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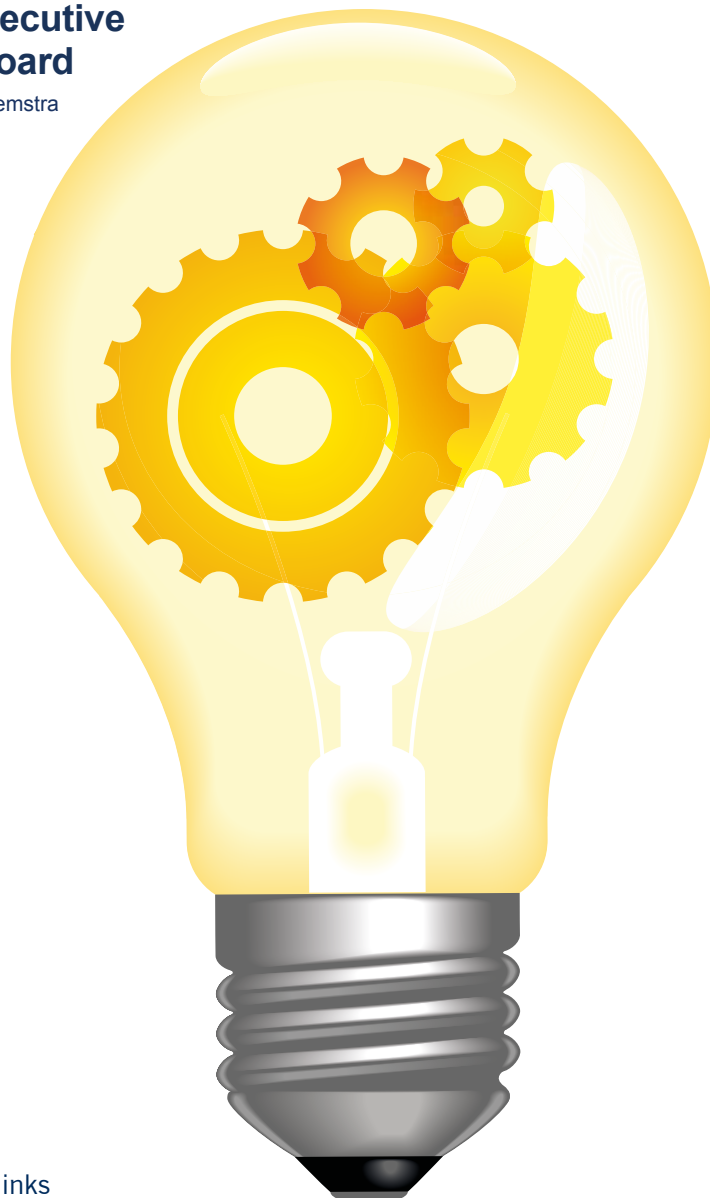
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The value of emotion in visionary leadership

by Merlijn Venus, Daan Stam and Daan van Knippenberg

New research shows that emotional displays from leaders can have a profound and influencing effect on the way that employees think, feel and behave relative to an organisation's visionary goals

These days, business leaders tend to strive toward being calm and collected. Executive coaches teach it. Some professionals reportedly even take Botox not just to keep the wrinkles at bay, but also to sculpt their faces into a state of permanent serenity. However, they might be better off taking acting classes as recent research suggests that far from something you should shy away from, emotions are actually a crucial part of persuasion.

This isn't entirely news. From the ancient Greeks on, people have known

key facets of persuasion. Over the next 2,500 years, however, people have not learned much more about how this process works.

Even such questions as what kind of emotion is most effective for what kind of message have been answered less by scholarship than gut instinct. Obviously, many leaders developed an intuitive sense of what kind of emotional displays might support or undercut what kind of message, but no one proved it in any kind of systematic way.

“...emotional displays tend to have a profound, long-term influence on how employees think, feel, and behave at work.”

that a lot of leadership comes down to an ability to persuade, and that a key part of that ability rests on how well the speaker can create an emotional connection with their audience. Aristotle, in fact, saw appealing to a person's emotions as one of the three

Emotion to Vision

About 15 years ago, this began to change. Although knowledge about the nature of persuasion remains fragmented, researchers have learned more now about the dynamics of jobs that require “emotional labour,” such



as waiters and waitresses, airline attendants, hotel desk clerks, and other service employees expected to provide “service with a smile.” Specifically, some scholars found that the more the person actually felt the emotions they presented, the higher their level of customer satisfaction.

However, quite how this works has remained unclear. For example, we still don't know much about the reason emotional displays of leaders help them convey a long-term vision or even what kinds of displays work best in what situation.

Overall, scholars have confirmed the general intuition and found that how you say something tends to matter more than what you say. Other researchers have found a correlation between enthusiasm and a perception of charisma, and optimistic emotions



tend to be rated as more effective. Somewhat more surprisingly, scholars have also determined that emotional displays tend to have a profound, long-term influence on how employees think, feel, and behave at work. For example, expressions of negative emotion tend to lead to more analytical thinking in a group and can lead to increased effort, while positive emotions may encourage people to be more creative and feel more open and positive about a company's prospects. Emotional displays even seem to support better group coordination.

These insights are useful as far as they go. However, because the most valuable work a leader does is sell their long-term vision, we needed to know more about how emotional displays and expressions can help

leaders encourage people to support their vision.

RSM colleague Daan Stam made a distinction in his PhD dissertation between visions of an optimistic future ideal that appeals to growth values and opportunities, and towards which people might stride, and visions of an undesirable, dark future, from which people need to stay away and that appeals to values such as obligations, duties and responsibilities.

He found that whether leaders can effectively communicate a positive or negative vision depends on the personality of the followers or the context of the vision. In some contexts, people seem to be more attracted by a warmer vision and in other contexts they can be more receptive to a chillier vision designed to encourage prevention.

His work pointed to a new question: how can leaders make their vision easier to accept regardless of the context or the follower characteristics?

Our research suggests that what matters most in persuading a group to follow a long-term goal is not whether the emotional state itself is positive or negative but how closely it aligns with the long-term vision of the message. For example, former Vice President Al Gore's concerned tone in *An Inconvenient Truth* fit his vision of the seriousness of global warming (a prevention focus), while the 2008 electioneering of President Barack Obama's fit the optimistic "Yes, We Can" vision of his campaign (a promotion focus).

This congruence can develop in a number of ways. We found that in general, leader enthusiasm motivates followers toward a promotion focus, which leads to higher follower performance for certain kinds of growth-oriented goals (Sell more! Serve better!).

Leader concern works the other way, by encouraging followers to think more about prevention (don't lose this account!). But frustration can also be effective when paired with a growth-oriented vision (if only you could straighten this software out, we would sell more!). ▶

The value of emotion in visionary leadership (continued)

by Merlijn Venus, Daan Stam and Daan van Knippenberg

No bad emotions

Most business communications advisors instinctively try to accentuate the positive. We found, however, that positive or negative is not the crucial aspect of whether a message is effective. The effectiveness of the emotional content depends largely on how it relates to the end-goal: in the end, there are no bad emotions, just emotions that don't suit the purpose.

Far from hiding their feelings, the most successful executives will be those whose emotional displays correlate most closely with their vision of where the organisation needs to go. Our findings suggest that leaders capable of delivering strong emotional displays that match their long-term vision will be more successful in motivating followers to share and pursue the vision.

Based on a number of experiments with students at RSM and our review of the academic literature, we believe that managers should keep in mind the following:

- Get frustrated! Frustration may be the most effective kind of emotional outburst when an opportunity is blocked.
- Act concerned. Agitation may be more appropriate when survival is at stake.
- Beyond better acting skills, try

to develop greater awareness and knowledge of emotions and their consequences.

- Pay attention to strength of feeling. If you don't have much emotion behind your message, the message is likely to be much less effective.
- Recruiters and human resource administrators should search for candidates who have abilities that are predictive of a strong capability for emotional communications, including emotional intelligence.

Many questions

Of course, many questions about the relationship between emotion and persuasion remain. One of the most compelling is not only about the impact of the vision on the group and which other emotions can help leaders, but also how the leader develops a compelling vision in the first place. How can we help leaders with the development and formation of a vision? Are there particular personalities and/or skills that lend themselves to developing a persuasive, long-term vision?

Once we know the answers to all those questions, we should be a few steps closer to a model of leadership that managers can use to transform their organisation, and eventually, their world. That's certainly our vision. ■

This article draws its inspiration from the paper *Leader emotion as a catalyst of effective leader communication of visions, value-laden messages, and goals*, written by Merlijn Venus, Daan Stam and Daan van Knippenberg and published in the journal *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, 122 (2013) 53-68. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.obhdp.2013.03.009>

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