



Leader emotion as a catalyst of effective leader communication of visions, value-laden messages, and goals [☆]

Merlijn Venus ^{*}, Daan Stam, Daan van Knippenberg

Rotterdam School of Management, Erasmus University Rotterdam, The Netherlands

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ABSTRACT

Despite the importance that effective leader communication of visions, value-laden messages, and goals seems to have in leadership, we know very little about which leader behavior is conducive to effective persuasive communication of desired end states. The current research highlights leader emotion as useful for leaders to make followers receptive to leaders' communicated end state. Across four experiments we found that follower performance was highest when there was a match between leader emotion and end state in terms of implied regulatory focus (promotion vs. prevention). Three of these experiments tested the proposed underlying mechanism of this pattern and found that leader enthusiasm (agitation) primed followers with promotion (prevention) focus, which in turn generated high follower performance when leaders communicated end states that sustained this focus, that is, when visions appealed to promotion (prevention); persuasive messages contained openness (conservatism) values; and when goals were defined as maximal (minimal) goals.

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Introduction

The core function of organizations is to attain desired end states (Locke, 2005). Accordingly, a key responsibility for organizational leaders is to motivate and inspire employees to accept these end states (Zaccaro & Klimoski, 2001), whether they are specific goals, goal-related values, or future end states and superordinate goals such as visions (Cropanzano, James, & Citera, 1993; Lord & Brown, 2004). To this end, leaders must engage in persuasive communication (e.g., Conger & Kanungo, 1998), the importance of which is perhaps nowhere more apparent than in the consensus among scholars that the ability to persuasively communicate a vision is the sine qua non of outstanding leadership (House & Shamir, 1993; Kirkpatrick & Locke, 1996).

However, previous research on leader persuasive communication of desired end states is scarce and has yielded inconsistent results regarding the effectiveness of persuasive messages (cf. Grant & Hofmann, 2011) as well as regarding the effectiveness of a charismatic presentation style in message communication (Awamleh & Gardner, 1999; Kirkpatrick & Locke, 1996). Leadership scholars have therefore started to identify the conditions under which leader persuasive communication is effective. Thus, Grant and Hof-

mann (2011) found that ideological messages were only effective when communicated by a beneficiary and not the leader. As another example, Stam, van Knippenberg, and Wisse (2010) found that a visionary message influenced follower performance only when it matched followers' motivational state, be it trait-based or contextually induced.

Yet, a match between leaders' persuasive appeals and follower psychological states may as often as not occur spontaneously, and adjustment of persuasive appeals to follower characteristics may not always be possible or desirable for leaders. Leaders must often align employees' behavior with goals that require frequent adaptation to volatile, changing environments, or find they need to communicate multiple and diverse goals within a relatively short span of time. How can leaders accomplish this? Clearly, the contingency perspective that characterizes the current state of science fails to fully capture what it is that leaders do in their persuasive attempts to motivate followers to accept desired end states.

One neglected yet potentially effective means leaders could employ in their persuasive attempts to make followers more receptive to accept desired end states is the use of emotional displays. We argue that leaders can use specific emotions to prime followers with a regulatory focus, which is a self-regulatory system that determines whether followers view end states in terms of hopes, wishes, and aspirations (a promotion focus) or in terms of duties, obligations, and responsibilities (a prevention focus). According to regulatory focus theory (Higgins, 1998), followers pay attention to information that sustains their primed regulatory focus, and reg-

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^{*} Corresponding author. Address: Rotterdam School of Management, Erasmus University Rotterdam, P.O. Box 1738, 3000 DR Rotterdam, The Netherlands.

E-mail address: mvenus@rsm.nl (M. Venus).

ulatory fit emerges when environmental stimuli (e.g., activities, goal-pursuit means) sustain one's focus, thus increasing the value and motivation in what one is doing (Higgins, 2000). Relying on the primacy of affect hypothesis (Zajonc, 1984), which suggests that leader emotions can influence followers' mindsets more readily than leader verbal communication, we argue that leaders can manage follower regulatory fit and effectively communicate end states by displaying emotions that induce a regulatory focus aligned with the communicated goal, value, or vision. The communicated end state, in turn, should sustain followers' primed regulatory focus, increasing motivation to accept the desired end state. As an illustration, consider Steve Ballmer, CEO of Microsoft, whose enthusiastic appearance on events may elicit a promotion focus in his audience, which, we argue, would render the audience more receptive to a promotion-focused message. Conversely, displays of concern and worry as opposed to enthusiasm, we argue, are more likely to help someone like Al Gore, former vice-president of the United States, in conveying his more prevention-focused message represented by his *Inconvenient Truth*.

The contribution of our study is threefold. First, by identifying leader emotion as an effective means to make followers receptive to desired end states, we integrate the literature on leader persuasive communication concerning desired end states with the emerging literature that explores the role that leader emotion plays in the leadership influence process (e.g., van Knippenberg, van Knippenberg, Van Kleef, & Damen, 2008). Second, unlike much prior work (e.g., Grant & Hofmann, 2011; Kirkpatrick & Locke, 1996; Stam et al., 2010) our study focuses not narrowly on either vision communication, value messages, or the communication of short-term goals, but offers a theory that applies to all these areas. Third, unlike others (e.g., Stam et al., 2010), we examine what leaders (can) do to increase support for their communicated goal irrespective of idiosyncratic follower characteristics.

Leader persuasive communication and leader emotion

Arguably one of the most important tasks leaders have is to communicate desired end states. Indeed, according to the leadership literature outstanding leadership is reflected in effective communication of visions (cf. House & Shamir, 1993), effective communication of goals (e.g., Berson & Avolio, 2004; Colbert, Kristof-Brown, Bradley, & Barrick, 2008), and in motivating followers through messages infused with values (House, 1996; Shamir, House, & Arthur, 1993). Remarkably, however, it is far from clear which leader behaviors are conducive to effective communication of desired end states (cf. van Knippenberg & Stam, in press). What is more, research exploring how inspirational communication adds to charisma mainly focuses on the role of leader rhetoric (e.g., Emrich, Brower, Feldman, & Garland, 2001). There is increasing evidence, however, that leaders can use their emotions to influence how followers think, feel, and behave (e.g., van Knippenberg et al., 2008). Accordingly, in the present study we explore how leaders' use of emotions may help leaders in successfully communicating visions, goals, and value-laden messages.

Although the leadership literature has always acknowledged that "emotions are deeply intertwined with the process of leading" (Gooty, Connelly, Griffith, & Gupta, 2010, p. 979), leadership researchers have only recently started to examine how leader emotional expressions impact follower behavior (for overviews see Gooty et al., 2010; van Knippenberg et al., 2008). Unfortunately, studies have generated mixed results regarding the relative effectiveness of positive vs. negative leader emotions. To shed more light on this issue, two processes have been identified through which leader emotions may influence followers (e.g., Van Kleef, 2009). On the one hand, leader emotions may influence followers through the affective reactions they evoke in followers. For exam-

ple, leader positive emotions may through evoking positivity produce higher ratings of charisma than negative emotions (e.g., Bono & Ilies, 2006). On the other hand, leader emotions may influence followers through the information they provide regarding follower performance quality. Leader negative emotions may, for example, indicate substandard performance, which may result into increased effort among followers (Sy, Côté, & Saavedra, 2005).

Van Kleef, Homan, Beersma, van Knippenberg, van Knippenberg, and Damen (2009) identified information-processing motivation as a factor that determines whether followers pay attention to emotion-related information or not. Specifically, they found that leader happiness vs. leader anger through affective reactions generated higher team performance when teams scored low on information-processing motivation, whereas the reverse pattern appeared when teams scored high on information-processing motivation, an effect that was mediated by performance inferences. Similar results have been found with regard to other follower characteristics (Van Kleef, Homan, Beersma, & van Knippenberg, 2010). Taken together, leader emotions may influence followers through two ways, the relative prevalence of which may be influenced by follower personality.

Even so, it is not clear how leader emotion may through either performance inferences or affective reactions enhance positive follower behavior (e.g., goal acceptance) in a leadership situation that involves persuasive communication of desired end states. Even if there were a leader emotion (e.g., enthusiasm) that could elicit goal acceptance, it would not be clear whether this generalizes to different types of goals or followers. In short, it is hard to see how the current state of science can inform us regarding effective leader persuasive communication of desired end states. In response to calls for more attention to other mediating processes (van Knippenberg et al., 2008), in the current paper we raise the possibility that leader emotions can activate in followers a certain action state or motivational direction, which causes followers to react more positively to one type of goal or value than another. We submit that leader emotion can do so by priming followers' self-regulatory focus, as it is this construct that is concerned with people's self-regulation towards desirable end states.

Regulatory focus theory and regulatory fit

According to Regulatory Focus Theory (Higgins, 1998, 2000) individuals may differ in their regulatory focus, or motivational orientation, with respect to the *same* desired end state. This focus may be manifested not only as an individual trait originating from socialization processes (Keller & Bless, 2006), but also as a temporal state elicited by situational cues (e.g., Friedman & Förster, 2001). A promotion focus involves a focus on ideals (e.g., aspirations), a focus on gains, and the use of approach strategies or eagerness means to attain a positive end state. A prevention orientation, in contrast, involves a focus on oughts (e.g., obligations), a focus on losses, and the use of avoidance strategies or vigilance means to attain the same positive end state (Higgins, 1998, 2000).

Importantly, the influence of regulatory focus on motivation and performance is determined by regulatory fit. Regulatory fit is defined as a positive experience that results when individuals are exposed to environmental stimuli (e.g., specific goal-pursuit activities or strategic means) that match or sustain their regulatory focus (Higgins, 1998, 2000). Specifically, when individuals engage in goal pursuit in a manner that fits (sustains) their regulatory focus, they will "experience feeling right about what they are doing and will engage more strongly in the goal-pursuit activity" (Cesario, Higgins, & Scholer, 2008, p. 446; see also Higgins, 2000, 2009). Core to regulatory fit is the notion that it feels good and "right" to act in line with your regulatory focus. This can be understood from the fact that regulatory focus implies a goal-directed

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