



Perceptions of leader emotion regulation and LMX as predictors of followers' job satisfaction and organizational citizenship behaviors

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ABSTRACT

To align personal feelings with socially defined display rules, individuals often turn to one of two self-presentation strategies: surface or deep acting. Leaders could be expected to rely on these regulatory techniques, as their work roles demand an ability to convey meaning through emotions that may or may not be authentically felt. In this study, we examined how different forms of emotion regulation, as engaged in by those in leadership roles, influence follower job attitudes and behaviors. We predicted that follower perceptions of the leader–member exchange relationship would moderate main effect relationships. Survey results collected from 126 employed individuals indicated that LMX quality influenced follower reactions to the form of emotion regulation engaged in by supervisors. Specifically, deep acting was positively associated with job satisfaction for members in low-quality exchanges, while surface acting negatively affected participation in prosocial acts for individuals in high-quality exchanges. Implications and suggestions for future research are discussed.

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“More than anything else today, followers believe they are part of a system, a process that lacks heart. If there is one thing a leader can do to connect with followers at a human, or better still a spiritual level, it is to become engaged with them fully, to share experiences and emotions, and to set aside the processes of leadership we have learned by rote.”

—Lance Secretan, Industry Week, 1998

1. Introduction

Emotions have been acknowledged as comprising an integral component of leadership-related processes and outcomes. Indeed, emotion is implicitly – if not explicitly – embedded within various contemporary theories of leadership, including transformational leadership (e.g., Barbuto & Burbach, 2006; Brown, Bryant, & Reilly, 2006; Brown & Moshavi, 2005; Küpers & Weibler, 2006; Rubin, Munz, & Bommer, 2005), charismatic leadership (e.g., Bono & Ilies, 2006), and leader–member exchange (e.g., Dasborough & Ashkanasy, 2002). It is perhaps not surprising then, that emotions felt and displayed as part of the leadership role have been studied as predictors of numerous organizationally-relevant outcomes. At the individual level, for example, leader emotionality has been linked to follower creativity (e.g., Zhou & George, 2003), follower performance (e.g., McColl-Kennedy & Anderson, 2002), follower mood (e.g., Sy, Côté, & Saavedra, 2005), and evaluations of leader effectiveness (e.g., Kerr, Garvin, Heaton, & Boyle, 2006; Rosete & Ciarrochi, 2005); while at the higher level of analysis, leader emotionality has been tied

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to team performance (e.g., Van Kleef et al., 2009), emotional climate (e.g., Özçelik et al., 2008), and organizational change (e.g., Groves, 2006).

Despite the inextricability of emotion and leadership, little research has examined how leader emotion regulation influences employee work attitudes and behaviors. Instead, extant empirical and popular press literature has focused almost exclusively on leader Emotional Intelligence (EI; George, 2000; Goleman, Boyatzis, & McKee, 2002; Mandell & Pherwani, 2003; Wong & Law, 2002) or displays of discrete emotions and their blends (e.g., Bono & Ilies, 2006; Lewis, 2000; McColl-Kennedy & Anderson, 2002). This is a notable omission as emotions, and therefore the way in which they are managed and conveyed, speak to the nature of the leader–follower relationship (Lawler & Thye, 1999). Evidence exists to suggest that leaders and followers mutually construct their relationship and come to expect certain behaviors – including emotional displays – in light of that relationship (Martinko & Gardner, 1987). Consistent with the tenets of social exchange theory, if expectations for the emotional content of a relationship are not met, individuals could be expected to become dissatisfied and be less likely to ‘give back’ (Liden, Sparrowe, & Wayne, 1997). The current study builds upon and extends previous work by examining how perceptions of leaders’ emotion regulation strategies, along with reports of leader–member exchange (LMX) quality, impact followers’ attitudes toward their work role and their willingness to engage in extra-role, discretionary acts. In the following pages, we review research pertaining to the role emotion plays in effective leadership. Specific focus is given to defining different forms of emotion regulation, as well as to reviewing LMX theory. Building on work relevant to authenticity in interpersonal relationships, we conclude by suggesting these variables will interact to predict followers’ job satisfaction and organizational citizenship.

2. Leadership and emotion regulation

Emotions have the ability to influence behavior in both positive and negative ways and therefore, good leaders manage their own emotions as well as influence (e.g., elicit, quell) the emotional states of others (Humphrey, Pollack, & Hawver, 2008; McColl-Kennedy & Anderson, 2002). In fact, existing research suggests managers regulate their feelings as frequently as those who work in what have traditionally been defined as emotionally laborious, people–work jobs (e.g., sales and service workers; Brotheridge & Grandey, 2002). Nevertheless, unlike many service or caring occupations where the nature of emotions to be expressed is often quite restricted (e.g., front-line service employees are expected to display only positive emotions), the emotional requirements of those working in leadership roles are more complex; leaders must experience and show a variety of emotions—the frequency, intensity, variety and duration of which may vary considerably (Humphrey et al., 2008). To complicate matters further, these emotional requirements are often compounded by the stressful working conditions (e.g., budgetary constraints, performance targets, and competition) leaders face (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Humphrey, 2008). Overall, individuals who can manage their own and others’ emotions despite such conditions are more likely to emerge as leaders (e.g., Côté, Lopes, Salovey, & Miners, 2010; Pescosolido, 2002; Wolff, Pescosolido, & Druskat, 2002) and be perceived as authentic – even transformational – in their leadership style (e.g., Ashkanasy & Tse, 2000; Barling, Slater, & Kelloway, 2000; Ilies, Morgeson, & Nahrgang, 2005).

As noted previously, much of the existing research pertaining to emotions and leadership focuses on a leader’s emotional intelligence (EI; Mayer & Salovey, 1997; Mayer, Salovey, & Caruso, 2008). Leaders high in EI excel at establishing high quality, functional relationships with others, thereby influencing emotions at the individual and collective level (Ashkanasy & Jordan, 2008; George, 2000). Despite a burgeoning stream of research linking EI to leadership processes and outcomes, the implications of a related – yet largely independent – literature on emotion regulation for leadership research is less understood. Generally speaking, emotion regulation is the process by which “individuals influence which emotions they have, when they have them, and how they experience and express [those] emotions” (Gross, 1998, p. 275). In the workplace, emotion regulation is often likened to a form of labor (e.g., Hochschild, 1983), particularly when undertaken to comply with job-related display rules (i.e., demands to express emotions that comply with social, occupational or organizational expectations; Ashforth & Humphrey, 1993).

2.1. Emotion regulation strategies

To meet display rule requirements, individuals may regulate their emotions using one of three strategies. First, individuals may engage in *deep acting*, a process by which an actor regulates the interpretation of emotional cues in order to modify his or her emotional reaction. Deep acting involves changing internal feelings to match external expressions and is often achieved through attention deployment (i.e., focusing on the desirable aspects of a situation and disregarding the undesirable aspects) and/or cognitive change (i.e., changing how one defines a situation and the possible meanings attached to it; Grandey, 2000; Gross, 1998). Although emotions conveyed through deep acting can appear quite genuine to observers, actors will nevertheless feel less authentic as compared to when displaying genuinely experienced emotions (Hunt, Gardner, & Fischer, 2008). In this sense, deep acting suggests well-intentioned faking and is an “imperfect but nonetheless potentially effective solution for [those] confronted with display rules that do not match their felt emotions” (Hunt et al., 2008, p. 51).

In contrast to deep acting, surface acting refers to an emotion regulation strategy in which only the “physiological or observable signs of emotion” are modified (Grandey, 2000, p. 98). Surface acting, also referred to as “acting in bad faith,” occurs when one displays emotions that are incongruent with what one is actually feeling (Rafaeli & Sutton, 1987, p. 32). The essence of surface acting involves “disguising what we feel” and/or “pretending to feel what we do not” (Hochschild, 1983, p. 33) and is achieved through “careful presentation of verbal and nonverbal cues” including “facial expression, gestures, and voice tone” (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1993, p. 92). Due to the incongruence between internal feelings and external expressions, surface acting not only

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