



Leadership and emotion management for complex tasks: Different emotions, different strategies



Chase E. Thiel*, Shane Connelly, Jennifer A. Griffith

University of Oklahoma, United States

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ABSTRACT

Emotions in the workplace influence a number of critical cognitive tasks including information processing and decision-making. Moreover, the effect of emotion on these operations is often emotion-specific. Given these unique effects, leaders may need to learn how to manage subordinates' discrete emotions, and not just general affect. This laboratory experiment examined the effects of leaders suggesting different regulation strategies after subordinates experienced anger or pessimism. Effects of these emotions under different leader-facilitated regulation strategies were evaluated with respect to planning, a critical organizational task, and perceptions of leader effectiveness. Results demonstrated that the type of leader-facilitated regulation strategy moderates the relationships of anger and pessimism to planning. The findings imply that leaders should understand the differential effects of discrete emotions, and be prepared to help subordinates manage emotions accordingly.

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1. Introduction

Affective events at work can induce a wide range of emotional responses (Basch & Fisher, 2000) that can have direct and indirect influences on work related perceptions and behaviors (Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996). Depending on the direction and intensity of the emotions experienced, the resulting perceptions and behaviors can influence an individual's performance (Kiefer, 2005; Piderit, 2000). Leaders can certainly help shape subordinates' perceptions of affective events in ways that minimize or prevent emotional reactions in subordinates that may be counterproductive. When such emotional reactions do occur, leaders can also play an important role in helping subordinates to regulate their emotions (George, 2000).

While numerous findings have demonstrated a link between general affect and cognition, such as decision-making, risk assessment, divergent thinking and information processing (Amabile, Barsade, Mueller, & Staw, 2005; Estrada, Isen, & Young, 1997; Fiedler, 2000; Isen, 1999; Isen, 2001; Kligyte & Connelly, 2006; Madjar, Oldham, & Pratt, 2002; Vosburg, 1998), less is known about the influence of discrete emotions on cognition. Initial research demonstrates that discrete emotions have differential effects on information gathering, information integration, and decision making, and that these differential effects are explained by the underlying appraisal dimensions (Leone, Perugini, & Bagozzi, 2005; Lerner & Keltner, 2000, 2001; Maitlis & Özçelik, 2004; Nabi, 2003).

The influence that discrete emotions have on one's ability to plan has not received much empirical attention. Planning is an important task for both leaders and their subordinates, as it is a critical skill for the dynamic workplace that dominates most contemporary organizations (Mumford, Schultz, & Van Doorn, 2001). Emotions may have substantial effects on planning because it is a complex cognitive activity that requires the integration of existing information, search for new information, consideration of critical causes, generation of potential action steps, and projection of likely outcomes.

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 405 325 0770.
E-mail address: cthiel@ou.edu (C.E. Thiel).

From a leader's perspective, managing a subordinate's emotions (negative ones especially) is vital because it can offset potentially negative consequences associated with affective reactions. This is particularly important if the felt emotion has an inhibitory effect on cognitive operations or interpersonal interactions. Emotion management has been shown to be a central characteristic of effective leaders (Erez, Misangyi, Johnson, LePine, & Halverson, 2008; Gaddis, Connelly, & Mumford, 2004; George, 2000; Pescosolido, 2002). Therefore, providing leaders with additional knowledge and skills regarding emotion regulation strategies may be crucial to effective leadership and sustained performance. However, few studies have investigated how leaders manage emotions, and even fewer have identified specific techniques for managing discrete emotional experiences.

In line with prior research, we expect discrete negative emotions to differentially influence cognitive operations such as planning. Moreover, we expect that the effectiveness of emotion regulation strategies in altering an emotional state and its relationship to key workplace outcomes might depend on the particular emotion experienced. Accordingly, the primary purpose of this study is to examine whether and how two leader-facilitated cognitive emotion regulation strategies moderate the relationships of follower anger and pessimism to planning performance. Anger and pessimism were examined with regard to leader-facilitated emotion regulation because of their propensity to occur in the workplace (Andersson & Bateman, 1997; Bensimon, 1997; Bjornstad, 2006; Fitness, 2000; Jensen & Slack, 2003; Strathdee & Hughes, 2001), because they are defined by very diverse sets of cognitive appraisals, and because they have been found to have unique effects on cognitive operations (e.g. Anderson, Spielman, & Bargh, 1992; Lerner & Keltner, 2001; Lerner & Tiedens, 2006; Lyubomirsky & Nolen-Hoeksema, 1995; Tiedens & Linton, 2001). A secondary goal of this study is to examine whether leader-facilitated emotion regulation is effective for buffering the influence of emotion on follower perceptions of the leader.

1.1. Cognitive appraisals associated with anger and pessimism

Recent examinations of affect and cognition suggest examining the effects of discrete emotions. While theorists disagree on the origin and expression of emotional experiences, one potential mechanism for the differential influences of discrete emotion is the underlying appraisal dimensions (Frijda, 1986; Lazarus, 1991; Roseman, 1991; Scherer, 2001; Siemer, Mauss, & Gross, 2007; Smith & Ellsworth, 1985; Weiner, 1986). Appraisals represent the cognitive reactions to and interpretations of an affective event that triggered the emotional experience.

Anger is one of the most studied workplace emotions, partly because of its salience and prevalence. From a leadership perspective, Basch and Fisher (2000) found that acts of management are more often the cause of subordinate anger as opposed to any other source. Anger has also been one of the emotions highlighted in cognitive appraisal theories. While there has been some disagreement over the number and type of the appraisals associated with anger, two dimensions, certainty and control, have generally been accepted as leading to anger (Lazarus, 1991, 2001; Roseman, Antoniou, & Jose, 1996; Smith & Ellsworth, 1985) and have been empirically investigated (Lerner & Tiedens, 2006; Tiedens & Linton, 2001). Angry individuals also appraise the situation as being unfair, hold other individuals responsible for this injustice, and perceive blockages to goal attainment (Kuppens, Van Mechelen, Smits, & De Boeck, 2003). For example, an employee who receives legitimate negative feedback from a supervisor who delivers the feedback in an abrasive manner may perceive the feedback as unfair and the leader as the cause for this unfair evaluation. The leader's abrasiveness enables the employee to discount the legitimacy of the feedback and feel more certain that the leader is wrong (in both the delivery, and by association, content of the feedback). The employee may also feel a sense of control by believing there is no need to change his or her performance and by having evidence that the leader is unfair (e.g. the boss shouted at me).

Anger experienced in one situation has also been shown to influence optimistic expectations about one's ability or chances in future situations (Frischhoff, Gonzalez, Lerner, & Small, 2005; Lerner, Gonzalez, Small, & Frischhoff, 2003). The employee who receives feedback from a rude supervisor may optimistically believe that they will perform well on future work-related tasks, even if they were poorly rated on those same tasks in the emotion-evoking situation. Optimism, like anger, can induce heuristic-like processing of information (Lerner et al., 2003; Mackie, Devos, & Smith, 2000), which is beneficial for some cognitive tasks, but not for others. Accordingly, studies have found that angry individuals are prone to quickly scan information and environmental demands, failing to engage in deep processing of information (Small & Lerner, 2005; Tiedens & Linton, 2001). Anger undermines effective decision-making and problem solving because the cognitive appraisals influence the most basic situational construals related to problem formation (Lerner & Tiedens, 2006). Returning again to the previous example, the angry individual may fail to engage in systematic and detailed information processing that is critical to workplace tasks because they optimistically believe that they will perform well, even when the task is quite complex or they haven't performed well on the same task in the past. Practically, the angry individual may carry the anger induced from the feedback to other work situations, causing them to miss important details and provide critical analysis that is often needed for work-related tasks. Anger appears to induce a cognitive buffer that may be beneficial for some tasks, but not for those that require systematic, detailed information processing.

Pessimism is another emotional state people regularly experience in the workplace. Factors such as unemployment, high executive compensation, or poor feedback have been found to influence pessimism (Andersson & Bateman, 1997; Bjornstad, 2006; Jensen & Slack, 2003; Strathdee & Hughes, 2001), which are prevalent workplace experiences. While this emotional state has not been explicitly addressed in the appraisal literature, recent emotion frameworks provide some guidance as to what cognitive appraisals are formed in association with experiencing pessimism. In one framework, developed by Connelly, Gaddis, and Helton-Fauth (2002), pessimism is described as a passive emotion, which leads to appraisal tendencies of low control and certainty. For example, an employee may experience pessimism as a result of failing to obtain an important new customer account, especially if little or no rationale for the customer's decision is provided. The pessimistic individual will question themselves, and

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