

The Science of Work

Insights on the human aspects of the working world from Wharton faculty
by Sigal Barsade, Ph.D. and Nancy Rothbard, Ph.D.

Faster than a Speeding Text: “Emotional Contagion” At Work

How others’ feelings are influencing our business decisions
Published on October 15, 2014 by Sigal Barsade, Ph.D. in The Science of Work



Photo: Creative Commons: Flickr/seanb

Social media content found online is part of our lives, especially when it goes “viral” as funny cat videos, the MS “bucket” challenge or taunting tweets. This viral material which is shared as quickly as it’s viewed, can make us laugh or feel inspired or even angry. Managers should keep in mind that moods can also “go viral,” distributed around the office like a group text message.

My research reveals that emotions, both positive and negative, actually spread among your employees like viruses. People routinely “catch” each other’s feelings when working together in groups. It’s not surprising that this influences your employees’ moods: what’s more surprising is that it significantly influences their judgment and business decisions as well. Usually without anyone having a clue what’s going on.

This phenomenon, known as “emotional contagion,” has been recognized in the psychological literature as a type of interpersonal influence (Schachter, 1959: 15; Cacioppo and Petty, 1987; Levy and Nail, 1993) There’s such a thing as cognitive contagion too—catching other people’s ideas—but there are differences. To understand ideas, words are key—but to understand feelings, face-to-face nonverbal cues are much more important. Studies show that emotional contagion most often occurs at a significantly less conscious level, based on automatic processes and physiological responses (e.g., Hatfield, Cacioppo, and Rapson, 1994). While early work focused on contagion between two people, in my article “The Ripple Effect: Emotional Contagion and Its Influence on Group Behavior,” I find that emotional contagion is a significant force in groups as well.

For the study, I divided business school students into small groups for a simulated management exercise. Each had to role-play a department head advocating for an employee to get a merit-based increase. At the same time, all the students were part of a “salary committee” negotiating how best to allocate a limited pot of funds, so they had to balance getting the most for their own candidate with maximizing the overall benefit to the company. I seeded each group with a confederate (an actor) trained to convey one of four different mood conditions: cheerful enthusiasm, serene warmth, hostile irritability, and depressed sluggishness.

The findings revealed a significant effect of emotional contagion. Groups in which the confederate had “spread” positive emotion experienced an increase in positive mood. But the emotional contagion did not stop with a spread of feelings. These groups also displayed more cooperation, less interpersonal conflict and felt they’d performed better on their task than groups in which negative emotions were spread by the confederate. And, groups in which people felt positive emotions had actually made decisions that allocated the available money more equitably.

When the students were asked why they allocated the funds the way they did, and why they thought their group performed the way it did, they pointed to factors such as their own negotiating acumen, or the qualities of the “candidates” they had been assigned. They had no inkling that their behavior and decisions, and that of their group, had been directed by the displayed emotion of the confederate.

As a manager in today’s increasingly collaborative, team-oriented business environment, you can see the value of being aware of emotional contagion among your team members. In fact, executives can use their knowledge of the impact of mood contagion to create more positive team dynamics, increase performance, and decrease turnover by consciously managing their own emotions and the emotions they want to spread.

For example, you can train yourself to be aware of your own mood and deliberately lift your own spirits before interacting with your team. You can make eye contact to spread positive emotions faster, and limit your gaze with persistently negative people to neutralize their influence. Avoiding negative body language helps too (for instance, you might cross your arms because you are cold, but people will likely believe you are defensive or angry, mimic your arm crossing, and begin to feel that way.) Positive emotion contagion is also a powerful tool for creating a workplace culture of “companionate love”—as I discussed in my blog [“Feeling the Love—At Work”](#)—which has been shown to boost employee satisfaction and teamwork, and reduce absenteeism and emotional burnout. (Negative mood contagion can be implemented too, but should be relegated to short-term situations. For example, a team leader may want to elicit shared feelings of frustration or anger when the team has lost to a competitor or has not met its goals.)

We’ve all seen those motivational posters about one’s work attitude being “catching.” My research shows that it’s even more catching than one might think—and in fact has profound consequences for a company’s day-to-day operations. But armed with an awareness of emotional contagion, managers have the potential to create more productive teams, departments, and corporate cultures.

References:

Barsade, S. G. and O. A. O'Neill 2014 "What's love got to do with it? A longitudinal study of the culture of companionate love and employee and client outcomes in a long-term care setting." *Administrative Science Quarterly*, forthcoming.

Barsade, S. G. 2002 "The ripple effect: emotional contagion and its influence on group behavior." *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 47, 644-675

Cacioppo, J. T., and R. E. Petty 1987 "Stalking rudimentary processes of social influence: A psychophysiological approach." In M. P. Zanna, J. M. Olson, and C. P. Herman (eds.), *Social Influence: The Ontario Symposium: Ontario Symposium on Personality and Social Psychology*, 5: 41-74. Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.

Hatfield, E., J. Cacioppo, and R. L. Rapson 1992 "Primitive emotional contagion." In M. S. Clark (ed.), *Review of Personality and Social Psychology: Emotion and Social Behavior*, 14: 151-177. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

1993 "Emotional contagion." *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 2: 96-99.

1994 *Emotional Contagion*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Levy, D. A., and P. R. Nail 1993 "Contagion: A theoretical and empirical review and reconceptualization." *Genetic, Social, and General Psychology Monographs*, 119: 233-284.

Schachter, S. 1959 *The Psychology of Affiliation*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

About Sigal Barsade:

An award-winning researcher and teacher, Sigal Barsade's expertise is in emotional intelligence, organizational culture, leadership and top management teams, emotions in the workplace, and group dynamics. She is the Joseph Frank Bernstein Professor of Management at the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania. Prof. Barsade also teaches in "The Leadership Edge: Strategies for the New Leader," a [Wharton Executive Education program running November 17-20, 2014](#).

Prior to joining Wharton, Prof. Barsade taught at Yale University for a decade. She has consulted for corporate, public and nonprofit clients, including Del Monte, GlaxoSmithKline, Merrill Lynch, the NBA, State Farm Insurance, and Philadelphia Gas Works. Prof. Barsade serves on the editorial boards of *Administrative Science Quarterly*, *Organizational Behavior & Human Decision Processes*, and *Organization Science*.