

Cognitive asymmetry in employee emotional reactions to leadership behaviors[☆]

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Abstract

This article is predicated on the idea that leaders shape workplace affective events. Based on *Affective Events Theory* (AET), I argue that leaders are sources of employee positive and negative emotions at work. Certain leader behaviors displayed during interactions with their employees are the sources of these affective events. The second theoretical underpinning of the article is the *Asymmetry Effect* of emotion. Consistent with this theory, employees are more likely to recall negative incidents than positive incidents. In a qualitative study, evidence that these processes exist in the workplace was found. Leader behaviors were sources of positive or negative emotional responses in employees; employees recalled more negative incidents than positive incidents, and they recalled them more intensely and in more detail than positive incidents. Consequently, leaders may need to exercise their emotional intelligence to generate emotional uplifts to overcome the hassles in the workplace that employees seem to remember so vividly.

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“I’ve been doing my job for a long time and I put in my regular report where I’m going and for my manager to come back and say, “no I don’t want you to go there”, bothers me. I travel a lot in my job, so I’ll ask my boss: why? In one case, my boss simply said, “I didn’t want you to go”, and I was frustrated with that. I never found out why he didn’t want to go there. It’s pure frustration, not knowing why. I’m the most experienced in that area; I know what has to be done. All my boss had to do was give a reason. . . I don’t mind if someone gives me a reason, but it’s frustrating when I’m never given one.”

Employee talking about a recent interaction with his manager (face to face organizational leader).

In the opening quotation, the employee expresses negative emotions about his boss’s lack of communication at work. This quotation, extracted from one of the interviews conducted in the present study, serves to illustrate the reactions that negative encounters can generate in the workplace. In this article, therefore, the findings of a qualitative study of subordinate perceptions of leaders during face-to-face interactions in the workplace and how they respond emotionally to particular leadership behaviors are presented. The study represents an exploration of a model based on

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Affective Events Theory (AET), which posits that effective leaders are seen to shape the affective events that determine employees' attitudes and behaviors in the workplace (Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996). The research also explores the *Asymmetry Effect* (Peeters, 2002) of emotion, which purports that a negativity bias (prominence) exists when employees report emotional incidents they have encountered. Thus, the overall purpose of this study was to provide a preliminary understanding of employee emotional responses to leadership behaviors displayed during face-to-face interactions.

Emotions have always been an important factor in management practice, and the subject of emotions in the workplace is now one of the hot topics in management today (Ashkanasy & Daus, 2002). It has been suggested that emotions may be disruptive in the workplace, preventing rational and objective behavior. However, individual emotions are unavoidable, and are thus inherently a part of organizational life. This is particularly true in the case of interpersonal relationships at work, which are inherently emotional in nature. As George (2000) argues, leadership is a particularly emotion-laden process, with emotions entwined with the social influence process.

While the early work on leadership implicitly touched on emotional aspects of leadership behaviors, there was no explicit mention of emotional responses or moods caused by leaders. The Ohio State Leadership studies and the Michigan Leadership studies of the 1950s highlighted task oriented behaviors versus relations oriented behaviors (Yukl, 2002). The relations oriented behaviors are socio-emotional in nature; however, there was no reference to the moods or emotions of employees in these studies. Like management research in general, most leadership research has traditionally emphasized rational and cognitive processes, with emotions as a basis for influence only coming to the spotlight in the 1980s (Yukl, 2002). Early work identifying emotional consequences of leadership was on charisma (see George, 2000 for a discussion); however, since employee behavior and productivity are directly affected by their emotional states (Ashkanasy & Daus, 2002), it is imperative to consider employee emotional responses to organizational leaders.

To investigate the emotional process of leadership, a qualitative approach was chosen for data collection. Conger (1998) asserts that qualitative research must play a pivotal role in leadership studies because leadership is a rich and complex phenomenon (Conger, 1998). Alvesson (1996) has also argued for a qualitative approach that takes the socially constructed nature of leadership seriously. Conger (1998) argues in particular that leadership is not a simple reflection of objective reality, but is a socially constructed process where leadership can be produced and reproduced over time (see Chen & Meindl, 1991). Further, interpretation plays a large role in how leadership is defined and experienced; for example, employee perceptions and emotional reactions to leader behavior (Conger, 1998). Thus, this research focuses on employee recollections of emotional interactions with their leaders, rather than the "actual" interaction itself.

Before embarking on the theoretical underpinnings of this study, first it is necessary to explain how leadership is defined within the context of this research. Leadership is "the ability to decide what is to be done, and then to get others to want to do it" (Larson, 1968, p. 21). The distinction between a leader and a manager is blurry, and academic circles continue to debate the degree of overlap (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2003). Kotter (1990) argues that the key distinction is in the processes and core outcomes associated with each. He argues that management aims to produce organizational stability and order through goal setting, monitoring, and organizing. Leadership on the other hand aims to promote organizational change through developing and communicating a vision, then inspiring and motivating people to achieve the vision.

Alvesson & Sveningsson (2003) argue, however, that the dichotomy between leaders and managers is not fully convincing. In their study, they found that managers doing everyday mundane acts, such as chatting with their employees, were viewed as leaders. The reason was due to the formal position of managers, which frames their acts to appear more significant than acts by other individuals. Based on Alvesson and Sveningsson's findings, I argue that managers, even when they are not doing extra-ordinary activities such as inspiring employees to achieve a vision, are still viewed as leaders. This is because their behaviors are given a special emotional value beyond the everyday significance of the behavior. Hence, in this study, managers who evoke emotional responses in employees are considered to be leaders.

1. Theoretical background

Historically research on leadership has focused on such leadership behaviors from cognitive and behavioral perspectives. Recent advances, however, have shifted attention from purely behavioral and cognitive processes to

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