



The role of leader emotion management in leader–member exchange and follower outcomes

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ABSTRACT

In response to growing calls for such research, we develop and test a model of leader behaviors directed at managing followers' negative emotions. These leader interpersonal emotion management strategies (IEMS) are posited to affect followers' organizational citizenship behaviors performed within interpersonal relationships (OCBs) and job satisfaction via follower perceptions of the quality of the leader–member exchange relationship (LMX). In addition, we posit that some, but not all, leader IEMS promote and strengthen LMX relationships. Results from multisource data in a sample of 163 leader–follower dyads confirmed the majority of the hypothesized direct effects of the leader IEMS and mediating effects of LMX.

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Introduction

Emotions are intricately intertwined in theories of leadership and lie at the core of many leadership mechanisms such as inspiring followers, building and sustaining interpersonal relationships, and investing in follower outcomes such as satisfaction, performance and citizenship behaviors (e.g., Ashkanasy & Humphrey, 2011; Connelly, Gaddis, & Helton-Fauth, 2002; Gooty, Connelly, Griffith, & Gupta, 2010; Humphrey, 2008; Humphrey, Pollack, & Hawver, 2008; Rajah, Song, & Arvey, 2011). Indeed, many scholars have acknowledged that leaders are active managers of group emotion (Ashkanasy & Humphrey, 2011; Brotheridge & Lee, 2008; George, 2000; Humphrey, 2008; Humphrey et al., 2008; Pescosolido, 2002; Pirola-Merlo, Härtel, Mann, & Hirst, 2002).

Given the vast number of studies, debates and comprehensive reviews that have accumulated (e.g., Antonakis, Ashkanasy, & Dasborough, 2009; Ashkanasy, 2003; Gooty et al., 2010; Humphrey, 2008; Rajah et al., 2011), the study of leadership and emotions is no longer considered an emerging domain. Many of these accumulated empirical studies have shed light on issues such as how leader's own positive and negative emotional displays affect followers (i.e., Brotheridge & Lee, 2008), the impact of contagion processes that transmit leader affect to the workgroup (e.g., Sy, Côté, & Saavedra, 2005), and the effects of leader surface and deep acting on follower outcomes to name just a few (i.e., Humphrey et al., 2008). The role of emotions in leadership literature, then, has primarily focused on leaders' emotional displays, processes (e.g., contagion, emotional labor) and emotion-related abilities (e.g., emotional intelligence; positive and negative affectivity) and the effects thereof on their followers, or groups of followers. What is less common in the literature is a focus on the *active* or *conscious behaviors* enacted by leaders to manage follower emotions. Such a focus would be consistent with the work of many scholars who have argued convincingly that followers and leaders alike consider the management of follower emotion, and negative emotion in

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particular, a fundamental leadership task (e.g., Ashkanasy, 2003; Dasborough & Ashkanasy, 2002; Humphrey, 2008; Huy, 2002; Sanchez-Burks & Huy, 2009; Pescosolido, 2002; Seo et al., 2012; Toegel, Kilduff, & Anand, 2013). Indeed, Humphrey (2008) coined the term “leading with emotional labor” to reflect this critical function of a leader as an active manager of follower emotion. Yet, rather surprisingly, the literature is fairly scant in this domain with very few studies focusing on specific behaviors leaders enact in response to follower emotion (e.g., Gooty et al., 2010).

To be sure, a handful of studies have examined leader behaviors as the cause of follower emotions. For example, Dasborough (2006) found that certain leader behaviors (e.g., empowering followers, communication, demonstrating concern, recognizing employee effort) are the causes of affective events in followers thus leading to emotion experiences. Similarly, McColl-Kennedy and Anderson (2002) found that followers experience more positive emotions when leaders display transformational behaviors. In an earlier theoretical treatise, Weierter (1997) argued that charismatic leaders reinforce follower self-esteem via displays of enthusiasm and passion and thus engender positive emotions in followers. Despite this progress, less is known about what specific behaviors leaders enact to manage followers' negative emotions. And, importantly, what is the influence of these behaviors on important job-related outcomes such as relationship quality, contextual performance and satisfaction?

In this paper, we cast interpersonal emotion management (IEM) strategies (Williams, 2007) as observable leader behaviors targeted at managing followers' negative emotions. Drawing upon increasing evidence in emotion regulation theories and empirical findings which suggest that people routinely manage and regulate others' emotions (e.g., Barden, Zelko, Duncan, & Masters, 1980; Covell & Abramovitch, 1987; Francis, 1997; Huy, 2002; McCoy & Masters, 1985; Niven, Holman, & Totterdell, 2012; Niven, Totterdell, Holman, & Headley, 2012; Pierce, 1995; Rafaeli & Sutton, 1990; Richards, Butler, & Gross, 2003; Toegel, Anand, & Kilduff, 2007; Williams, 2007; Williams & Emich, 2014), we suggest that leaders regulate follower emotions via the use of leader IEM strategies. Furthermore, drawing upon the tenets of social exchange theory and attribution theory we argue that followers attribute differing intentionality to the use of these strategies, which in turn will influence relationship quality.

Specifically, a leader's use of problem-focused strategies that mitigate or eliminate underlying causes of negative emotions will relate to positive follower perceptions of a quality exchange relationship between the follower and leader (i.e., LMX). In contrast, a leader's use of IEM strategies that are emotion-focused and leave the underlying cause of negative emotion unaddressed hinder the LMX relationship via decreased rapport and affiliation (e.g., Butler et al., 2003). We further expect that LMX will mediate the relationships between each of the IEM strategies and routinely studied work outcomes: organizational citizenship behaviors performed within interpersonal work relationships (OCBIs) and job satisfaction. We chose these outcomes because of their conceptual relationships with LMX and their organizational importance, as both have been linked to organizational performance (e.g., Bolino, Turnley, & Bloodgood, 2002; Ostroff, 1992).

Our work contributes to the leadership and emotions literature in three unique ways. First, we extend research on emotions in leadership by investigating perceptions of specific leader behavior targeted at managing followers' negative emotions. The LMX literature has long contended that leader-follower interactions and role-making episodes can elicit high-quality LMX (e.g., Ballinger & Rockmann, 2010; Liden, Sparrowe, & Wayne, 1997; Liden & Maslyn, 1998; Sparrowe & Liden, 1997; Sin, Nahrgang, & Morgeson, 2009). Yet, we know very little about the specific leader behaviors that are enacted during such role-making episodes or interactions that relate to LMX. An understanding of such behaviors could stimulate further theory and empirical research by pinpointing specific leader behaviors (in addition to known LMX antecedents such as dyad tenure) that could foster higher quality LMX.

Second, we contribute to theory and findings in the study of social exchanges which have started to move away from a purely transactional-cognitive route to one that contends that emotion expression and regulation are key building blocks for the development and maintenance of interpersonal relationships (e.g., Ballinger & Rockmann, 2010; Butler et al., 2003; Gooty, Thomas, & Connelly, 2015; Harker & Keltner, 2001; Lawler & Thye, 1999; Saavedra & Van Dyne, 1999). Considering that leaders' responsiveness to followers' emotions in interpersonal relationships is laden with information, attributions and intentionality, a focus on such emotional phenomena may be central to understanding social exchange (e.g., Butler et al., 2003; Lawler, Thye, & Yoon, 2009).

Finally, we contribute to the IEM literature by offering a finer grained examination of IEM strategies. This examination suggests that specific IEM strategies differentially affect the quality of leader-follower relationships. Understanding why perceptions of some IEM strategies are likely to elicit positive outcomes whereas some are likely to elicit negative outcomes deepens our theoretical understanding of IEM strategies in organizations beyond current models, which suggest primarily positive effects for the target individual (Williams & Emich, 2014). In the following sections, we develop theory connecting the use of leader IEM strategies to evaluations of the social exchange relationships between leaders and their followers, OCBIs, and job satisfaction. Next, we present empirical findings showing the importance of IEM strategies in building or thwarting high-quality LMX. Such LMX, in turn, mediates the association between leader IEM strategies and work outcomes: OCBIs and job satisfaction (see Fig. 1 for a graphical description).

Interpersonal Emotion Management Strategies

Interpersonal emotion management (IEM) strategies derive from Gross (1998) work on emotion management of the self and the notion that individuals manage others' emotions at work using the same tactics that they use to manage their own emotions (Francis, 1997; Little, Klueemper, Nelson, & Gooty, 2012; Lively, 2000; Niven, Totterdell, & Holman, 2009). Williams (2007) outlined four interpersonal emotion management strategies used to manage others' emotions: situation modification, cognitive change, attentional deployment, and modulating the emotional response.

Situation modification consists of active efforts to directly modify or change a situation to alter its emotional impact (Gross, 1998). In situation modification, a leader will remove, modify, or change the aspects of the situation or problem causing an undesired emotion in the follower. As such, situation modification is problem-focused. For example, if an employee is experiencing anxiety

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