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THE ROLE OF EMOTIONAL LABOR IN PERFORMANCE APPRAISAL: ARE SUPERVISORS GETTING INTO THE ACT?

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ABSTRACT

Researchers have issued a call for research on emotional labor to move beyond service roles to other organizational roles (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1993). The present paper proposes that emotional labor plays a pivotal role during performance feedback exchanges between supervisors and subordinates. We suggest that the emotional labor supervisors engage in while providing performance feedback is a vital mechanism by which leaders impact followers' perceptions of the feedback environment (Steelman, Levy, & Snell, 2004) and, subsequently, important outcomes (e.g., employee satisfaction with the feedback, motivation to use feedback, feedback seeking frequency, and LMX quality).

INTRODUCTION

Hochschild (1979, 1983) coined the term "emotional labor" upon observing that employees in the service industry were getting paid for expressing their emotions in a particular organizationally-sanctioned fashion while interacting with customers. More recently, researchers have sought to broaden emotional labor research beyond service roles (e.g., Ashforth & Humphrey, 1993). We argue that emotional labor is an important process in performance appraisal contexts.

CONCEPTUALIZING EMOTIONAL LABOR

Deviating slightly from Hochschild's (1979, 1983) seminal work, we conceptualize emotional labor in an analogous fashion to Ashforth and Humphrey (1993) who defined emotional labor as the act of expressing *appropriate emotion* (i.e., emotion that is congruent with organizational objectives). Congruence typically emerges in the form of the encouraged display of positive emotions and the suppression of negative emotions (Diefendorff & Richard, 2003). Ekman (1973) defined display rules as conventions that govern emotional expression. In work contexts, display rules communicate to the employee what emotions are appropriate in certain situations as well as how such emotions should be expressed (Diefendorff & Richard, 2003). Given this view of emotional labor, the focus herein is on the laborer's (i.e., the supervisor) compliance with the appropriate display rules and the effect supervisors' emotional displays have on subordinates.

When one engages in emotional labor to comply with display rules, one may or may not feel the particular emotion he or she is required to display. This notion speaks to Hochschild's (1979, 1983) depictions of deep acting and surface acting. Surface acting involves the display of emotion devoid of the underlying emotional experience whereas deep acting involves attempting to actually experience the emotions one is required to display (Morris & Feldman, 1996). Thus, surface acting entails managing *expressions* and deep acting entails managing *feelings* (Grandey, 2000).

THE NEGLECTED ROLE OF EMOTION IN PERFORMANCE APPRAISAL

Performance appraisals convey feedback information to employees about how the organization views their performance (Murphy & Cleveland, 1995). We view performance appraisal sessions as not just an information exchange between supervisor and subordinate, but also as an emotional transaction – with both the emotions exuded by the supervisor and the content of the feedback message bearing implications for the feedback recipient's response to the feedback (Newcombe & Ashkanasy, 2002). We are not concerning ourselves with the basis on which performance ratings are made; rather, we are focusing upon the manner in which performance information, once it has been arrived upon, is communicated to employees.

The manner in which feedback is conveyed has implications for its effectiveness. Baron (1988) demonstrated that the provision of negative and disapproving performance feedback adversely impacted the self-efficacy levels and goal-setting behaviors of feedback recipients. To this end, however, negative feedback (i.e., feedback that highlights employees' performance weaknesses) in itself is not inherently problematic. While people do react more positively to positive feedback (London, 2003), employees are accepting of negative feedback presuming it is specific, delivered promptly, and considerate in nature (Baron, 1988). Furthermore, a sense of trust in the feedback source enhances feedback acceptance (Earley, 1986). What *is* problematic is destructive feedback; that is, feedback that is general, inconsiderate, and that attributes performance to internal factors (Kluger & DeNisi, 1996; London, 2003).

Research on the "mum effect" (i.e., the hesitancy of individuals to transmit undesirable news) suggests that people will delay providing bad news as long as possible (Tesser & Rosen, 1975), a finding which does not bode well for the need for performance feedback to be delivered in a timely manner. Having to give negative feedback, it seems, puts supervisors in a particularly pressured situation. It is critical that employees are made aware of their shortcomings in terms of performance, yet there is ample opportunity for the feedback to be delivered in an ineffective manner. In addition to the transmission of negative performance feedback, it appears reasonable that the emotions experienced by the supervisor and subsequent attempts at suppression or amplification could have implications for the delivery of positive performance feedback, as well. For instance, the expression of positive emotion in such an exchange has been shown to yield positive perceptions of leadership (Newcombe & Ashkanasy, 2002). Thus, examining the emotion exhibited by the feedback giver can appreciably inform understanding of the outcomes of performance appraisal.

PROPOSITIONS INTEGRATING EMOTIONAL LABOR AND PERFORMANCE FEEDBACK DELIVERY

The emotional labor process begins with the presence of implicit or explicit norms governing emotional expression (Grandey, 2000). Presumably, in the context of the supervisor-subordinate interaction, implicit norms will dictate that supervisors express positive emotion and suppress negative emotion (e.g., Chu, 2002; Diefendorff & Gosserand, 2003; Diefendorff & Richard, 2003; Grandey & Brauburger, 2002).

Proposition 1: When responding to a measure of demands for emotional labor, supervisors will tend to endorse emotional labor demands to express positive emotion and suppress negative emotion.

Diefendorff and Richard (2003) found empirical support for the notion that enactment of display rules arises from perceptions of expectations surrounding the use of display rules. We expect this finding to hold in the specific context of a performance feedback session. Thus, it is anticipated that supervisors will perceive that they are expected to convey performance feedback in a manner compliant with display rules.

Proposition 2: Perceived demand to use appropriate display rules is positively related to the emotional labor performed by supervisors in the performance feedback session.

Previous research has identified a number of individual difference variables that influence emotional labor. Of interest in the particular paper are self-monitoring, emotional intelligence, and political skill. The former two are established constructs, posited by many to play an important role in emotional labor (see Grandey, 2000), which we believe have implications for a supervisor's ability to use display rules appropriately (i.e., to express positive emotion and suppress negative emotion).

Self-monitoring. Self-monitoring refers to the extent to which people attend to the behaviors of others in social situations and use these cues as guidelines for their own self-presentations (Snyder, 1974; see also Gangestad & Snyder, 1985; Snyder & Gangestad, 1986). Because low self-monitors place more credence in their feelings, it makes theoretical sense that they will adhere to display rules with less ease than high self-monitors, who are more willing and able to adapt their emotional expressions to situations (Grandey, 2000). High self-monitors deal better with jobs requiring emotional labor, reporting less burnout and diminished susceptibility to emotional dissonance (Abraham, 1998; Wharton, 1993). We contend that supervisors high on self-monitoring will behave more in accordance with display rules when sharing performance feedback than supervisors low on self-monitoring, for high self-monitoring supervisors are more a) attuned to their environment and b) motivated to act in accordance with it.

Emotional intelligence. Emotional intelligence (EQ) is defined as "the ability to perceive emotions, to access and generate emotions so as to assist thought, to understand emotions and emotional knowledge, and to reflectively regulate emotions so as to promote emotional and intellectual growth" (Mayer & Salovey, 1997: 5). Supervisors high on EQ are more likely to be sensitive to the emotions of their subordinates (George, 2000; Wong & Law, 2002). Having to convey performance feedback is a task replete with emotional demands, and it follows that supervisors high in EQ will be better able to accommodate to emotional demands by using appropriate display rules.

Political skill. Political skill refers to the ability to "effectively understand others at work, and to use such knowledge to influence others to act in ways that enhance one's personal and/or

organizational objectives” (Ahearn, Ferris, Hochwarter, Douglas, & Ammeter, 2004: 311). Political skill has been shown to positively correlate with emotional intelligence, yet reflect knowledge and skill that extends beyond emotional matters (Ferris et al., 2005). One dimension of political skill – apparent sincerity (i.e., being perceived by others as honest and trustworthy; Pfeffer, 1992) – has been linked to aspects of the feedback environment. Thus, political skill should play an important role in supervisory emotional labor during feedback provision.

Proposition 3: The relationship between supervisors’ perceived demands to use appropriate display rules and the emotional labor performed by supervisors during the performance feedback session is moderated by the supervisor’s degree of self-monitoring. That is, supervisors high on self-monitoring are better able to utilize display rules than supervisors low on self-monitoring.

Proposition 4: The relationship between supervisors’ perceived demands to use appropriate display rules and the emotional labor performed by supervisors during the performance feedback session is moderated by the supervisor’s emotional intelligence. That is, supervisors with greater emotional intelligence are better able to utilize display rules than supervisors with lesser emotional intelligence.

Proposition 5: The relationship between supervisors’ perceived demands to use appropriate display rules and the emotional labor performed by supervisors during the performance feedback session is moderated by the supervisor’s political skill. That is, supervisors with greater political skill are better able to utilize display rules than supervisors with lesser political skill.

Emotional Labor and the Feedback Environment

The feedback environment (Steelman et al., 2004) encompasses the contextual aspects surrounding feedback processes, and is comprised of the feedback recipient’s perceptions of feedback delivery (i.e., the source’s intentions in giving feedback), source credibility (i.e., the feedback source’s expertise and trustworthiness), feedback quality (i.e., the consistency and usefulness of feedback), favorable and unfavorable feedback (i.e., the perceived frequency of positive and negative veridical feedback), source availability (i.e., the perceived amount of contact an employee has with the supervisor), and the extent to which the environment promotes feedback seeking (Steelman et al., 2004). Of specific interest here are the feedback environment elements of feedback delivery and source credibility.

First, we turn to source credibility’s component of trustworthiness. Trustworthiness refers to whether or not the feedback recipient trusts the supervisor to provide accurate feedback (Ilgen et al., 1979; Steelman et al., 2004). McAllister (1995) established that the foundations for trust are partially affect-based. High quality exchanges are characterized by high levels of trust and warmth (Newcombe & Ashkanasy, 2002) that become salient in the performance appraisal context via positive affect expressed by the leader. By engaging in emotional labor (i.e., using appropriate display rules), supervisors may foster perceptions of trust.

Proposition 6a: Emotional labor performed by the supervisor (laborer) in the performance feedback session is positively related to the subordinate’s (target) perception of supervisor credibility.

Feedback delivery involves the level of consideration (i.e., concern) demonstrated by the source in regards to the feedback receiver. This notion of consideration converges with the very idea of constructive feedback (London, 2003) wherein the purpose is to motivate rather than discourage. Supervisors who adhere to display rules are less likely to “slip up” and behave in a manner (e.g., spiteful or annoyed) that would jeopardize the feedback recipient’s perceptions of supervisor consideration. Those who adhere to display rules, in essence, should not be insensitive in any way as the display rules mandate proper interaction in terms of emotion. As such, those who adhere to display rules should not lapse into destructive feedback or enable the intrusion of mood (Forgas & Tehani, 2005) into the performance feedback session.

Proposition 6b: Emotional labor performed by a supervisor (laborer) in the performance feedback session is positively related to the subordinate’s (target) perception of the feedback delivery.

We contend that the effect of emotional labor on the aforementioned elements of the feedback environment is impacted by the extent to which the feedback recipient perceives that the emotion displayed by the supervisor when conveying performance feedback is sincere. Ashforth and Humphrey (1993) directly asserted that emotional labor can enhance trust, provided the act is perceived as sincere. Newcombe and Ashkanasy (2002) found that when there was lack of congruence between the leader’s message and nonverbally expressed emotion (e.g., kind words coupled with negative facial expressions), perceivers reacted more negatively.

Proposition 7a: The relationship between emotional labor performed by the supervisor in the performance feedback session and the subordinate’s perception of supervisor credibility is moderated by the subordinate’s perception of feedback sincerity. That is, subordinates who perceive the conveyance of feedback as more sincere will report greater supervisor credibility than subordinates who perceive the conveyance of feedback as less sincere.

Proposition 7b: The relationship between emotional labor performed by a supervisor in the performance feedback session and the subordinate’s perception of feedback delivery is moderated by the subordinate’s perception of feedback sincerity. That is, subordinates who perceive the conveyance of feedback as more sincere will report greater feedback delivery than subordinates who perceive the conveyance of feedback as less sincere.

Relationship of the Feedback Environment to Outcome Variables

The feedback environment scale components have been shown to relate to variables such as satisfaction with feedback, motivation to use feedback, feedback seeking frequency, and LMX quality (Steelman et al., 2004). Therefore, coinciding with previous research, these relationships would be expected to emerge in the present context.

Proposition 8a: Supervisor credibility is positively related to satisfaction with the performance feedback session.

Proposition 8b: Feedback delivery is positively related to satisfaction with the performance feedback session.

Proposition 9a: Supervisor credibility is positively related to subordinate motivation to use feedback.

Proposition 9b: Feedback delivery is positively related to subordinate motivation to use feedback.

Proposition 10a: Supervisor credibility is positively related to subordinate feedback seeking frequency.

Proposition 10b: Feedback delivery is positively related to subordinate feedback seeking frequency.

Proposition 11a: Supervisor credibility is positively related to LMX quality.

Proposition 11b: Feedback delivery is positively related to LMX quality.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Extending emotional labor beyond the service context, we posit that supervisors attend to norms governing the usage of display rules, and their behavior follows in concert such that they engage in patterned emotional displays – expressing positive emotion and suppressing negative emotion while delivering performance feedback. Engaging in emotional labor in this manner is thought to elicit a strong feedback environment, characterized by enhanced subordinate perceptions of supervisor trustworthiness and an impression that feedback was provided in a considerate manner. These propositions are especially important as the feedback environment has been shown to relate to employee satisfaction with the feedback, motivation to use feedback, feedback seeking frequency, and LMX quality (e.g., Cawley et al., 1998). Various individual difference variables (i.e., self-monitoring, emotional intelligence, and political skill) are also implicated in emotional labor processes during performance appraisal sessions. This paper represents one of the first attempts to explicitly link political skill to emotional labor and feedback variables.

Our propositions also extend the work of Newcombe and Ashkanasy (2002) by suggesting that sincerity in expressed emotion is critical when providing feedback. One clear implication of this statement is that when giving positive feedback it is necessary that supervisors exude positive emotions. In regards to the handling of negative emotion, it is advisable for supervisors to avoid expressing negative emotion because of its heightened potential to be delivered in a destructive manner (Baron, 1988, 1990). These propositions, however, diverge from Newcombe and Ashkanasy's (2002) stance that negative emotion is acceptable presuming it is paired with negative feedback. Finally, our paper takes the established role of sincerity one step further, illustrating *how* supervisors may foster perceptions of sincerity during performance feedback-giving. At the least, supervisors must engage in surface acting; that is, minimal adherence to appropriate display rules. Ideally, however, supervisors will be genuine in terms of emotional display – exuding true pleasure when giving positive feedback and true concern (devoid of any antagonism) when giving negative feedback.

ENDNOTES

1. Both authors contributed equally.

REFERENCES AVAILABLE FROM THE AUTHORS