The role of organizational leaders in employee emotion management: A theoretical model ☆

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ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

The actions of organizational leaders are important determinants of the emergence, management, and consequences of employee emotional experience. However, the nature and dimensionality of leader emotion management and the behaviors that constitute such management are largely unknown. The authors present a comprehensive, theoretically-derived model of leader emotion management which clarifies the nature of emotion management and its role in leadership. This model also delineates the knowledge and skill-based antecedents of emotion management and the consequences of such management. Specifically, we propose linkages between particular KSAOs and specific emotion management dimensions and between those dimensions and particular individual and organizational outcomes. The model is meant to serve as a framework to guide empirical efforts in investigating the nature and correlates of leader emotion management.

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1. Introduction

Work is an emotional experience. It is a source of anger, distress, frustration, and embarrassment, but also a spring of pride, belongingness, fulfillment, and excitement (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1995; Boudens, 2005). These emotions derive both from work-related events and interactions (Ashkanasy & Jordan, 2008; Reichard & Riggio, 2008) and from the non-work feelings that employees bring with them to the job. The consequences of these emotions are far-reaching, impacting not only well-being, but also individual, group and organizational performance (for reviews, see Barsade & Gibson, 2007; Elfenbein, 2007).

A consistent theme that has emerged from the literature on workplace emotions is that organizational leaders have a great deal of influence over the emergence, management, and consequences of organizational affective experiences (for a review of relevant literature, see Gooty, Connelly, Griffith, & Gupta, 2010). Specifically, several studies have revealed that leaders are responsible for some of the most important and frequent determinants of employees' emotions (e.g., Ashkanasy & Jordan, 2008; Dasborough, 2006; George, 2000; Pescosolido, 2002; Reichard & Riggio, 2008). Leavitt and Bahrami, 1988 go so far as to suggest that, "managing one's own emotions, and those of employees, is as much a critical managerial function as managing markets or finances" (1988: 40). Similarly, Rafaeli and Worline, 2001 conclude, "put simply, management's job has become the management of emotion" (2001: 107).

Owing to, and perhaps driving, this recognition that leaders exert a significant impact on employees' work-related feelings, there has been a rapid growth in research on what we refer to as leader emotion management or LEM (e.g., Ashkanasy & Tse, 2000; Humphrey, 2008; Humphrey, Pollack, & Hawver, 2008; Pescosolido, 2002). While impressive, the swiftness of this growth also has resulted in a

disjointed and sometimes confused body of work. Evidence for this fragmentation and confusion is apparent when one considers the very different conceptualizations of and approaches to leader emotion management in the literature.

2. Current approaches to studying leader emotion management

One common approach is to conceptualize leader emotion management as closely entwined with a characteristic of the leader—most often emotional intelligence (EI) (e.g., Humphrey et al., 2008; Wolff, Pescosolido, & Druskat, 2002; Wong & Law, 2002; for a recent review, see Walter, Cole, & Humphrey, 2011). Studies in this vein usually address the question of how well EI predicts a particular leadership construct (e.g., transformational leadership [TL] or charismatic leadership) and/or a measure of leader emergence or effectiveness (e.g. Coté, Lopez, Salovey, & Miners, 2010; Harms & Credé, 2010; Wolff et al., 2002). Although research on emotional intelligence has been useful in understanding leadership (e.g., George, 2000, but also see Antonakis, Ashkanasy, & Dasborough, 2009; Kaplan, Cortina, & Ruark, 2010), our focus here is more so on the behavioral nature of emotion management.

For the most part, studies investigating EI with respect to leadership treat EI as a unitary and stable predictor construct (see Harms & Credé, 2010 for examples) of a given index of leader effectiveness (see studies above). Although Mayer and Salovey (1997) describe four branches of EI (accurately perceiving emotions in oneself and others, using emotions to facilitate thinking, understanding emotional meaning, and managing emotions of oneself and others), studies rarely address these separate components. Also, the branches themselves are quite broad and represent sets of mental abilities, not leader behaviors. As such, studies examining EI generally do not address or tease apart "what about EI" and/or "what parts of it" are related to what aspects of emotional leadership behavior (see Jordan, Dasborough, Daus, & Ashkanasy, 2010 for similar recognitions and point).

Juxtaposed with this work on EI are various streams of research relevant to leaders as emotion managers. This work includes research on diverse topics such as: the effects of leader emotional displays (Connelly & Ruark, 2010; Dasborough, Ashkanasy, Tee, & Tse, 2009; Sy, Côté, & Saavedra, 2005); the emotional consequences of leader decision-making (De Cremer, 2007) and communication (Dasborough, 2006), and the role of leaders in establishing emotional norms (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1995) and providing emotional support (Visweswaran, Sanchez, & Fisher, 1999). Studies on these topics are important because they offer a more nuanced view of the role of leaders in emotion management. However, because these studies examine different processes and variables, it would be useful to have a framework that brings them together.

We note that there have been some other recent models attempting to bring some clarity to this literature. In an important paper on organizational emotion management behavior, Williams (2007) integrated several theoretical models in explicating the interpersonal processes and behaviors that allow for the development of trust. In a paper especially relevant to the current one, Humphrey and colleagues (2008) forwarded a model suggesting that leaders can be the original source of an affective event and also can help or hinder employees' ability to cope with affective events at work. These authors also describe the key role of empathy, emotion recognition, and emotional expressiveness in emotionally intelligent leadership. Also, Ashkanasy and colleagues have discussed leader emotion management across various levels of analysis (e.g., Ashkanasy & Jordan, 2008), providing important insights into leadership and emotions. Additionally, van Knippenberg and co-authors (2008) provide a summary of leaders as sources of employee emotions, integrating work from various areas. In a different context, Little and colleagues drew from theories of emotion regulation and coping in investigating how employees respond to customer emotions (Little, Kluemper, Nelson, & Ward, 2013).

These models all discuss important components of (leader) emotion management, and we draw from some of them below. Although certainly all informative, these models, taken in isolation or together, still do not provide a complete picture of leader emotion management. They all are narrower than what we present here. As such, they provide the ingredients from which we partially have crafted the current model. What is lacking, and what we attempt to provide here, is a thorough explication of 1) the nature (i.e., the constituent dimensions) of leader emotion management, 2) the specific predictors of those particular dimensions, 3) the outcomes those dimensions impact, and 4) the moderators of these two sets of linkages.

To these ends, the remainder of this paper unfolds as follows. First, we define key terms and provide an overview of the proposed theoretical model. Next, we discuss eight broad sets of behaviors that constitute effective leader emotion management as well as the consequences that follow from these behaviors. We then propose various knowledge and skills that are relevant to leader emotion management and, by implication, to individual and organizational outcomes (see Fig. 1). Next, we discuss feedback loops in the model as well as individual and contextual moderators that operate at various points in the model (see Fig. 2). The paper concludes with a discussion of the theoretical and practical implications of the current model.

3. Conceptualizing emotion and leader emotion management (EM)

First, our wording regarding the emotion concept warrants mention. Here, we are interested in state affect (i.e., fleeting affective experiences), not trait affect, which is a more stable individual characteristic. In speaking of state affect, we generally use the term "emotion" throughout the manuscript. While both emotion and moods represent affective (i.e., feeling) states, they can differ phenomenologically. Emotions represent acute, intense, and ephemeral reactions to some event (e.g., being publically chastised by one's leader; Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996). Mood, in contrast, is a more diffuse and longer-lasting affective state. People generally are aware of their emotions, whereas the experience of moods can occur in the background and without triggering conscious awareness (Watson, 2000). This said, the distinctions between mood and emotion are not entirely clear, either from an experiential perspective or in terms of function (cf., Ekman & Davidson, 1994). In general, the valence of affect, rather than the intensity, predominates in terms of impacting behavior (Russell, 2003) Also, the two experiences are often intertwined temporally, as moods (e.g., "feeling a little down") can morph