

Managing Emotions in the Workplace: Do Positive and Negative Attitudes Drive Performance?

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You know the type: coworkers who never have anything positive to say, whether at the weekly staff meeting or in the cafeteria line. They can suck the energy from a brainstorming session with a few choice comments. Their bad mood frequently puts others in one, too. Their negativity can contaminate even good news.

"We engage in emotional contagion," says Sigal Barsade, a Wharton management professor who studies the influence of emotions on the workplace. "Emotions travel from person to person like a virus."

Barsade is the co-author of a new paper titled, "Why Does Affect Matter in Organizations?" ("Affect" is another word for "emotion" in organizational behavior studies.) The answer: Employees' moods, emotions, and overall dispositions have an impact on job performance, decision making, creativity, turnover, teamwork, negotiations and leadership.

"The state of the literature shows that affect matters because people are not isolated 'emotional islands.' Rather, they bring all of themselves to work, including their traits, moods and emotions, and their affective experiences and expressions influence others," according to the paper, co-authored by Donald Gibson of Fairfield University's Dolan School of Business.

An "affective revolution" has occurred over the last 30 years as academics and managers alike have come to realize that employees' emotions are integral to what happens in an organization, says Barsade, who has been doing research in the area of emotions and work dynamics for 15 years. "Everybody brings their emotions to work. You bring your brain to work. You bring your emotions to work. Feelings drive performance. They drive behavior and other feelings. Think of people as emotion conductors."

In the paper, Barsade and Gibson consider three different types of feelings:

œ Discrete, short-lived emotions, such as joy, anger, fear and disgust.

œ Moods, which are longer-lasting feelings and not necessarily tied to a particular cause. A person is in a cheerful mood, for instance, or feeling down.

œ Dispositional, or personality, traits, which define a person's overall approach to life. "She's always so cheerful," or "He's always looking at the negative."

All three types of feelings can be contagious, and emotions don't have to be grand and obvious to have an impact. Subtle displays of emotion, such as a quick frown, can have an effect as well, Barsade says. She offers this example: "Say your boss is generally in very good humor, but you see him one day at a meeting and his eyes flash at you. Even if they don't glare at you for the rest of the meeting, his eyes have enunciated some valuable information that is going to have you concerned and worried and off center for the rest of the meeting."

Barsade suggests that while some people are better than others at controlling their emotions, that doesn't mean their coworkers aren't picking up on their moods. "You may not think you are showing emotion, but there's a good chance you are in your facial expression or body language. Emotions we don't even realize we are feeling can influence our thoughts and behaviors."

The researchers' paper discusses a concept known as "emotional labor," in which employees regulate their public displays of emotion to comply with certain expectations. Part of this is "surface acting," in which, for instance, the tired and stressed airline customer service agent forces himself to smile and be friendly with angry customers who have lost their luggage. That compares to "deep acting," in which employees exhibit emotions they have worked on feeling. In that scenario, the stressed-out airline worker sympathizes with the customer and shows emotions that suggest empathy. The second approach may be healthier, Barsade says, because it causes less stress and burnout, particularly emotional exhaustion from having to regulate one's emotions and "play a role."

But is there a downside to being too authentic? If the company is losing money and experiencing the effects of downsizing, should the manager, feeling stressed and overwhelmed, convey his despair to his workers? Or should the manager try to appear cheerful and act as if nothing is wrong? Barsade says it's possible for the manager to convey emotions that are both authentic and positive, saying something like, "I know you're worried. Things aren't looking good, but you know, we have a way out of this and we can work [on it] together." The employees will appreciate the honesty and take comfort in the optimism, she says.

Emotions as Valuable Data

Emotional intelligence -- buzz words already familiar in psychology and education -- is now talked about in business circles as well, Barsade says. Business schools are teaching executives how to be emotionally intelligent, and how to manage the emotions of their employees.

"The idea behind emotional intelligence in the workplace is that it is a skill through which employees treat emotions as valuable data in navigating a situation," according to the authors. "Let's say a sales manager has come up with an amazing idea that will increase corporate revenues by up to 200%, but knows his boss tends to be irritable and short-tempered in the

morning. Having emotional intelligence means that the manager will first recognize and consider this emotional fact about his boss. Despite the stunning nature of his idea -- and his own excitement -- he will regulate his own emotions, curb his enthusiasm and wait until the afternoon to approach his boss."

Barsade says research suggests that positive people tend to do better in the workplace, and it isn't just because people like them more than naysayers. "Positive people cognitively process more efficiently and more appropriately. If you're in a negative mood, a fair amount of processing is going to that mood. When you're in a positive mood, you're more open to taking in information and handling it effectively."

While you can't necessarily change your coworkers, people can take steps to avoid catching a negative mood, according to Barsade. They can tell themselves before attending a staff meeting that they are not going to be bothered by the person who shoots down everyone's ideas, or that they are not going to let that person become the focus of their attention at the meeting (reducing the possibility for contagion). Or they can change their office routine. Barsade gave the example of a manager who was dragged down at the start of every day when passing by the desk of an employee who either grunted or gave no acknowledgement. The manager took control and simply started following a different route through the office.

Barsade's research has taken her into a variety of workplaces, most recently long-term care facilities. Her research found that in facilities where the employees report having a positive workplace culture -- she calls it a "culture of love" -- the residents end up faring better than residents in facilities with a less compassionate and caring work culture. The residents reported experiencing less pain, made fewer trips to the emergency room, and were more likely to report being satisfied and in a positive mood.

Overconfidence Online

E-mail, instant messaging and video conferencing have introduced new challenges to the workplace, Barsade adds. E-mails and instant messages can be misunderstood because they are devoid of facial expressions, intonation and body language -- cues that help convey emotions. Some people, she says, work hard at making their emails neutral, with the downside of sometimes sounding curt. On the other hand, while some writers may add a smattering of exclamation points, question marks and capital letters in an attempt to convey more emotion, this can also be a dangerous route, particularly when attempting humor or sarcasm to drive home a point.

"How can emotions be best conveyed via these media?" the paper asks. "What is the effect of conveying emotionally charged messages via text, when these messages are more likely to be misconstrued? How must we re-think emotional contagion and other social processes in an organizational world in which many meetings take place online?"

The paper cites a study showing that people tend to be overconfident about their ability to convey the emotion they wish in an e-mail, particularly when they are trying to be funny or sarcastic. "Video conferencing, also increasing in its use, has more cues, but it is also not yet the same as interacting face to face, particularly in group situations. Given that these technologies continue to grow as a primary means of communication within the business world, it is crucial that we understand how the interpretation and communication of affect occurs in these contexts," the paper says.

Workplaces need to get smart about the best use of e-mail, Barsade states. Her advice is that "if something is important, and you know that the emotional context is going to be an issue, then pick up the phone; don't just rely on e-mails." And even the phone may not be good enough. "Sometimes, if it is really important, you just have to fly to where they are and meet them face-to-face to get the message across."

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