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## The many faces of emotional leadership

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### Abstract

This article focuses heavily on overviewing and analyzing the seven articles in this special issue on emotions and leadership. The articles are discussed in terms of four key leadership issues. The first issue concerns the traits necessary for leadership. Empathy is shown to be an important variable that is central to both emotional intelligence and leadership emergence. The second issue concerns the relationship of emotions to the leadership process. It is argued that a key leadership function is to manage the emotions of group members, especially with regard to feelings related to frustration and optimism. The third issue involves our perceptions about leaders. Leaders' emotional displays are demonstrated to have a larger impact on perceptions of leaders than the content of the leaders' messages, at least in some circumstances. The fourth area involves the relationship between leadership and performance. Leaders' influences upon emotional process variables are found to have a large impact on performance. The article develops several propositions that summarize the content of this special issue and, in addition, develops new propositions that suggest future areas of research. The article concludes by touching on the review process and acknowledges the reviewers for this special issue.

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### 1. Introduction to the special issue

Welcome to the special issue of *The Leadership Quarterly* on emotions and leadership. There are only seven articles in this special issue, yet these articles have managed to address a wide range of the key issues concerning emotions and leadership. Together, the articles have examined leadership traits, perceptions of leaders, leadership emergence, the effects of

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leadership on productivity, the leadership process, satisfaction with leadership, climate, and other related topics. These topics constitute the different “faces” of leadership.

It is important to realize that our view of leadership may vary considerably according to which face we are looking at. As Lord, De Vader, and Alliger (1986) have pointed out, there could be big differences among (1) our perceptions of the traits that lead to leader emergence, (2) the actual traits that help actors emerge as leaders in groups, and (3) the traits that help leaders increase productivity. For example, it is quite possible that we have stereotypical expectations about leaders and perceive them in unrealistic ways. Fortunately, Lord et al. concluded that there is some consistency among these areas, at least with regard to intelligence. He and his colleagues reviewed studies which demonstrated that we expect leaders to be more intelligent than followers, that the group members with higher IQs are more likely to emerge as leaders, and that the intelligence of the leader correlates well with productivity. They found that the effect size for intelligence varied according to which issue was being addressed. However, looking at this through our “faces” analogy, the effects for intelligence are similar enough to suggest that the different faces for these issues are more like snapshots of the same individual wearing different expressions, rather than portraits of totally different leaders.

Are the faces different, however, when it comes to other aspects of leadership? Many leadership models posit that there are two different types of leaders—task and relationship leaders. It is easy to imagine that task leaders wear serious expressions and are high on emotional management traits related to delay of gratification and self-motivation. In contrast, socio-emotional leaders may wear friendly expressions and be high on emotions related to empathy.

The articles published in this issue are reassuring in their consistency about which emotions are important for leadership. Empathy is an important trait for leaders who manage with emotion. Evidence is also provided that empathy contributes to the cognitive skills used by task leaders. Likewise, the articles generally agree that it is important for leaders to manage their group members’ emotions, particularly with regard to emotions related to optimism and frustration. This consistency is particularly impressive given the diverse methods used by the researchers, the different issues they examined, and the varied populations they sampled. The articles have used both laboratory and field studies, and both quantitative and qualitative research methods. They have used rival and competing scales to measure empathy. They have used student samples as well as working adults, and have surveyed people in the United States and abroad. Together, these articles help us understand the emotions displayed on the different faces of leadership.

Even a casual reading of the following articles will reveal how well they fit in with current leadership theories. I think this is because leadership theorists never abandoned their belief in the importance of emotions during the long decades when psychologists as well as other management scholars were jumping on the cognitive bandwagon. Leadership scholars have tended to take a balanced approach that realizes the importance of both cognitive and emotional processes. This approach is reflected in the models that emphasize two types of leaders, such as task and socio-emotional leaders. Task leaders handle tasks that are primarily cognitive in nature, such as planning and organizing. However, these models also argue that relationship or socio-emotional leaders are also important and, according to the model of

Fiedler, Chemers, and Mahar (1977), should even be the main leader in charge depending upon which contingency factors are present. Likewise, transformational leadership theorists have always maintained the importance of leaders' influence on followers' emotional states (Bass & Avolio, 1994; Tichy & Devanna, 1986; Yammarino, Spangler, & Bass, 1993).

In the following sections, I will discuss several key leadership issues and show how the authors have demonstrated that emotions play an important part in our understanding of these leadership areas. I will also mention some basic processes that have not been examined by the articles in this edition, but that need to be developed in order for us to have a complete picture of the leadership process. Consequently, I will develop several propositions for future research.

## 2. The key leadership issues

### 2.1. *Leadership traits and emotions*

Which traits related to emotions are important to leadership? Salovey and Mayer's (1990) concept of emotional intelligence has generated considerable excitement among both practitioners and academics. Their most recent definitions of emotional intelligence emphasize that it has four parts: (1) the ability to perceive one's own emotions; (2) the ability to perceive others' emotions; (3) the ability to manage one's own emotions; and (4) the ability to manage others' emotions (Mayer & Salovey, 1997; Salovey & Mayer, 1990). Moreover, they argue that empathy, defined as "the ability to comprehend another's feelings and to reexperience them oneself," is a central characteristic of emotional intelligence (Salovey & Mayer, 1990, p. 194). The two studies in this issue that examine personality traits and leadership emergence both focus on empathy. Kellet, Humphrey, and Sleeth found that displaying empathy is one of the "two routes to leadership," and that empathy is a very good predictor of leadership emergence. Wolff, Pescosolido, and Druskat also found that empathy played an important role in leadership emergence. In their model, empathy was an important trait that enabled both task- and relationship-oriented skills, and that these skills in turn lead to leadership emergence.

Given the considerable research that demonstrates that there are two different types of leaders (task and relationship), it makes sense to hypothesize that the different leadership types will require different emotional leadership skills. The Kellet, Humphrey, and Sleeth article follows the straightforward assumption that empathy would have its main impact on relationship-oriented leadership. However, the Wolff, Pescosolido, and Urch Druskat article insightfully argues that empathy contributes to the cognitive skills necessary for task leadership.

Task leaders must organize and plan group activities. In confusing situations, leaders must develop a vision that guides members around obstacles and onto the path that leads to success. As Wolff et al. observe, this requires "pattern recognition, defined as the ability to synthesize information and identify patterns in a collection of unorganized information" (Boyatzis, 1982). They also found that empathy is a good predictor of perspective taking, which they argue is necessary for problem solving. Following Boland and Tenkasi (1995), they define perspective taking as "analyzing, discerning, and considering the merits of another's point of

view.” Empathy, which is the desire to understand others’ feelings and the ability to do so, would naturally contribute to both pattern recognition and problem solving.

Although most researchers probably follow the intuitively simple premise that empathy works mostly through relationship-oriented leadership, the Wolff et al. study suggests that the actual effects of empathy may be more far-reaching. The limited research in this area has not been entirely consistent. For example, in the Kellet, Humphrey, and Sleeth article, empathy was negatively related to complex task performance. Their findings are consistent with the traditional distinction between task- and relationship-oriented leadership as defined by Fiedler et al. (1977). Fiedler et al. argue that task-motivated leaders rate their least preferred coworkers relatively low. Hence, these leaders may well be low on empathy. Kellet et al. speculate that the actual relationship between empathy and task leadership may depend upon the type of work performed, and that considering task and environmental factors may explain inconsistent findings. In addition, it must be pointed out that Wolff et al. did not hypothesize, nor did they find, any direct relationship between empathy and their measure of leadership emergence (percentage of votes as the leader). Rather, they found that empathy had its effects by influencing task-related cognitive processes. So based on their model, we would not expect any direct unmediated relationships between empathy and task leadership.

The above argument raises the question: What other emotional intelligence skills would a task leader require? The ability to manage one’s own emotions is one of the four components of emotional intelligence. This may be especially important to task leaders, who must delay gratification while working long hours on tasks, overcome their frustrations when encountering problems, maintain confidence when facing difficult goals, and in general marshal enthusiasm for completing their work tasks. The two articles in this issue on leadership emergence have not addressed the issue of how the different components of emotional intelligence relate to the different types of leadership, and this is an issue that still needs considerable investigation.

It may also be useful to examine the relationship between emotional intelligence dimensions and charismatic, transformational leadership. Although the majority of people may naturally fall into either the task- or relationship-oriented categories, a small but important number of people may fall into the transformational leadership category. Bales (1950) argued that few people are high on both his task (Forward–Backward) and relationship (Positive–Negative) dimensions because time spent on one dimension reduces the time available to spend on the other dimension. Moreover, task-oriented statements tend to be factual and thus neutral in emotional tone. Likewise, statements high on the assertiveness (Upward–Downward) dimension tend to work against being perceived as high on the positive dimension because assertive statements, which seek to direct and control others, could easily create negative feelings. Because few individuals can successfully balance both task and relationship behaviors, Bales argued that most successful groups have separate task and socio-emotional leaders. However, he did find that some people, by carefully balancing their statements across the different dimensions, could achieve a UPF rating. The UPF profile is characteristic of charismatic leaders.

Many recent researchers tend to use the terms transformational leadership and charismatic leadership virtually interchangeably, or with charisma as a transformational component (e.g., Bass & Avolio, 1994; Tichy & Devanna, 1986; Yammarino et al., 1993). The term

transformational leader more accurately describes leaders who change organizations or society by developing a vision and plan for the future. Often, transformational leadership occurs under crisis situations when most people are confused and uncertain about what to do. Clearly, transformational leaders need strong emotional self-management in order to persevere under difficult circumstances. Transformational leaders show strong task leadership under these situations by scanning the environment, grasping the key elements, and developing a plan—the vision—that they transmit to their followers.

By planning, organizing, and making decisions, transformational leaders perform many of the same functions that task leaders do. However, transformational leadership theorists are quick to distinguish between transformational leaders and transactional leaders. The latter fit the traditional definition of task leaders in that they rely on routine rewards and procedures to motivate their followers. In contrast, transformational leaders are distinguished by their ability to emotionally involve their followers.

In this issue, the article by McColl-Kennedy and Anderson examines how transformational leaders influence and manage the emotions of employees. I discuss this article in more depth in the Emotions and Leadership Processes section. However, at this point, I simply wish to point out that their article supports the argument that transformational leaders provide both task and emotional leadership. The McColl-Kennedy and Anderson article does not address the relationship between emotional intelligence and transformational leadership, but it is reasonable to conclude from their research that transformational leaders need the talents of socio-emotional leaders as well as task leaders.

Thus, the following propositions:

**Proposition 1a:** *Group members high on empathy will be more likely to emerge as socio-emotional leaders.*

**Proposition 1b:** *Group members high on emotional self-management will be more likely to emerge as task leaders.*

**Proposition 1c:** *Group members high on both empathy and emotional self-management will be more likely to emerge as transformational leaders.*

## 2.2. *Emotions and leadership processes*

Three of the articles in this special issue examine leadership processes. According to all three articles, one of the key duties of leaders is to manage the emotions of group members. This duty relates to the previously described fourth component of emotional intelligence, which is the ability to manage others' emotions (Mayer & Salovey, 1997; Salovey & Mayer, 1990). Naturally, a complete listing of important leadership functions would include planning, organizing, controlling, and so forth. However, these three articles make it clear that managing group members' emotions is not a peripheral task with little relevance to productivity, but is instead one of the main ways leaders influence performance.

The article by McColl-Kennedy and Anderson shows that, “transformational leadership has a significant direct influence on frustration and optimism.” Thus, their article helps determine

which emotions managers should be concerned with. Previous research has demonstrated that transformational leaders score higher on optimism than other types of leaders (Spreitzer & Quinn, 1996). Because transformational leaders set challenging goals, often in the midst of crisis, it is imperative that they convince their members that the goals are obtainable. Maintaining optimistic moods is crucial to this sense of success. McColl-Kennedy and Anderson cite the statement of Berson, Shamair, Avolio, and Popper (2001, p. 56) that transformational leaders “instill optimism, confidence, and faith in their followers by suggesting that although their challenges appear formidable, they can be successful by working together to create a better future.” McColl-Kennedy and Anderson found that transformation leadership style had a structural model correlation of .44 with group members’ optimism.

Few important goals can be achieved without encountering frustrating events. Indeed, a key component of emotional intelligence is the ability to soothe oneself when upset, or—when leading groups—to soothe others who are upset (Goleman, 1995, 1998). Thus, McColl-Kennedy and Anderson hypothesized that one of the key duties of leaders is to help members cope with frustration. They found that leadership style had a structural model correlation of  $-.52$  with frustration. As discussed in the Leadership, Emotions, and Performance section, they found that the ability of leaders to influence feelings of frustration and optimism had a large influence on performance.

Pirola-Merlo, Hartel, and Mann also examined the ability of leaders to help team members cope with frustration. They examined the effects of obstacles and negative events on the affective team climate and team performance of R&D teams. Their research is based, in part, on Affective Events Theory as developed by Weiss and Cropanzano (1996). According to this theory, each individual tends to have an average affective mood level, depending on his or her personality, with some tending to be negative and others more positive. However, this average mood level can be disturbed by positive or negative events at work. Thus, Pirola-Merlo et al. posited that it is the job of leaders to help team members cope with these negative events. Their model argues that leaders can have a major impact on the overall affective tone of team members, as measured by team climate. Their path analysis demonstrated that leadership had a very substantial influence on team climate, with a coefficient of .52. They also found that facilitative and transformational leadership suppressed the negative effects of obstacles on climate. As will be discussed in the Leadership, Emotions, and Performance section, the ability of leaders to influence climate strongly influenced performance.

The third article on leadership processes, by Pescosolido, also proposes that leaders function as managers of group emotions. He argues that leaders manage emotions in two ways. First, during times of ambiguity, leaders develop an interpretation of the emotional response that best matches the group’s needs; leaders then convey this response by modeling the appropriate emotions. Second, he argues that leaders increase group solidarity and morale by creating shared emotional experiences. Emotional contagion from leaders to followers plays an important part in this process (Kelly & Barsade, 2001).

Pescosolido also demonstrates through a supplementary quantitative analysis that groups that have norms of open emotional expression increase leaders’ ability to manage group emotions. He illustrates his theories by a qualitative analysis of 20 different groups. From his description of events, it is clear that the leader’s ability to handle feelings of frustration, and to

create feelings of optimism, is of paramount importance. In several examples, the leader's displays of confidence helped group members cope with potentially frustrating events. Thus, his qualitative findings are very consistent with the empirical field study conducted by McColl-Kennedy and Anderson.

Additionally, Pescosolido theorizes that members high in empathy will be more likely to engage in the management of emotions, and thus to emerge as leaders. His case examples support his theory, and are also supportive of the two articles on empathy written by Kellet et al. and Wolff et al.

The three studies are consistent in their support of Proposition 2a, and two of them are supportive of Proposition 2b:

**Proposition 2a:** *The management of group members' emotions is a major leadership function.*

**Proposition 2b:** *Feelings related to frustration and optimism are two of the most important emotions for leaders to manage.*

### 2.3. *Emotions and perceptions of leadership*

In this special issue, there are two studies by Ashkanasy and his colleagues that have looked at how emotions influence how we perceive leaders. Newcombe and Ashkanasy tested whether facial expressions influence our perceptions of leaders. The effects they found for emotional expressions are really quite startling in terms of their size because they found that emotional expressions were more important than the objective content of the message. In their study, participants watched videotapes in which leaders gave either positive or negative feedback to a subordinate.

The four professional actors who portrayed the leaders read scripts, and this allowed them to control for the objective message. Each actor made two films for each feedback condition, one in which he or she used positive facial expressions, and the other in which negative facial expressions were used. This resulted in congruent (e.g., positive facial expressions, positive feedback) as well as incongruent (e.g., positive facial expressions, negative feedback) conditions. The actors' facial expressions had stronger effects on observers' ratings of the actors' leadership than did the objective content of the message. Thus, observers rated the actors who portrayed positive facial expressions higher than those who used negative expressions regardless of whether they were giving positive or negative feedback.

Newcombe and Ashkanasy also hypothesized and found a very interesting congruence effect: leaders who gave positive feedback but with negative facial expressions were rated lower than those who gave negative feedback with negative expressions. They predicted this effect because we often use body language and facial expressions as clues to people's real feelings. Someone who praises us but who shows signs of feeling negative emotions is likely to be seen as hypocritical and insincere.

The second article on perceptions, by Dasborough and Ashkanasy, is a theory piece that discusses attributions about leaders' intentions. They maintain that leadership is "intrinsically an emotional process, where leaders display emotion, and attempt to evoke emotion in their

members.” The model they develop is a comprehensive one and includes many elements besides emotional displays. However, their model emphasizes how we use leaders’ emotional displays to help us make attributions about their sincerity. According to their model, leaders who are perceived as making changes to benefit the organization as a whole would be labeled as true transformational leaders, whereas those who are perceived as manipulative and self-serving would be seen as pseudo-transformational leaders. Leaders who are high in emotional intelligence should be better able to manage the impressions they give others; likewise, followers high in emotional intelligence should be better able to detect deception. The state affect, or mood, of both followers and leaders should also influence the attribution process. Moreover, member affect/liking for the leader should have a substantial impact on their attributions as well.

As a way of summarizing and highlighting the core finding from both articles, I state the following propositions:

**Proposition 3a:** *Organizational members who display positive emotions will be rated higher on leadership than will those who display negative emotions.*

**Proposition 3b:** *Followers will use leaders’ emotional displays as key indicators of leaders’ intentions and sincerity.*

However, because the relationship between emotions and attributions is one of my own research areas, I would like to extend another proposition that addresses an area omitted in both papers by Ashkanasy et al. Although leaders are likely to be heavily judged by their emotional displays, as demonstrated by Newcombe and Ashkanasy, leaders’ emotional displays are likely to be due to their working environments as well as to their personalities. For example, let us take the type of situation studied by Newcombe and Ashkanasy, in which a manager is giving performance feedback to a subordinate. As they demonstrated, if the manager is displaying positive affect, he or she is likely to be rated highly by observers regardless of whether he or she is giving positive or negative feedback. The underlying assumption made by observers in this case is likely to be that the positive emotions displayed by the manager represent good will towards the subordinate.

Now let us take the case of a manager who is having a bad day. Some employees were late for work, thus making him or her worry for half an hour about whether to call in temporary (and poorly trained) help. In addition, an expensive piece of equipment has broken down, and the manager is having trouble reaching a qualified technician to make repairs. As the manager picks up the phone to make another call, the manager is interrupted by a subordinate who has just walked in. Belatedly, the manager realizes that the employee is there for a scheduled performance appraisal.

The manager may in fact feel quite favorably towards this particular subordinate and may read him or her a very favorable performance appraisal. However, it may take the manager a few minutes to overcome the unpleasant feelings generated by the morning’s events. The manager’s body language and facial expressions may convey subtle signs of irritation, even if the manager is forcing a smile and saying how much the employee’s good work is appreciated. This occurrence would correspond to the situation studied by Newcombe and Ashkanasy in



which the actor delivered positive feedback while displaying negative emotions. This disconnect resulted in the lowest rating of the four conditions, lower even than the situation in which the manager gave negative feedback accompanied by negative emotional displays.

As Affective Events Theory indicates, work events can disrupt an employee's normal, or typical, feelings (Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996). Thus, in many cases, the use of a leader's emotional displays may produce biased results. This occurrence is a direct application of the fundamental attribution error to work situations (Humphrey, 1985; Martinko & Gardner, 1987), in which behaviors caused by the work environment are overattributed to the dispositions of the actor. Humphrey (1985) labeled emotional displays that are caused by the job characteristics and work environment "secondary work behaviors" because they are not, strictly speaking, part of the task itself but are still a typical work behavior. Combining this stream of research with Newcombe and Ashkanasy's findings leads to the following proposition:

**Proposition 3c:** *Leaders who perform intrinsically unpleasant tasks will consequently experience and display unpleasant emotions, and thus will be rated lower than leaders who perform intrinsically pleasant tasks.*

#### 2.4. Leadership, emotions, and performance

Two of the articles in this issue examined the degree to which leaders' management of their subordinates' emotions influenced performance. In addition, a third article, the one by Pescosolido, provided case examples that illustrated ways in which the management of emotions contributed to effective performance. As mentioned earlier, the article by McColl-Kennedy and Anderson found that leadership style had a substantial impact on feelings of frustration (structural model correlations of  $-.52$ ) and on feelings of optimism ( $.44$ ). In turn, feelings of frustration and optimism had substantial influences on performance ( $-.28$  and  $.17$ , respectively). Performance in their study was measured by an objective indicator of sales performance. Overall, these results are quite impressive.

The article by Pirola-Merlo, Hartel, and Mann examined the impact of leadership on affective group tone (as measured by team climate) and performance in R&D teams. Their path analysis revealed that leadership had a strong influence on team climate ( $.52$ ), which in turn strongly influenced team performance ( $.71$ ). Clearly, the results for both studies demonstrate that leaders who effectively manage their group members' emotional processes can have a large influence on performance.

Their results can be summarized in the following proposition:

**Proposition 4a:** *The management of group members' emotional states (such as feelings of frustration and optimism) is a major way leaders influence performance.*

Both studies found that the effects of transformational leadership were fully mediated by the emotional process variables. This mediation is consistent with many models of transformational leadership, which emphasize how transformational leaders motivate their employees to

higher levels of performance. However, I suspect that the degree to which emotional process variables fully mediate the impact of leadership style depends upon the task characteristics of the leadership environment. In many situations, managers are in a curious situation because they are responsible for the group's productivity, but they themselves do not do the work.

From this perspective, it makes sense that a manager's main influence is on group process variables related to emotions such as optimism and frustration. This scenario matches the industry studied by McColl-Kennedy and Anderson because the sales managers relied on their employees to make sales. However, the sales managers could still play an important role in motivating employees and helping them cope with the frustrations inherent in dealing with rude clients. A similar scenario may apply to the research and development teams studied by Pirola-Merlo, Hartel, and Mann. These team members are experts and may not feel the need for task direction from their leaders.

Nevertheless, there may still be many situations in which group members depend on their leaders for insight into technical problems or tricky issues. Under these circumstances, leaders may have direct unmediated influences on performance as well as indirect influences through group process variables. Transformational leadership theory also mentions the role that leaders play in developing plans and visions; clearly, the quality of these plans should influence performance. Although this special issue is devoted to the relationship between emotions and leadership, I wish to maintain a balanced view that recognizes the importance of cognitive processes as well. Thus, my last proposition:

**Proposition 4b:** *The degree to which emotional processes fully mediate the effects of leadership style will depend on task characteristics and the degree to which leaders must provide plans and task direction.*

### 3. Conclusions

Together, the seven articles in this special issue have successfully demonstrated that emotions are related to several of the key issues in leadership research. First, two of the quantitative articles have provided evidence that empathy is an important trait that predicts well to leadership emergence. In addition, an article using qualitative methods also found that empathy played a role in leadership emergence. Second, three articles have concluded that the management of group members' emotions is an important part of the leadership process. Third, an empirical study found that emotional displays have large effects on our perceptions of leaders, and this finding has been backed up by the theoretical literature review in a separate article. Finally, two of the studies found that leaders who successfully manage group processes can substantially influence performance.

Although these seven articles have addressed a wide range of leadership issues, there are still many issues to be explored. I have raised some of these issues in this introductory article, but there are many others as well. Research into the relationship between emotions and leadership is only just beginning, so there should be grounds for future research for many years to come.

I have entitled this introductory article, “The many faces of emotional leadership, ” and raised the issue of what faces or expressions leaders should display. This faces issue raises the question of what face or expression researchers should wear as they continue research into this area. The answer is clear: confident faces, full of hope and optimism.

## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the reviewers for the special issue on leadership and emotions. Every reviewer gave very detailed and useful comments. As the editor, I could compare the manuscripts before and after the revisions, and it was clear that all of the papers had been improved by the reviewers’ comments. In their letters to me, the authors indicated that they felt their papers had been improved by the comments as well, and cited specific suggestions that had been helpful. Most of the reviewers provided recommendations on multiple papers for me, and I greatly appreciate their “double duty.” It also is important to note that the Kellet, Humphrey, and Sleeth manuscript was double-blind-reviewed by three reviewers selected by Jerry Hunt, the senior editor, who also managed the review process.

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