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Leader Affect Variability and Employee Engagement

Jiaqing Sun, PhD, Sandy J. Wayne, PhD, and Yan Liu, PhD

It is widely understood that a leader’s daily emotional expressions can have a significant impact on employees’ emotions and work performance. After observing angry or depressed leaders in the morning, employees may feel demotivated or anxious for the entire day and struggle to fully engage in their work. On the other hand, leaders who express positive emotions, such as enthusiasm and inspiration, in the morning can create a positive work mood that encourages employee performance for the rest of the day. But what about the variability of leaders’ emotional expressions across different days?

Imagine there are two leaders: one whose emotions remain quite stable with limited observable changes and another who displays a variety of different emotions over time. Which leader’s emotional expression has a more significant impact on employees’ emotions and performance on a given day?

Our recent research suggests that leaders’ positive emotional expressions on a particular day are more effective in promoting followers’ work engagement when the emotions are displayed by leaders who consistently display a narrower, rather than a broader, range of emotions. In this article, we’ll introduce our study findings and discuss the implications for leadership practices and organizational outcomes in real estate.

Understanding Leader Affect and Variability

Affect is an umbrella term that captures an individual’s overall emotional state over a short period of time and features two dimensions: positive affect and negative affect. Leader positive affect represents leaders’ overall positive emotions at a given moment, such as happiness, enthusiasm, joy, and excitement, while leader negative affect pertains to the extent to which a leader experiences negative emotions such as anger, depression, frustration, and sadness. Employees or followers may not discern their leaders’ true affect, as the leader may regulate or control his or her emotional expressions, but the affect perceived in a leader can significantly impact employees’ own affect for the day. Imagine that you see your leader with a long face in the morning; you might find yourself feeling less energetic or motivated for the rest of the day.

Some leaders with high emotional intelligence (EQ) may regulate their affect on a daily basis and display appropriate emotional expressions. These high EQ leaders are more likely to build
trust and inspire employees. Leaders who display positive emotions are better equipped to provide support and guidance. Additionally, high EQ leaders also understand when and how to display negative emotions. Although the expression of negative emotions may cause employees to experience similar negative emotions, it can also serve as an important signal that the employees should remain alert to the situation.

Our study focuses on the impact of leader daily emotional expression on employees’ work engagement, which represents employees’ positive, fulfilling, work-related states of mind. When employees fully engage in their work, they perform better and become more creative and productive.

It is unsurprising that positive emotional expressions from leaders can enhance and encourage employees’ positive affect and engagement in their work. Similarly, when leaders express negative affect, employees may experience similar negative emotions and, thus, find it difficult to engage in their work. Employees are impacted by leaders’ emotional expressions on a daily basis, so employee work engagement may also fluctuate in response to changes in leader affect. Taking into account these day-to-day changes in leader affect, we further consider another important factor—leader affect variability—defined as the extent to which a leader's emotions fluctuate over time, as observed by subordinates. We hypothesized that high leader affect variability—leader affect that changes frequently—may cause employees and followers to adapt to this change and become less reactive to leaders’ affective expressions.

Our Findings

The results confirm our hypotheses that a leader’s positive affect influences positive affect from employees, and a leader’s negative affect elicits negative affect from employees. Similar conclusions were also observed between leader affect and employee work engagement via the influence of the leader's effect on employee affect. Thus, the significant role of leader emotional state on employee emotions and work engagement is established.

Our research also shows that the higher the leader’s affect variability, the weaker the influence of positive leader affect on employee work engagement. However, no matter whether leader affect variability is high or low, leader negative affect impacts employee negative affect similarly, suggesting that a leader’s negative affect has a consistently lowering effect on employee affect and work engagement, regardless of how much leader affect varies day-to-day.

Maximizing Employee Engagement

To maximize employee engagement, leaders should keep in mind that their daily affective expressions are critical. For some employees, the first thing they do in the morning is to check leader’s emotions. According to affect-as-social-information theory, leader emotions are critical “social signals” for employees to understand their situation. Therefore, it is important for leaders
to maintain a consistent and positive emotional demeanor by setting clear expectations for behavior and emotions and by cultivating a workplace culture where leaders demonstrate emotional intelligence and positive attitudes. Encouraging open communication and feedback can also help to ensure that employees feel valued and understood, which in turn, can lead to increased engagement.

Overall, by prioritizing emotional consistency, leaders can more efficiently promote employees’ daily work engagement by expressing positive emotions.

**Real Estate Implications**

Real estate leaders can benefit from understanding how their affect variability impacts daily employee work engagement. In a highly competitive field like real estate, where performance and results are crucial, maintaining a positive affect and avoiding emotional swings can be key to success. However, this is easier said than done. It requires leaders to improve their affect regulation abilities and express genuinely positive emotions to their followers. If a leader needs to expend significant effort in expressing positive affect to employees, it likely leads to burnout.

We highlight the importance of organizational culture in shaping leader affect and affect variability. Team collaboration is essential in real estate, so a positive organizational culture can help leaders maintain a consistent and positive affect, leading to better engagement and productivity from their teams. By creating a supportive and positive culture, leaders can also attract and retain top talent, which is crucial for success in the highly competitive industry. The mutual support between leaders and team members can thus create a positive ambiance that helps cultivate a positive mood within the team.

To improve emotional intelligence, leaders can seek feedback from their team and engage in regular self-reflection to better understand how emotions impact the team. Leaders can also prioritize building positive relationships with teams by creating supportive work environments. By implementing these strategies, real estate leaders can improve leadership effectiveness and drive sales results.

**Recommended Reading**


**Reference**

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Dr. Jiaqing Sun’s (PhD in Management – University of Illinois at Chicago & PhD in Social Psychology – Beijing Normal University) research focuses on emotional and attributional processes in leader-follower interactions. Specifically, her research explores how employees and leaders perceive their relationships and interpret what happens between them. Her recent research sheds light on employees’ feelings of gratitude relating to leaders’ behaviors, especially for the special treatment received from servant leaders. Her papers have been published in top journals, such as Journal of Applied Psychology and Journal of Personality and Social Psychology.

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