



The effects of leader negative emotions on evaluations of leadership in a crisis situation: The role of anger and sadness

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ABSTRACT

While existing literature on leadership articulates the importance of leader emotion, there has been little attention to the potential roles of more specific emotions. Emotions such as anger and sadness have been linked to leaders in times of crisis. The current paper examined the effect of leader emotion on evaluations of leadership in the context of a failed product. In particular, we examined how the expression of anger and sadness influences the evaluation of leaders. Results revealed that a leader expressing sadness was evaluated more favorably than a leader expressing anger. We found that participants' emotion mediated the relationship between leaders' emotion and the evaluation of leaders. Furthermore, accepting responsibility for the crisis led to more favorable evaluations than not accepting responsibility.

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Employees often experience a crisis as an episode of threat and uncertainty inducing anxiety (Pescosolido, 2002). During periods of uncertainty, leaders play a substantial role in sense-making and anxiety-reduction (Yukl & Howell, 1999) as employees look to their leaders to determine how they should interpret and react, to the crisis. How leaders react (what they say and how they say it) signals to employees how they should make sense of the event and, quite often, affects employees' evaluations of the competence of the leader (Boin & Hart, 2003; Kash & Darling, 1998; Pearson & Clair, 1998). Few events provide a more consequential test of the effectiveness of a senior executive than his or her ability to respond effectively in the eyes of his or her followers to an event that threatens the organizations core-values or long-term viability (Kash & Darling, 1998). As such, a crisis represents both a formidable task and a window of opportunity (Boin & Hart, 2003).

One factor affecting employees' crisis reaction is the expression of emotion by the leader. Leader emotion expression signals to employees how they should interpret the crisis and provides a strong signal regarding the organization's response to the event (Pescosolido, 2002). George (1996) defines emotions as intense feelings that are directed at someone or something. There are multiple universal expressions of emotion that people distinguish as separate and distinct (Ekman, 1997) include both negative emotions, such as anger and sadness, and positive emotions, such as happiness and surprise. During crisis events, negative emotions are common and seen as natural reactions (Tiedens, Ellworth, & Mesquita, 2000). Surprisingly, little research has examined the role of specific negative emotions in the evaluation of a leader during a time of crisis. Given the dearth of literature in this area, the current research focuses on the impact of two negative emotions commonly linked to crises – anger and sadness (Humphrey, 2002; Lewis, 2000; Tiedens, 2001) – on the evaluation of a leader.

In this paper, we first discuss in more detail why subordinates look to leaders in times of crisis. Second, we discuss how people form impressions of leaders on the basis of emotional expression and how these impressions may influence the evaluation of a leader. Lastly, we present the results of a study that extends past findings and clarifies the influence of leaders' emotions during times of crises.

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1. Leaders in times of crisis

Typically, an organizational crisis is an event that threatens an organization's viability and is characterized by ambiguity and employees' perceptions that decisions must be made swiftly (Pearson & Clair, 1998). In particular, employees seek actions from leaders that signal a quick resolution to the crisis and a demeanor that exudes confidence in their ability to respond to the event. Although the literature on crisis leadership is not vast, there are theoretical frameworks that support the contention that a leader's emotional reactions affect followers' evaluation of their leader, such as charismatic and transformation leadership (Bass, 1990; Bass & Avolio, 1993; Conger & Kanungo, 1987) and the literature on affect transference (Hatfield, Cacioppo, & Rapson, 1994; Kelly & Barsade, 2001). We would be hard pressed to identify a more momentous event for the evaluation of a leader. During a time of crisis all eyes look to the top and every action is scrutinized. Crises, therefore, offer a window of opportunity for leaders to demonstrate effective leadership (Bass, 1990). This sentiment is echoed by Boin & Hart's (2003) crisis reform theory.

The crisis faced by Johnson and Johnson in 1982 provides an example of how a crisis could generate a window of opportunity. In the fall 1982, seven people near Chicago died of cyanide poisoning linked to Tylenol capsules. The company's public relations department had no contingency plans to deal with such an event, yet the CEO, James Burke, quickly took advantage of the opportunity to demonstrate concern for consumers and accept responsibility on behalf of Johnson and Johnson for the tragedy. He regained the firm's market share by deciding to introduce a tamper-proof Tylenol bottle and received accolades for his leadership (e.g., "American Corporate Conscience Award" by Council on Economic Priorities; Bass, 1990).

1.1. Crises and leader emotion

There is emerging interest in how leaders rely on the expression of emotions to help convey their message or influence others during crises (e.g., Ashforth & Humphrey, 1995; George, 2000; Humphrey, 2002). For instance, the research on leader positive emotions indicates that positive emotions expressed by leaders can inspire and motivate subordinates (Bass, 1990; Conger & Kanungo, 1994). As George (1996) noted, "Leaders that show excitement, enthusiasm, and activity, are more likely to energize their subordinates and convey a sense of efficacy, competence, optimism, and enjoyment" (George, 1996, p. 162). President John F. Kennedy provides a classic example of the use of positive emotions to elicit support for his visionary goals when delivering his radio address to the nation in which he articulated his goal of putting a man on the moon (Chemers, 1997).

Furthermore, a central component of charismatic leadership theory suggests that leaders use emotions to arouse similar feelings in their audience (Conger & Kanungo, 1987). For instance, by using positive emotions in articulating their vision, leaders paint a positive picture of the future and promote followers' positive feelings. Recently, Bono & Illies (2006) found support for the notion that charismatic leadership is linked to positive emotions. Their results showed that individuals rated high on charisma tend to use more positive emotions in both speeches and vision statements. Several theorists have suggested that transformational leaders also use positive emotions to motivate their subordinates and communicate a vision (Ashkanasy & Tse, 2000; Bass, 1990; Bass & Avolio, 1993; also see Connelly, Gaddis, & Helton-Fauth, 2002). It is not the case, however, that positive emotions are always the appropriate emotional response to an event. The appropriate emotional response is context dependent and for crises, negative emotion expression may be warranted.

Leaders' negative emotion, too, can influence subordinates in a number of ways. For example, George (2000) argues that because negative emotions foster systematic and careful information processing, it may be fruitful for leaders dealing with a crisis to express negative emotions to redirect attention to force a thoughtful process to amend the problems produced by the crisis. Additionally, leaders can use negative emotions to encourage support from subordinates. External threats may function to strengthen the bond between subordinate and dominant figures (Masters & Sullivan, 1989). In particular, anger displays against a common enemy may motivate followers and solidify the leader–follower relationship (Bucy, 2000). In response to the Oklahoma City federal building bombing, Bill Clinton expressed sympathy towards the victims, but anger towards the perpetrators. This emotional stance was posited to earn him a 12-point boost at the polls (Bucy & Newhagen, 1999).

The literature on emotion perception further provides evidence that people form impressions of others on the basis of emotion expressions (Montepare & Dobish, 2003). For example, Ekman (1997) argues that facial expressions of emotion have meaning that provides information about the expresser regarding the antecedents of the expression, their thoughts, internal physical state, likely next actions, and what they want the perceiver to do.

Several mechanisms have been identified to account for such phenomena. The ecological theory of social perception suggests that displays of emotion may be regarded as expressions of approach, attack, or avoidance because they suggest how dominant or friendly a person may behave rather than simply how angry or sad a person may feel (Montepare & Zebrowitz-McArthur, 1998). For example, anger can be viewed as an attack, conveying a person's intention to act in a domineering and hostile manner. Expressions of sadness may be seen as expressions of avoidance, suggesting a person's reticence toward interaction, submissiveness, and timidity. Thus, when facing a crisis, such as a product recall due to a failed product, leaders expressing anger because of a failed product may lead to the perception that they are willing to attack the problem, whereas expressing sadness during a crisis may communicate sympathy for any harm that the product caused.

More evidence of associations between emotion expressions and trait impressions is provided in a study in which participants were asked to make trait ratings of six trained actors displaying sadness, happiness, anger, disgust, and fear (Knutson, 1996). As expected, actors displaying anger were perceived as being high in dominance, but low in affiliation, whereas actors displaying sadness were perceived as being low in dominance and avoidance, but high in affiliation. Montepare & Dobish (2003) replicated the results using untrained targets, and further showed that the relationships between emotional expressions and trait

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