

## **Impact Of Leader Emotional Displays And Emotional Contagion At Work In India: An In-Class Experiential Activity**

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**ABSTRACT:***Aim* - The current research identifies the relationship between leader emotional displays at work, member attitudes. **Methodology** – For the purpose of this study an in-class activity was conducted and 210 usable samples were collected from postgraduate students in 40 teams over a period of 2 years in the same campus in Chennai, India. Emotional contagion and Leader Emotional displays were measured by the instrument developed by Bull Schaefer & Palanski (2013). In this study, the instruments were contextualized to fit Indian scenario, Correlation and Regression Analysis were conducted to test the relationship. **Results** – Through this study we have empirically established the relationship emotional contagion from leaders to the group members and further through the learning from this experiment demonstrate the ease with which the emotional transference happen within a work group under the influence of leader experience with emotional labour. **Implications** - The implications for researchers and practitioners are discussed.

**KEYWORDS** – Emotional Contagion, Leader Emotional Displays, Emotional labor, Group Emotional Transference

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Date of Submission: 25-08-2018

Date of acceptance: 08-09-2018

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### **I. INTRODUCTION**

In the past two decades the research on emotional influence of work performance, work related relationships and work attitudes has been highlighted (Rajah, Song & Aryey, 2011). Employee in the organization have direct influence on the affective states of stake holders such as customers and clients who are considered to be important by the organization. This awareness has triggered the requirement of job that expects the emotional displays from the employees to deliver service quality (Pugh, 2001), customer retention (Tsai, 2001) and customer satisfaction (Brown & Sulzer-Azaroff, 1994) by influencing the affective environment at work. Emotions are often contagious (Hatfield, Cacioppo & Rapson, 1994) and specifically when negative emotions are spread in a work group can bring down the performance of organization and also impact the work related attitudes of employees (Frost, 2003; Rothbard & Wilk, 2011) but the understanding of this quick transfer of emotions among work groups and their impact is not fully explored or understood by the employer and leader.

From the previous literature it is evident that the emotions have an influence on the work related attitudes yet emotions related skills are underrated in the context of business education (Esmond-Kiger et al., 2006) as emotions at work are still considered to represent irrational experiences (Stearns & Stearns, 1986). But through this study we are aiming at creating an in-class experience to business administration students in the process of introducing them to the concept of emotional contagion by live demonstration of the quick transfer of affective displays with in a group through the exercise conducted in the class.

This study focuses on the issues faced by the organization emphasizing on the emotional displays as job role requirements that involves emotional labor. Further this study also focuses on the execution of the exercise on emotional contagion for the management instructors to make students understand the importance of displayed emotions at work. This study focuses on the leader emotions as they are considered to be open to an in-class experience (Rajah et al., 2011). This exercise also highlights the importance of practical demonstrations of concepts as leaning tools for the students to understand the role affect plays between colleagues, spouses, peers or other dyads.

### **II. LITERATURE REVIEW**

#### **2.1 Emotional Contagion**

Emotional contagion is a process in which an individual or group affects the behavior or emotions of another group or individual through unconscious or conscious induction of behavior attitudes and emotion states (Schoenewolf, 1990). Emotional contagion is a type of social influence and is similar to cognitive

contagion (Levy & Nail, 1993) and it is a process that can transpire at both conscious and subconscious levels (Kelly & Barsade, 2001). Though cognitive contagion is considered to be similar to emotional contagion in most often yet can be different by the processes and the context of contagion. The previous literature have used the term emotion at a broad level similar to that of affect that encompass the general understanding of the phenomenon of subjective feelings (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1995)

The psychological researchers in the literature on variety of feeling state have suggested that to understand overall effective experience and to reflect commonality it is important to understand the contagion process (Mayer et al., 1991). The affective experience mentioned here are the emotions, moods and dispositional affect. The disposition affect is a stable, long-term variable that would not be influenced by the contagion but could influence it (Watson et al., 1988). Whereas emotions are relatively short term, intense and affective reactions to a specific environmental stimuli (Reber, 1985). Further moods when compared to emotions are more diffusive affective reactions to stimulus from environment, are weaker leading to relatively short term unstable changes that are intra-individual and can change readily (Tellegen, 1985)

Emotions are considered to be the most representative of the malleable affective short-term changes that can occur in a group and supporting the same are the finding from previous literature in which emphasizes on emotion as a more broad ranging effect when compared to other types of affect (Mayer et al., 1991). So this study focuses on understanding the logic behind the contagion of emotion among the group.

### **III. THEORETICAL FRAME WORK**

#### **3.1 Emotional Contagion and Leader Displayed Emotions**

The previous research on Affective Events Theory by Weiss & Cropanzano (1996) explains the influence of daily work events emotional reactions on work attitudes and job performance which is also supported by previous literature (Beal et al., 2005; Rothbard & Wilk, 2011), that emotional reactions to events at work have an impact on the employees individual performance and their satisfaction at work.

The events at work need not be immense or dramatic to trigger an emotional reaction from the employee sometimes it depends on the way the employee react to the situation also matters (Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996) and as per Affective Events Theory there is no restriction on the event types that trigger the emotional responses of employees but the previous studies on emotional contagion highlights the importance of leader emotional displays in triggering the stimulus.

The occurrence and spread of affect from on individual or group to other individual or group is explained by emotional contagion. Research in emotional contagion explains that regardless of the situation displayed emotions have an impact on the conversation despite the intentionality and they spread across the groups through simple non verbal or verbal conversations (Barsade, 2002; Morris & Keltner, 2000). The perceptions of work related evaluations and hinder member performance can be affected by the displayed emotions of leaders which can spread like virus that is contagion and influence the members in the group (Johnson, 2008; Bull Schaefer, 2010).

The previous research has highlighted the importance of influence of negative and positive emotions of leader on the individual outcome like creativity and happiness of the members (Rajah et al., 2011) and also the elder emotions either positive or negative can impact just not only the individual but also the team outcomes like the expanded effort and coordination (Sy et al., 2005; Barsade, 2002). Thus it is evident that leader display of emotions have an impact on the members of the group.

#### **Learning Objectives**

- To demonstrate the effortless emotional transference with in a group
- To give leader experience of emotional labour to highlight its importance
- To generate a stimulus for discussion regarding the emotional displays of leader at work and individual and organizational performance criteria to highlight the importance of emotions at work

#### **In- class Group Exercise**

This activity is set up as an in class-experiment which uses a pretest-posttest within case design that would take about 30 minutes for the instructor. The activity involves a manipulation aiming at measuring the group that does not exceed more than 10 members with the minimum limit as 4 and individual experienced affect before and after the activity with a group chosen leader. The manipulation variable given different for positive and negative leaders and the groups were kept uninformed about the change purposefully. On completion of posttest the class was given a briefing regarding the in-class exercise and present research evidence for further discussion on emotional contagion. The exercise is carried in different steps,

Step 1: A pre activity assessment (Appendix A) and instructions are given in step 1 at the beginning of the class and for the purpose of this assessment the measure was adopted from the work used by Bull Schaefer &

Palanski (2013) initially developed by Diener et al. (1995) and Shaver et al. (1987). After the pretest the class was asked to form groups and then they were to choose a leader for their group. The chosen leader were separated from the rest of the group, the members were informed that the leaders were given instructions which will be communicated to them and In the meanwhile the members of the group were asked to discuss on any controversial topic. The leaders were informed about the concept of emotional contagion and how the emotions are spread and were handed with logic puzzle (Appendix B) to figure within their group. The leaders were asked to choose whether they wanted to be extremely positive or negative influence on the group and spread the same across the group. The leaders were given advice on the emotional displays with examples like pessimistic, angry, hopeless ways of acting with the group members to display their negative emotions and the positive emotions include the optimism, enthusiasm and even gestures like high-five for the strong display of emotions. The leaders were explained the importance of frequency and intensity in display of their emotions and give suggestion regarding their performance if they are expressing the emotions in an obvious manner as suggested or were faking to keep the real purpose of the activity intact.

Step 2: As the group activity begins the leader assume their role and instructed start to display their emotions in positive or negative way assigned. The group was group approximately 5 minutes to solve the puzzle as from previous research we have understood that emotions and contagion occurs quickly the puzzle answer was revealed at the end of the activity.

Step 3: This is a debrief session where the groups share their solution to puzzle and then they were given chance to discuss the behavior of their leaders. Further the class was guided through reflection questions (Appendix C) that leads the discussion through the concepts of emotional contagion, organizational consequence and emotional labor. The post activity assessments were collected from each group and the group was asked to brief on the effectiveness and style of each group leaders.

Leader faked emotional displays: During the part of this discussion the instructor has bring in the results of the previous activity to consider the presence of emotional contagion in the short period of time. Further the discussions were focused on what could be the probable conclusions when the power of emotional displays in real time working environment where the leaders will have power over the group it would be interesting to know as the results may speculate based on the experience, team leaders or supervision. Leaders were also asked to discuss their experiences where the leaders expressed the difficulty in faking their emotions stating that they could not hold the emotions for longer times or how hard it was for them to be harder or encouraging which gives an insight in to the existence of emotional labor and its importance in real time during customer service.

#### **IV. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

##### **4.1 Sample and Data Collection**

The sample sizes for the analysis for this study are 210 samples working in 40 teams collected from the students in 6 different post graduate organizational behaviour classes from Chennai, India over a period of 2 years at the same campus. The summary of results were presented to students within debrief to establish the validity of the outcomes of the exercise. The demographic data was not specifically collected as the effect of demographics on emotional contagion was not studied in this literature..

##### **4.2 Instruments Used**

For the purpose of this study we have adopted the 10-item scale for the pre and post assessment used by Bull Schaefer & Palanski (2013) and which was developed by Diener et al. (1995) and Shaver et al. (1987). This particular measure was adopted in this study as this has been used recently to capture both the negative and positive influence and displayed emotions that have been experienced by the respondents in different studies testing the transference (Bull Schaefer, 2010; Green et al., 2011). The students were asked to mark the extent to which they are experiencing the following emotions that include enthusiastic, happy anxious, sad and others (Appendix A) on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree).

**Table 1**

	<b>Positive Leader</b>		<b>Negative Leader</b>	
	<b>Member</b>		<b>Member</b>	
	<b>Negative Emotions</b>	<b>Positive Emotions</b>	<b>Negative Emotions</b>	<b>Positive Emotions</b>
<b>Pre-Test</b>	<b>5.12</b>	<b>3.21</b>	<b>5.03</b>	<b>3.10</b>
<b>Post-Test</b>	<b>5.93</b>	<b>2.83</b>	<b>4.16</b>	<b>3.49</b>

### **4.3 Results**

The pre and post activity positive and negative effects of the members were matched respectively for both negative and positive leader conditions specifically to a total of 4 matched pairs in Table 1. The results have confirmed that the emotional display of leaders have intended influence on the participants affect in the intended direction ( $P < 0.001$ ). In the positive leader emotion condition the members of the group experienced increased positive emotions and decreased negative emotions where as in the negative leader emotion condition the participant experienced decreased positive emotions and increased negative emotions. A step wise regression was conducted to attain the practical significance of the leader emotional contagion for each condition using group level of negative and positive emotions. In the positive emotional condition we have tested the relative impact of leader positive emotions on the positive emotions of the participants by entering the reported pre-activity assessment of participant's positive affect in step 1 followed by positive emotional displays of leader in step 2. Results have indicated that both the predictors were statistically significant ( $p < 0.001$ ) and more importantly the pre-activity positive affect explained about 19.5 percent of unique variance of positive emotions of participants post activity experience. The leader positive emotional display explained about 11.8 percent of unique variance in positive emotion of participants post activity experience. In parallel the effects of positive emotional displays of leaders on the experience of negative emotions by the participants post activity were also tested. From the results we have found that the pre-activity negative effect of the participants explains about 29 percent of unique variance and the leader positive emotional display explains about 7 percent of unique variance ( $p < 0.001$ ).

In the negative emotional condition the relative impact of negative emotional displays of leader on the participant's experience of negative emotions was tested by entering the pre activity negative effect of participants' in step 1 followed by the negative emotional displays of leader in step 2. The results have indicated that both the predictors were significant statistically ( $p < 0.001$ ). We have also found that the pre-activity negative affect explains about 9 percent of unique variance and leader negative emotional displays explain about 18.5 percent of unique variance. In parallel the effects of negative emotional displays of leaders on the experience of positive emotions by the participants post activity were also tested. From the results we have found that the pre-activity positive effect of the participants explains about 9.5 percent of unique variance ( $p < 0.001$ ) but the leader negative emotional display did not account to explain any unique variance in the positive emotions experienced in the post activity.

## **V. CONCLUSION**

The emotions are the outcomes of the events at work that impact the business performance in term of revenues and expenses. This study has tried to highlight the importance of emotions at work through an in class experimental activity that aided in exploring and describing the concept of emotional contagion with in small groups. This study further focuses on describing the in class experimental activity that demonstrates the existence of emotional contagion with in the management class rooms. Through this study we have empirically established the relationship emotional contagion from leaders to the group members and further through the learning from this experiment demonstrate the ease with which the emotional transference happen within a work group under the influence of leader experience with emotional labour. This study also highlights the importance of the influence of leader emotional displays at work on the organizational and individual performance criteria. Through this study we would also like to provide the instructor with appropriate information to guide the discussions in the class about the issues related to labour- work related outcomes and emotional contagion.

## **VI. LIMITATION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

Since the responses in the study are self reports there could be a high chance of ratings being inflated and this makes it difficult to avoid errors due to this phenomenon. However Considering the time factor we could not track the frequency or pattern in way the solution was given by the groups participated in the in lass activity and also this study may not be exhaustive but however as much as material possible was included in order to support the discussion. This study further does not test the connections between the emotional displays and performance at work. The appropriateness of the task given to the group can be solved from contribution from an individual rather than a whole group so predicting leader emotional displays on group performance could be subjected to some biases however the group was instructed for an overall active participation from all the members of the group. So in future, studies could focus on the tasks that are appropriate for the group or dyadic work, to understand the impact of emotional contagion on group performance rather than the impact of individual cognitive ability on the performance of the group. Further the studies should focus on the relationship between frequencies of leader emotional displays on the member contribution. Further the studies could also consider the differential affects of negative or positive emotions or weight of these emotions in triggering the outcomes.

**Appendix A**

Pre- and Post-activity Emotion Assessments and Manipulation Checks

When you were working on this puzzle with your group, to what degree did you experience each of the feelings described below?

To what degree did your group “leader” display positive emotions while your group was solving the puzzle?

To what degree did your group “leader” display negative emotions while your group was solving the puzzle?

	No degree	To some degree				To a great degree	
Enthusiasm	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Optimism	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Happiness	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Love	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Sadness	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Unhappiness	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Fear	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Anxiety	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Irritation	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Frustration	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

To what degree did your group “leader” display positive emotions while your group was solving the puzzle?

No degree	To some degree				To a great degree	
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

To what degree did your group “leader” display negative emotions while your group was solving the puzzle?

No degree	To some degree				To a great degree	
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

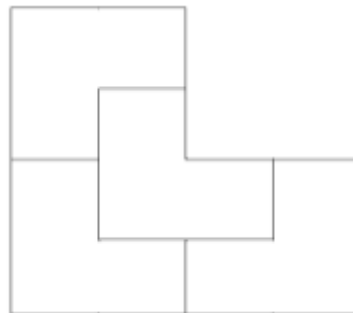
Note. The pre-activity assessment only consists of the first 10 items and includes the prompt: “Please report on how you are currently feeling today. To what degree are you currently experiencing the following emotions?” These items are adapted from the work of Diener, Smith, and Fujita (1995) and Shaver, Schwartz, Kirson, and O’Connor (1987).

**Appendix B: Suggested Logic Puzzle Activity and Answer**

Instructions: Divide the figure below into four parts of equal size, shape, and area



Answer:



## **Appendix C**

### **Suggested Discussion Questions for In-Class Debrief**

#### **Individual Small Groups**

1. What did your leader say or what did your leader do to try to direct your group's progress?
2. How did these words and/or actions influence your behaviors or thoughts?
3. To what extent did you know that your leader was acting unusual or peculiar?
  - a. To what degree could you recognize that your leader may be exaggerating a particular emotional/affective state with his or her displays/behaviors?
4. How did your leader's behaviors affect you and your behaviors?

#### **Leaders**

1. How difficult was it for you to display your assigned emotion?
2. Was it more difficult for you to display the intensity or the frequency of the emotion?
3. What type of feedback did your group members give you when you displayed your exaggerated emotion?
4. How did their feedback make you feel, and how did your feedback influence your ability to keep displaying your assigned emotion?
5. To what degree did you feel you had to fake your assigned emotion?
6. If you did feel like you were faking your assigned emotion, what technique did you use to fake it?

#### **Class**

1. How many of you think that your group experienced emotional contagion (as described earlier)?
2. Many of us may not notice a shift in effect, but statistical analysis of the results of this exercise in a variety of different business classes reveals that subtle contagion exists among most groups (show and talk through statistics). Yes, there are individuals who will not experience contagion, but groups show an inclination to experience affect in the direction of their leaders.
  - a. If groups adopt their leaders' affect, what would that mean for an organization if the leader is optimistic? Pessimistic?
3. This class exercise is pretty artificial. You probably randomly chose your leader. What sort of effect do you think you would experience if your supervisor or team leader at work was having a "bad" day?
  - a. Would it be different if you were close to your leader?
  - b. Would it be different if you were around your leader all day?
4. How can emotional contagion influence employee retention and performance?
5. How can the emotional contagion influence customer retention and consumer behavior?
6. As a consequence, how could leader emotional displays then influence expenses and revenues for an organization (thinking about employee and customer behaviors)?

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Dr. Ujjal Mukherjee "Impact Of Leader Emotional Displays And Emotional Contagion At Work In India: An In-Class Experiential Activity "International Journal of Business and Management Invention (IJBMI) , vol. 07, no. 08, 2018, pp. 67-73