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Emotional labor and leadership: A threat to authenticity? ☆☆☆



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ABSTRACT

Building on the emotional labor and authentic leadership literatures, we advance a conceptual model of leader emotional displays. Three categories of leader emotional displays are identified: surface acting, deep acting and genuine emotions. The consistency of expressed leader emotions with affective display rules, together with the type of display chosen, combines to impact the leader's felt authenticity, the favorability of follower impressions, and the perceived authenticity of the leader by the followers. Emotional intelligence, self-monitoring ability, and political skill are proposed as individual differences that moderate leader emotional display responses to affective events. We also look at followers' trust in the leader and leader well-being as key outcomes. Finally, we explore the influence on leader emotional labor of contextual dimensions of the environment, including the omnibus (national and organizational culture, industry and occupation, organizational structure, time) and discrete (situational) context. Directions for future research are discussed.

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I try, to the extent possible, to maintain a level of calmness in the face of frantic issues. I try to be as objective as possible in discussions, and if I'm in a face-to-face meeting with someone who has a short fuse, I'll sit right next to that person to make sure the fuse is never lit. I do that by being calm, even overly calm. When things get heated, I even change my voice. I will consciously take a deep breath, or two deep breaths, in front of everybody to get them to calm down a little bit and talk about the specifics, about solutions (Frost, 2004, p. 121).

The above quotation from David Marsing, a senior manager at Intel, illustrates well the challenges leaders may face in handling "toxic" emotions in organizations (Frost, 2004). Clearly, Mr. Marsing's effort to appear calm in the face of emotionally charged situations reflects the importance of emotional labor to leadership roles. Sociologist Arlie Hochschild first included emotional labor in the mix of physical and mental labor to describe work that goes beyond common expressions of experienced emotions to exhibiting emotional displays called for by the job. Hence, emotional labor requires one to induce or suppress feelings to sustain an outward expression that produces the proper state of mind in others and calls for a coordination of mind and feelings (Hochschild, 1983). In our opening example, Mr. Marsing is laboring hard to suppress his emotions and thereby model a calm demeanor for others as an appropriate strategy for managing a volatile emotional episode.

Despite the obvious demands for emotional labor that are inherent to the leadership role, scholarly attention to this topic has been sparse (Humphrey, Pollack, & Hawver, 2008) and indirect (Ashkanasy & Tse, 2000; George, 2000; Pescosolido, 2002, 2005;

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☆☆ This article is dedicated to the memory of our colleague, co-author, and friend, Jerry Hunt, who passed away prior to the publication of this article.

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Pirola-Merlo, Hartel, Mann, & Hirst, 2002). However, spurred on by recent practitioner (George, 2003; George & Sims, 2007) and scholarly (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Avolio, Gardner, Walumbwa, Luthans, & May, 2004; Gardner, Avolio, Luthans, May, & Walumbwa, 2005; Gardner, Avolio, & Walumbwa, 2005; Ilies, Morgeson, & Nahrgang, 2005; Shamir & Eilam, 2005; Walumbwa, Avolio, Gardner, Wernsing, & Peterson, 2008) writings on authentic leadership, a basic research question has emerged: Can leaders manage their emotional displays to foster favorable follower impressions without violating their authenticity?³ For instance, a leader announcing employee layoffs would be expected to express empathy and concern for the affected employees, and would most likely elicit anger and resentment from employees if he or she failed to display such emotions. If such emotions are not heartfelt, however, expressing them would be inauthentic. If the audience detects a lack of sincerity on the part of the leader, he or she may be viewed as hypocritical and disingenuous, thereby undermining his or her credibility with followers. To date, the degree to which leaders are required to engage in emotional labor, and the implications for authenticity, have not been adequately explored.

In this paper, we take an initial step towards filling this void by presenting a conceptual model of leader emotional displays that recognizes the interactive effects of the emotional context (the environment, situation, and associated display rules), leader behavior (surface acting, deep acting, and genuine emotional displays), leader felt authenticity, followers' impressions, and followers' perceived authenticity of the leader. We explore the interrelationships between micro-level (e.g., leader emotional displays and followers' impressions) and macro-level (e.g., cultural, occupational, structural, and temporal contextual factors) organizational phenomena. We also present propositions and consider promising directions for future research.

1. Emotional labor and leadership

As originally conceptualized, Hochschild (1983) described jobs that require emotional labor as having three things in common: (1) they require face-to-face or voice-to-voice contact with the public; (2) they require the worker to produce an emotional state in the customer; and (3) they allow the employer, through training and supervision, to exercise some control over the emotional life of employees. In Hochschild's view, organizations are increasingly willing to direct and control how employees present themselves to others. To manage the demands of emotional labor, workers may adopt one of three stances (Hochschild, 1983). Some workers identify too closely with the work, and are therefore unable to separate themselves from their work, which can lead to burnout. Others distinguish themselves from their work and use surface or deep acting when appropriate, but run the risk of feeling phony. In the third stance, the workers distinguish themselves from their role and recognize that acting is part of the job, but run the risk of becoming cynical.

Ashforth & Humphrey (1993) advanced Hochschild's (1983) conception of emotional labor in several ways. First, they broadened the scope of the construct by defining it as "the act of displaying the appropriate emotion (conforming with a display rule) as emotional labor" (p. 90). Note that this definition focuses on behavior and not the presumed emotions underlying behavior. Second, they add the genuine experience and expression of expected emotions as a third approach to emotional labor. Third, they examine the functions (task effectiveness and self-expression) and dysfunctions (poor service, dissonance, and impairment of one's sense of authentic self) of emotional labor. Finally, they consider social identity theory and argue that some of the effects of emotional labor on workers are moderated by identifying with the role.

Ashforth & Humphrey's (1993) broader conceptualization of emotional labor is most applicable to our work, given our focus on organizational leaders, who may or may not work in service professions and often attempt to regulate emotions with audiences other than the public. Moreover, subsequent empirical evidence (Grandey, Kern, & Frone, 2007) indicates that emotional labor may be directed toward both organizational outsiders (e.g., customers, clients, patients) and insiders (e.g., supervisors, co-workers). Hence, we view leaders as directing their emotional displays toward both internal (e.g., subordinates, peers, superiors) and external (e.g., customers, the press, competitors) audiences (Gardner & Avolio, 1998), albeit for the purpose of influencing such audiences to follow them in pursuit of desired goals.

The potential beneficial consequences of leader positive mood have been studied by George & Bettenhausen (1990) and George (1995). George & Bettenhausen (1990) found that the extent to which leaders of existing work groups experienced positive moods was positively related to levels of pro-social behavior performed by group members and negatively related to group turnover rates. George (1995) found that work groups led by sales managers who tended to experience positive moods at work provided relatively high levels of customer service. In contrast, Lewis (2000) found that leader displays of negative emotions produced more negative affective states among followers and less favorable assessments of leader effectiveness.

Consistent with these studies, Gaddis, Connelly, & Mumford (2004) demonstrated that the provision of positive as opposed to negative leader affective displays during failure feedback produced higher perceptions of leader effectiveness and higher quality performance on a group task. In a test of a mood contagion model, Sy, Cote, & Saavedra (2005) showed that leader mood can be contagious, with positive (negative) leader moods inducing group members to experience more positive (negative) moods, as well as a more positive (negative) group affective tone. Finally, research by Kellett, Humphrey, & Sleeth (2002, 2006) and Pescosolido (2002) indicated that perceptions of members' emotional abilities (i.e., empathy, the ability to identify others' emotions, and the ability to express one's own emotions) among work groups were related to leader emergence. Together, these studies demonstrate that leader and follower emotions and emotional displays are important factors to consider in the leadership process (George, 2000; Humphrey, 2002; Humphrey et al., 2008).

³ We do not assume managers become leaders by a stroke of the pen or personal computer. Rather, we label these "managerial leaders" as "leaders" throughout this paper and for simplicity assume that they either perform both functions or delegate those functions with which they do not feel comfortable (may we say "authentic") handling.

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