

Emotions at Work

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by Jack Zenger, Joe Folkman, and Scott Edinger

Emotions are powerful drivers of behavior

The basketball team went into the locker room at half time 14 points behind. Body language signaled that they were discouraged and frustrated. They had played badly. When they came running back on the floor after the half-time break ended there was a palpable difference. They looked more determined and confident. As the second half began it was obvious that they were scrambling hard for every ball, trying to

intercept every pass, and following up on every shot. There was an intensity in their play that was totally absent in the first half. The point gap was narrowed. Then they slipped ahead and finally won the game.

What happened? Something was said and done in the locker room that changed behavior. Maybe it was something said by one of the players. More likely it was something the coach said or the coach's candid observations regard-

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ing ways the team played during the first half. Bottom line, their emotions had been touched in some way that clearly led them to behave differently.

Emotions are strongly correlated with performance and productivity

One scholar wrote:

"In the last two decades, over 500 studies conducted around the world have revealed the benefits of optimism in creating superior achievement in various settings (at work, in school, and in sports). Optimism has been able to distinguish the high performers from the low performers in various domains of achievement. In

sports, optimism predicts performance among nationally ranked college swimmers. In academia, optimism predicts college grades and dropping out.

In the business world, optimism predicts sales productivity among salespeople in virtually every industry. Studies conducted with two insurance companies... found that salespeople with optimistic explanations of what was happening to them went on to sell significantly more insurance and were less likely to quit than

those with pessimistic explanations. To be exact, the optimistic salespeople sold 35 percent more insurance than the pessimists. Also, the pessimists were twice as likely as the optimists to quit by the end of their first year.

*Pilot research with salespeople in various industries—telecommunications, real estate, office products, auto sales, banking, and others—have found results similar to the insurance research. Optimists out-sold the pessimists by 20 to 40 percent. Optimism has an impact on sales productivity regardless of the industry, whenever persistence is to overcome adversity."*¹

With this quote in mind, we conducted research on the impact of inspiration on productivity. Here are our conclusions:

Impact of Inspiration on Productivity

Employees were assessed on their perceptions of the productivity in their work group. They also rated their immediate manager on inspiration. The five items assessing productivity are as follows:

¹Peter Schulman, "Applying 'Learned Optimism' to Increase Sales Productivity," *University of Pennsylvania Journal of Personal Selling & Sales Management*, Winter 1999 p.31.

- In my business unit or department, we are striving to continually improve work processes, procedures, and work flows to enhance overall productivity.
- Conditions in my job allow me to be as productive as I can be.
- In my business unit/department, there is very little wasted time because people can be productive without delays or distractions.
- Meetings I attend are a productive use of my time.
- My business unit/department is run efficiently.

Impact of Inspiration on Productivity

Leaders strongly impact employee's feelings of commitment and engagement

Our research has provided strong evidence for the relationship between leadership and levels of employee commitment. Figure 1 summarizes that research. It has been replicated in various industries, within public and private sector organizations, and on several continents around the world. The results are essentially identical.

Leaders emotionally connect with their team in many ways

We analyzed data from approximately 11,000 leaders. From this group we selected the leaders who scored in the top 10 percent for “inspires and motivates.” With this group of approximately 1,100 we conducted an analysis of the varying ways the members of the group went about inspiring people with whom they worked. By separating the top 10 percent from the rest and then seeking those items that best separated these two groups,

we found six clusters of behaviors. These clusters were unique behaviors that leaders used to connect with their group.

We arbitrarily described these six behavioral styles as:

1. Enthusiast
2. Visionary
3. Involver
4. Expert
5. Principled
6. Driver

Fig. 1 – Leadership Effectiveness vs. Employee Engagement



Emotions focus people's attention on a topic. They move the person to act and overcome the inertia that often holds them back.

This analysis confirms that leaders can use a variety of ways to inspire and motivate their colleagues. When people think of highly inspiring behavior, they often zero in on the first cluster having to do with enthusiasm. Without question the highly energetic, enthusiastic cheerleader is perceived by most as inspiring. While that behavior is the stereotype that many have of leaders who make an emotional connection, it is not typical of the majority of leaders we know. The really good news is that a wide variety of behaviors work to inspire others.

Leaving aside the style with which the leaders connect with the team, there is also the question of the substance of what they do. Our research addressed that as well. We examined those leaders who received the highest scores from their managers, peers, and direct reports on the items that measured “inspires and motivates to high performance.” We then determined the other behaviors that were most highly correlated with “inspires and motivates.” We wanted to know what distinguished those leaders

who were seen as extremely motivating and inspiring.

The specific actions that those leaders take include:

1. Setting stretch goals.
2. Providing clear vision and direction.
3. Communicating powerfully and profitably.
4. Developing others.
5. Encouraging teamwork and collaboration.
6. Fostering innovation.

Emotions are the “switch” that connects the leader with the group

Anyone who has taken a class in chemistry has heard about catalysts. This term describes how an agent in a chemical reaction accelerates the speed or the magnitude of the reaction. Emotions are the catalytic agent in relationships. Emotions focus people's attention on a topic. They move the person to act and overcome the inertia that often holds them back.

In our book *The Inspiring Leader*, we wrote:

“Emotions and inspiration are two sides of the same coin. The entire topic of a leader’s ability to inspire [direct reports] comes down to the leader’s willingness and ability to both be aware of and to comfortably use emotion. One broad and extremely important kind of emotion is ‘enthusiasm.’ We think of enthusiasm as describing a feeling of excitement, anticipation, and elation about some prospect for the future.”

In short, if you want to be more inspirational, understand that you have to become more comfortable in the world of emotions, feelings, and moods. This may sound like a formidable task. You may also be thinking to yourself, “I am what I am,” “I’m too old to change,” or, “I don’t want to get it to all this squishy emotion stuff.” Yet the late Andrall Pearson, a former McKinsey Director and CEO of PepsiCo and later Yum!, declared that, “emotion is a company’s secret competitive edge.”²

Emotions are extremely contagious

In 2002, Sigal Barsade of Yale University examined the effect of emotional contagion within the group context. In her experiment, a trained actor was placed within group contexts and directed to participate in the groups’ activities while enacting varying levels of pleasantness and energy. The groups were working to assign a pay bonus. They had a fixed amount of money they could spend and had to allocate it based on a set of performance criteria. After the activities were completed, participants were asked to complete self-assessments of their mood. Results of the study clearly suggested that the effect of one group member’s emotions had an unconscious effect on the mood of the other group members. This held true both for “positive” and “negative” moods.

The Effect of Mood

Given that mood is contagious, one important consideration is the effect of mood on performance. Some authors focus on the idea that “positive” moods

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²John H. Zenger, Joseph R. Folkman and Scott K. Edinger, *The Inspiring Leader*, McGraw-Hill, New York, 2009

have a positive effect on performance, but conversely, a “negative” mood can also affect performance.

In the Barsade study discussed above, a negative group member seemed to disrupt the group and reduce efficacy, while having a positive group member was associated with increased cooperation, fewer group conflicts, and heightened task performance. Likewise, in a similar study, Alice Isen (1993) assessed radiologists, finding positive mood enhanced their accuracy. Positive mood has a far-reaching effect on work performance, supervision, decision-making, and even on team members voluntarily acting for the good of the organization.

The leader's emotions are highly contagious

There are different explanations of the effect that position and authority have on mood contagion. It may be that those with authority have greater impact. Maybe it has to do with those who are liked or respected having a greater effect. What is clear is that leaders affect the group mood.

“In a study of the influence of the contagion of mood of a group leader on group members, the positive mood of the leader positively influenced group members at both the individual and collective level, with the opposite for a leader's negative mood. The leader's positive mood also had a subsequent influence on group coordination and effort.”

Conclusion

Like it or not, emotions play a big role in every aspect of our lives. They strongly impact our own productivity and performance, and the emotions of one person are highly infectious to everyone contacted. Leaders who recognize the power of making an emotional connection with their associates magnify their impact. Fortunately, there are many ways for that emotional connection to occur. The broader the repertoire, the greater the leader's impact because it would be rare to have a group of direct reports who would all be touched by the same approach. It truly is possible for anyone to be an inspiring leader.

About Us

Zenger Folkman relentlessly seeks to rise above the inconsistent, and sometimes misleading, nature of popular leadership philosophies and beliefs brought on by opinion. The discipline of leadership and those who pursue it deserve better. Our most valuable asset is the expertise of combining hard data and statistical analysis with logical explanations and actionable application that help individual leaders thrive and organizations succeed.