus the two focal components of transformational leadership in this research.

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