



Work Teams Have Emotions, Too (and you need to understand them)

By Sigal G. Barsade and Donald E. Gibson

As the use of groups and teams increases in organisations, more studies consider behaviours in a group setting. Below, Sigal G. Barsade and Donald E. Gibson argue that managers who understand and manage a team's emotional processes may gain the insight they need to give them the edge in fostering effective work teams.

As the use of groups and teams increases in organisations, we are learning new lessons about how people in groups feel and behave differently than when acting alone. We tend to be aware of our own individual emotions: we know when we're feeling angry and ready to strike out; we also know when we're flooded with a good mood after a personal success. When we bring these individual emotions to work groups, the result is a complex mix. We each bring our own mood-of-the-moment or feelings based on what's happened that day. We also bring our emotional tendencies—whether we tend to be upbeat and optimistic, or lean toward the gloomy, or anxious. What happens when individuals' emotions come together in a group setting? How can we hope to understand group emotions and moods in the workplace?

Given the complexity, it's not surprising that there has been significantly more research focused on individual than group emotions. Yet we commonly use terms suggesting that groups do have emotions: we say that "The group feels that we ought to go forward..." "The mood in the group was a little down today." "We're 'on a high'—we met our stretch goal!" As researchers, we've been studying the ways in which groups have emotions and how these emotions influence individual and group outcomes. We've come to some conclusions that can

help managers better understand where group emotions come from, what they mean, and how they can be good—and bad—for organisational performance.¹

Where Do Team Emotions Come From? Individuals Shaping Groups

One way to view this question is from the "bottom-up," that is, that employees bring their current emotional feelings and emotional tendencies to a group, and these feelings and tendencies come together to create a team emotion. In this view, a team's mood is the average of the team's individual moods. (Indeed, there are now several online websites that have begun to help businesses track a team's mood: the strategy is to poll individual team members to see what they are feeling, and average these feelings into an overall team mood.) Such an approach makes sense because a range of studies have shown that emotions are contagious: an individual's cheerful or gloomy mood is likely to be "caught" by others, and replicated in a group, particularly if it is cohesive. Contagious positive emotions can lead to increased cooperation, less conflict and better perceived performance in groups, while contagious unpleasant emotions can lead to the reverse².

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team moods have an influence on performance. For example, in retail environments, studies have shown that the more negative a group's mood, the less they engage in positive behaviors with customers and the more they are absent from work.³ Conversely, group positive moods in nursing teams have been shown to be associated with increased effectiveness; with military teams, positive mood was a critical factor in teams creating clear deadlines and performing well.⁴ In short, team emotion makes a difference. Managers would be well-advised to pay attention to the mood of their teams and the sources of these moods.

Another application of the bottom-up approach is to ask the opposite question: that is, "How different are individuals' emotions in a group and how does that influence performance?" Here, there is support for the notion that the more similar individuals are to each other in terms of their emotional tendencies, the more productive the group. For example, one study of top management teams found that when the CEO and his or her management team share the same affective personality they are more satisfied, have greater shared decision-making, less group conflict and are more productive as a team, based on the company's financial performance.⁵

Where Do Team Emotions Come From? Groups Shaping Individuals

While studies have supported the bottom-up approach, this approach doesn't tell the whole story. Is group emotion just the sum of its individual parts divided by the number of people in the group? Additional research indicates that there is a group emotional effect above and beyond the average of individual emotions. This view is "top-down" in the sense that the group is seen as likely to dramatically shape individual emotions. Individuals feel differently when they are in groups, and these emotions may be more extreme than an individual might feel by him- or herself. In this view, individuals are likely to be substantially influenced by

a group's positive excitement about a particular project, or conversely, angered beyond their normal tendency by a group's feeling of perceived injustice. These are powerful "crowd" emotions. One merely has to observe the enthusiasm displayed at an all-employee sales meeting, or the anger of union members on a picket line, to note the extreme emotional power of groups.

This perspective is useful as a reminder to managers that individuals acting in groups rather than alone may have an enhanced sense of power and invincibility, along with a heightened sense of anonymity—individual responsibility is less clear in a group than when acting alone. This combination may cause groups in organisations to take actions that, individually, they

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might have avoided. The case of Enron is an example where the "smartest guys in the room" encouraged groups of people to have confidence and downplayed hesitation or feelings of fear or guilt in the group that could have signaled that inappropriate action was being taken.⁶ Recent large fines at financial institutions and hedge funds point to organisational emotional cultures that may encourage feelings of group pride that make unethical or illegal actions seem more reasonable.

Examples such as these are a reminder that groups may create emotional cultures that generate strong informal rules (called "emotion norms") and values about which emotions—and at what intensity—are "okay" for group members to express. Teams vary, for example, to the degree they allow individuals to express anger or annoyance with each other. Workgroups, especially those oriented toward customer service, may have strong norms encouraging positive emotions as

the only acceptable emotions for members to display. Team members at Disneyland, for example, are forbidden from expressing negative emotions in the public setting of the parks.¹ These norms may reflect overall emotion cultures that indicate strong cohesiveness and a culture that encourages positive social interactions. In fact, a recent study in a health care setting found that an emotional culture of companionate love, which consisted of employees expressing emotions of caring, compassion, affection and tenderness towards each other, led not only to better outcomes for employees, but to the patients they cared for, as well as the families of those patients. The positive emotions rippled out even past the organisation itself.⁷

An important element in shaping group emotion is the emotion of the group leader. Leaders can set the emotional tone of a group through their own moods as well as the emotions they encourage—or discourage—in group members. Leaders may not realise the impact of their emotions on group members; they may unconsciously influence the tone of the group. They may also purposefully try to shape the emotions of the group, by, for example, using positive emotions to generate group enthusiasm and cohesiveness, or using negative emotions to spur motivation and focus. An example of the latter approach is when coaches use expressed anger and frustration to motivate sports teams to heighten their performance.

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her emotional tone. This is a cautionary note for managers: group members will be especially attuned to managers' emotions, and be more likely to share them. Given some indications that negative emotions can be more contagious than positive ones, managers may wish to more carefully regulate their expression of negative emotions.

Bottom Line: Understand Your Team's Emotions

Managers need to be aware of both bottom-up and top-down sources of group emotion. Both have been shown to significantly influence group performance. In terms of bottom-up considerations, in forming teams, managers should consider a team member's emotional tendencies in addition to the technical competencies or expertise they may bring to the group. If cohesiveness is important to a team's functioning, the manager should consider members sharing similar emotional tendencies. But the manager must also consider the mix of team members based on whether they tend to feel or show positive or negative affect; he or she may wish to ensure that there are sufficient employees showing the emotions of companionate love, or happiness so as to infect other group members with the same emotions. On the other hand, the manager may be cautious of populating a team with all "upbeat" people—a better strategy for some tasks may be to have a balance in group emotional tendencies.

In terms of top-down considerations, managers need to manage their team's emotional cultures as carefully as they manage their cognitive culture. Is this a team that encourages positive emotions, caring and emotional support (the culture attributed to Southwest Airlines or Zappos), or one that is filled with fear or thrives on anger? Has the manager considered his or her

own emotional tendencies in terms of setting goals for the team—is the team picking up on unspoken stresses of the manager, which may then influence team functioning? Another contextual component is for the manager to consider which type of mood or emotion is going to make his or her people most effective. Most evidence indicates that a positive mood leads to better decision-making, but there can be specific, shorter-term situations, in which negative emotions can be important as well. For example, short-term fear can help lead employees to understand the need for a necessary but painful organisational change, or brief bursts of anger may help energise a team who has lost unjustly to a competitor. The danger is that longer term experiences of these negative emotions can lead to burned out, less productive employees.

These recommendations assume that managers have a sufficient level of emotional intelligence to recognise their own and others' emotional patterns and tendencies. This managerial competence can be increased by becoming aware of the critical importance of team emotions to enhancing team satisfaction and performance. Rather than attributing team emotions to forces beyond their control, managers who understand and actually manage a team's top-down and bottom-up emotional processes may gain the insight they need to give them the edge in fostering effective work teams. **EB**

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