



Leading across language barriers: Managing language-induced emotions in multinational teams

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ABSTRACT

This study shows which negative emotion language barriers can provoke among multinational team (MNT) members and investigates how MNT leaders can successfully mitigate these detrimental effects. Multilingual teams constitute a leadership context of paramount importance in today's organizations, which prior research has neglected. Our study contributes to the literature on MNT leaders' emotion regulation strategies by investigating the specific challenges they face in this setting. We advance research on leadership in teams by exploring successful leadership strategies geared towards addressing language-induced emotions and by demonstrating the positive outcomes of MNT leaders leveraging their power in this context. Our study contributes to research on language barriers in multinational corporations by introducing the interplay of language-induced emotions and leadership to this area. Furthermore, it contributes to emotion-sensitive organizational studies by specifying previously established emotion management models for multilingual environments. On this basis, we draw conclusions for the development of future MNT leaders.

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Introduction: motivation of the study

Given that most multinational corporations (MNCs) are also multilingual (Harzing, Köster, & Magner, 2011; Luo & Shenkar, 2006), the management of language barriers constitutes a key leadership challenge in these companies (Zander, Mockaitis, & Butler, 2012). Despite the fact that languages are “the basic means of communication in organizations [and] the basis for knowledge creation” (Vaara, Piekkari, Tienari, & Säntti, 2005: 595), language barriers have surprisingly long been neglected both by researchers and practitioners (Harzing & Pudelko, 2013; Harzing et al., 2011). Only recently have management scholars started to explore the multifaceted role of language in MNCs (Brannen, Piekkari, & Tietze, 2014). A particularly active sub-stream within this emerging area is concerned with the impact of language barriers on multinational teams (MNTs). Given that teamwork “has become the contemporary ‘modus operandi’” in MNCs (Zander & Butler, 2010: 258) and considering that MNTs depend on the interaction between members speaking different mother tongues, the effective management of language barriers in these contexts is very important. The task of bridging linguistic boundaries in MNTs is mostly assigned to MNT leaders (Butler, Zander, Mockaitis, & Sutton, 2012; Zander et al., 2012), but there is a paucity of specific guidelines on how they can address the challenges of language barriers.

The negative emotions language barriers can trigger among MNT members present a particularly acute leadership challenge. Recent studies indicated that language-induced emotions can erode collaborative efforts and lead to losses in productivity and performance of MNTs (Hinds, Neeley, & Cramton, 2014) or even on the MNC level (Harzing & Feely, 2008; Neeley, Hinds, & Cramton, 2012). Whereas management studies have only recently taken a “linguistic turn” (Tietze, 2008: 2), the “affective revolution” in

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organizational behavior research (Gooty, Connelly, Griffith, & Gupta, 2010: 979; Gooty, Gavin, & Ashkanasy, 2009: 833), which turned scholars' attention to the impact of employees' emotions on organizational outcomes, already started in the late 1990s. Ever since, the investigation of emotions has taken center stage in organizational behavior (Gooty et al., 2009). Positive emotions are seen as “the wellspring of human motivation” (Salovey, Detweiler-Bedell, Detweiler-Bedell, & Mayer, 2008: 540), but recent studies particularly highlighted the disruptive potential of negative emotions and the need to understand and control them (e.g. Kulik, Cregan, Metz, & Brown, 2009; Little, Klumper, Nelson, & Gooty, 2012; Mooney, Holahan, & Amason, 2007; von Glinow, Shapiro, & Brett, 2004). Consequently, the management of employees' emotions emerged as an important component of effective leadership (Kaplan, Cortina, Ruark, LaPort, & Nicolaidis, 2014; Thiel, Connelly, & Griffith, 2012).

The pioneering studies on the emotional outcomes of language barriers mainly focused on analyzing the problem of language-induced emotions in multinational work environments, but did not provide a detailed account of possible solutions. Consequently, we still know very little about how MNT leaders can manage emotions triggered by language barriers. To address this gap, we conducted an inductive study investigating successful leadership measures to mitigate language-induced negative emotions in MNCs.

In our qualitative investigation, we conducted semi-structured interviews with 15 leaders and 67 members of 15 multinational and multilingual teams as well as 8 superordinate managers in three MNCs, allowing us to triangulate different perspectives on language-induced negative emotions and their management through MNT leaders. Our article will first reveal that MNT members' various emotional reactions to language barriers fall into two discrete categories: self-directed anxiety and other-directed resentment. Second, and more importantly, we will systematically investigate strategies to mitigate the emotional impact of language barriers. Consequently, the main thrust of this article lies in exploring the measures MNT leaders have at their disposal to manage their subordinates' negative language-induced emotions. As we will show, these measures form part of three major strategies: reducing the impact of language barriers, redirecting MNT members' attention away from language barriers, and reducing the negative appraisal of language barriers. These measures benefit the MNT through improved sensemaking, a more productive team climate and an increased willingness of MNT members to follow their leader.

Our study is the first to build on, contribute to and systematically connect research on leadership, language barriers and emotions in MNCs. As such, it contributes to research on MNT leaders' emotion regulation strategies by investigating the specific challenges MNT leaders face in multilingual settings, a leadership context which has despite its relevance been surprisingly neglected by prior studies. We advance leadership research with a fine-grained analysis of MNT leaders' cross-lingual bridge-making activities and provide an extension of leadership skills with cross-lingual competencies. We extend the growing literature on position power in teams by demonstrating the positive outcomes of MNT leaders leveraging their power through active emotion management. Our study also contributes to the investigation of language barriers in international management by highlighting the complexity of language effects and confirming that the instrumental view of language as an easily managed, neutral code has become obsolete. Furthermore, it contributes to emotion-sensitive organizational studies by contextualizing previously established emotion management models specifically for multilingual environments. In terms of practical recommendations, our study highlights the importance of MNT leaders' emotional awareness in multilingual settings, shows that emotions need to be actively managed rather than suppressed and draws important conclusions for global leadership development.

Theoretical framework

Our study is based on leadership research in multicultural and multilingual settings, the investigation of language barriers in MNCs and research on emotions in organizations. Below we will review selected findings and models from previous studies in these areas, which indicate connections between these three streams and therefore provide core references for our study.

MNT leaders' tasks and skills

Leadership can be defined as “a process of social influence” (Parry, 1999: 134) or “the ability of an individual to influence, motivate, and enable others to contribute towards the effectiveness and success of the organizations of which they are members” (House & Javidan, 2004: 15). Our study specifically focuses on formally assigned MNT leaders as the “individuals who are primarily responsible for defining team goals and for developing and structuring the team to accomplish these missions” (Zaccaro, Rittman, & Marks, 2001: 452), thus displaying leadership. This focus on vertical leadership (Zander & Butler, 2010) clearly presupposes hierarchical teams with a defined leadership role and an appointed leader. Most organizational teams have such structures. Along with Zaccaro et al. (2001), we believe that even in experienced teams in which other members may take over some leadership functions, designated leaders still fulfill boundary spanning functions.

The challenges leaders face in multinational settings are a key item on the agenda of leadership research, as leaders with global competencies and perspectives are an indispensable prerequisite for the success of MNCs (Brewster & Suutari, 2005). Not only top managers need to address the challenges of a highly diverse workforce (Levy, Beechler, Taylor & Boyacigiller, 2007) by spanning cultural and linguistic boundaries, creating links and establishing communication between multiple groups in their organizations (Mendenhall, Reiche, Bird, & Osland, 2012; Zander et al., 2012). Leaders in the middle management, particularly the leaders of multinational and multilingual teams, are also expected to motivate and inspire, to blend diverse collections of individuals into effective teams and to leverage the creative potential of team diversity (Butler et al., 2012; Zander & Butler, 2010; Zander et al., 2012).

Whereas specific research on the competencies of MNT leaders is still quite limited, pioneering studies in the field (Zander & Butler, 2010; Zander et al., 2012) borrow from the broader stream of literature investigating global leadership skills at the top management level. This research area centers on the concept of a leader's “global mindset”, which is often defined in terms of cross-

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