



The impact of leader emotion display frequency on follower performance: Leader surface acting and mean emotion display as boundary conditions

Gang Wang^{a,*}, Scott E. Seibert^{b,1}

^a Department of Management, The College of Business, Florida State University, 821 Academic Way, P.O. Box 3061110, Tallahassee, FL 32306-1110, USA

^b Department of Management & Organizations, University of Iowa, 108 John Pappajohn Business Building, Iowa City, IA 52242-1994, USA

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ABSTRACT

Theory and evidence suggest leader emotion has an important influence on follower performance. However, we lack a theoretical framework to understand when the frequency of leader emotional displays may or may not explain significant variance in follower performance. To advance knowledge in this emerging line of research, we integrate Emotion As Social Information (EASI) theory with attribution theory to explore boundary conditions of the relationships of the frequencies of positive and negative leader emotional displays with follower performance. Results based on leaders and followers in three organizations show that leader surface acting acted as a boundary condition, neutralizing the effects of the frequencies of positive and negative leader emotional displays toward an individual follower on that follower's performance. In addition, higher frequency of negative emotional displays shown by the leader to all group members acted as a boundary condition, neutralizing the effect of the frequency of negative leader emotional displays toward an individual follower on that follower's performance. This work advances our understanding of the way the frequency of leader emotional displays may influence follower performance, introduces new types of contingency factors to the leader emotion area, and helps extend emotional labor theory to the leadership context.

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Introduction

Distinct from the large volume of research on various leadership behaviors or styles, a steadily growing body of research has been focused on the roles that leader affect plays in the leadership process (e.g., Ashkanasy & Tse, 2000; Bono & Ilies, 2006; Connelly, Gaddis, & Helton-Fauth, 2002). Consistent with Gooty, Connelly, Griffith and Gupta (2010) and Gooty, Gavin, and Ashkanasy (2009), we regard leader affect as a broad construct that includes both leader emotion (i.e., an intense, short-term, and specific cognitive response to environmental stimuli) and mood (i.e., less intense, long-term, and diffused emotional states). A predominant theoretical explanation as to why leader affect may influence followers is that followers automatically “pick up” or share their leaders' affect through emotional contagion (Hatfield, Cacioppo, & Rapson, 1994), such that leader positive affect results in positive follower affect, behaviors, and outcomes, whereas leader negative affect leads to negative follower affect, behaviors, and outcomes (Bower, 1981; Clark & Taraban, 1991; Fredrickson, 2001; Porath & Erez, 2007; Rajah, Song, & Arvey, 2011).

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 850 644 8214; fax: +1 850 644 7843.

E-mail addresses: gwang5@business.fsu.edu (G. Wang), scott-seibert@uiowa.edu (S.E. Seibert).

¹ Tel.: +1 319 335 0844; fax: +1 319 335 1956.

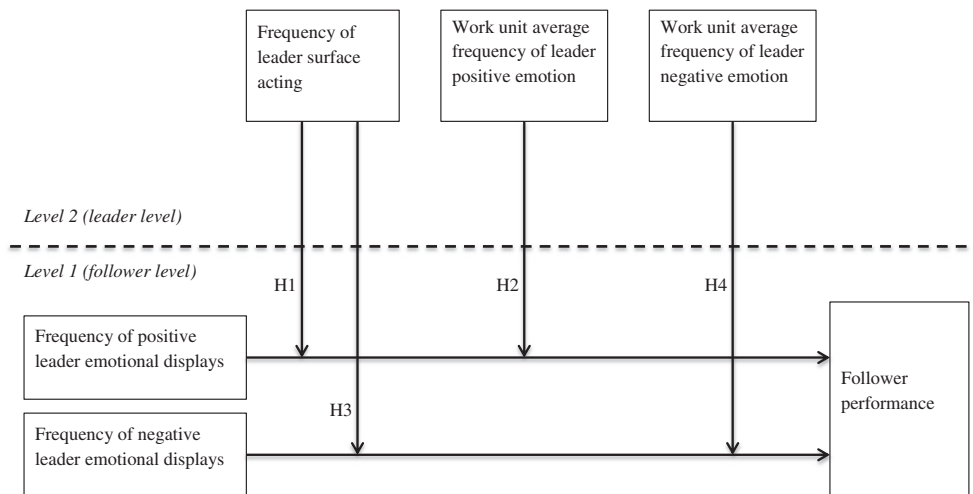


Fig. 1. Proposed theoretical model of the study. H = hypothesis.

However, empirical findings provide mixed support for this theoretical perspective. Whereas some research shows that positive leader affect could lead to positive follower moods, increased cooperation, and higher follower task performance (e.g., Barsade, 2002; Damen, van Knippenberg, & van Knippenberg, 2008; Erez, Misangyi, Johnson, LePine, & Halverson, 2008; George & Bettenhausen, 1990; Newcombe & Ashkanasy, 2002; Sy, Côté, & Saavedra, 2005), other research suggests leader positive affect has no clear influence or even negative effects on employee behavior and outcomes (e.g., Gaddis, Connelly, & Mumford, 2004; Visser, Van Knippenberg, Van Kleef, & Wisse, 2012).

The roles of leader negative affect are even less well understood (Gooty et al., 2010). Although leader expression of negative emotion had a deleterious consequence on followers' perceptions of the leader in several studies (Erez et al., 2008; Gaddis et al., 2004; Glomb & Hulin, 1997), follower effort or performance actually increased in some studies (Sy et al., 2005; Van Kleef, Homan, Beersma, & van Knippenberg, 2010).

Together, findings show that leaders' positive affect may not always result in higher follower performance, and that leaders' negative affect may sometimes have neutral or even beneficial consequences on follower performance. These contradictory results suggest that there are boundary conditions around the leader affect–follower performance relationship, and that the emotional contagion framework alone does not provide a complete account of this relationship. The development of a more comprehensive theory of leader affect and follower performance is, therefore, an important direction for research (Damen et al., 2008; Newcombe & Ashkanasy, 2002; Van Kleef et al., 2009). Such theory building will help us better understand when leader positive or negative affect may or may not be associated with increased follower performance.

Based on a theoretical integration of Emotion As Social Information (EASI) theory (Van Kleef, 2009) with attribution theory (Dasborough & Ashkanasy, 2002, 2004; Martinko, Harvey, & Douglas, 2007; Weiner, 1990), we specifically examine the boundary conditions around the relationships between the frequencies of positive and negative leader emotional displays toward individual followers and their task performance (see Fig. 1 for the theoretical model of the study). We focus on follower task performance as the outcome variable for two reasons. First, task performance is an outcome variable of particular importance in the management and organizational behavior field (Harrison, Newman, & Roth, 2006; Organ & Paine, 1999; Wang, Oh, Courtright, & Colbert, 2011). Second, EASI theory suggests leader emotional displays can have significant performance implications for followers². Specifically, we argue that in addition to observing and sharing their leaders' positive or negative emotions, followers may also be cued to infer why their leaders display positive or negative emotions toward them. Our argument is consistent with the premise of the EASI model, which posits that a sender's emotional displays may influence a receiver's behavior through emotional contagion or the information conveyed by the sender's emotional displays. EASI theory suggests that individual differences of the receiver (e.g., information processing motivation) and contextual factors (e.g., cooperative or competitive goals) act as moderators, determining whether followers share their leaders' emotion or attend to the information conveyed by their leaders' emotion (Van Kleef, 2009). Extending EASI theory, we argue that attribution theory (Dasborough & Ashkanasy, 2002, 2004; Martinko et al., 2007; Weiner, 1990) suggests that some leader behaviors may play similar roles in terms of cuing followers to make sense of why their leaders display positive or negative emotion toward them. We extend this line of reasoning by exploring the roles of two leader behaviors of particular relevance: leader surface acting and the average frequency of leader positive and negative emotional displays to all group members.

² Although the authors assessed the frequency with which a leader displayed positive and negative emotions to each individual follower, they didn't specifically measure leader emotional displays within performance contexts. Given that leaders could express emotions toward followers that are not explicitly about followers' performance, the authors acknowledge that leader emotions expressed within performance contexts are more likely to have performance implications for followers and caution that the effects of leader emotional displays about non-performance issues may operate differently. The authors thank an anonymous reviewer for suggesting this boundary condition of their theoretical model.

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