

I Second That Emotion: Effects of Emotional Contagion and Affect at Work on Leader and Follower Outcomes

Original Publication by Stefanie K. Johnson

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Charismatic leadership has, through a number of studies, been shown to be associated with positive follower outcomes. Stefanie K. Johnson at the University of Colorado, Denver School of Business, examines the effects of charismatic leadership and emotional contagion on positive and negative follower outcomes. According to Johnson, charismatic leadership is defined by three central components: attributed charisma (the personal power of a given leader), idealized influence (leader behavior as a role model for subordinates), and inspiration motivation (the use of those behaviors as a way of instilling a collective sense of mission and purpose within a given group). Furthermore, the article suggests that followers are perhaps most affected by a given leader's ability to influence follower goals and self esteem. Johnson also defines emotional contagion as an "unconscious transfer of emotions between individuals" that is essentially the result of an "individual's tendency to mimic and synchronize the facial expressions, vocalizations, postures, and movements of others." In the area of organizational leadership, Johnson predicts that due to the fact that leaders are typically "salient" individuals, and that followers are typically highly aware of their superiors' feelings, emotions should transfer easily from leaders to followers and vice versa. This transfer of emotions is ultimately dependent on individual susceptibility to others' facial, vocal etc. expressions of emotion.

With regard to individual susceptibility to emotional contagion, Johnson hypothesizes that as follower susceptibility to emotional contagion increases, leaders will be better able to influence (either negatively or positively) follower affects. Further, Johnson also hypothesizes that increased levels of charismatic leadership will result in increased follower positive affect, behavior, and outcomes. In terms of job performance, Johnson examines the concept of Organizational Citizenship Behavior (OCB). According to the article, OCBs are individual behaviors that promote organizational growth such as volunteering habits, individuals helping each other within organizations, etc. Johnson suggests that charismatic leadership may promote such behaviors as well as a sense of dedication to the organization by followers. In her hypothesis, Johnson predicts that if followers are positively affected at work, then they will exhibit OCB behaviors. Further, Johnson hypothesizes that follower perceptions of charismatic leadership will positively correlate with OCB type behaviors.

The next section of the article turns to the methodology used to test these and other hypotheses. Johnson's experiment utilized a large public school district for a field test of these hypotheses about the impact of leaders (principals) affect on follower (teachers) affect. Johnson's experiment utilized a survey methodology which asked teachers to report on their own susceptibility to emotional contagion, as well as positive and negative affect at work. Furthermore, a 50 item "Big 5" survey of teacher personality traits was used as a control variable. Among the types of surveys used was the Job Affect Scale Survey, a 20 item measure of positive and negative affect to determine how participants felt at work. Also used was a

Positive and Negative Affectivity Scale, as well as a Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire that measured “idealized influence, inspiration motivation, and attributed charisma.” The article then discusses the results of the experiment. To analyze the results of the experiment, hierarchical linear modeling was used. To address the inherent response bias evident in the teacher self reports, school turnover of both those schools that participated in the experiment and those that did not was examined. Furthermore, the number of new teachers, economic ratings, and overall rating of the schools within the given district were examined. According to the statistical results presented by Johnson in the article, the results supported the hypothesis that as “principal positive affect at work increased, so did the relationship between teacher susceptibility to emotional contagion, and teacher positive affect at work.” That is, leaders’ positive affect at work influenced followers’ positive affect at work through emotional contagion, but only for followers who reported being susceptible to emotional contagion. According to the research presented in the article the hypothesis that the same correlation exists between negative leader affect, negative follower affect, and emotional contagion was not established. Johnson’s research upheld the other hypotheses that negative and positive follower affect would be related to leader charismatic leadership and OCB. According to the results, positive affect at work predicted OCB, though negative affect did not.

The next section of the article then summarizes the importance of these findings. According to Johnson, the study highlights the importance of charismatic leadership, and particularly emotional contagion in organizational leadership. The study however, found no relationship between principals’ affect at work and teachers’ negative affect at work. According to the study, the most important indicator of charismatic leadership and OCB is follower positive affect. As Johnson points out, one shortcoming of the study is that it cannot determine the exact cause-effect relationship between the factors explored in the study. As Johnson discusses, this is likely due to the fact that many of these factors influence each other reciprocally. Lastly, Johnson notes that the effects of charismatic leadership and emotional contagion are likely greater in organizations in which “expression of positive affect is required”, such as in human resource management, healthcare, and sales.