The attributed emotional intelligence of change leaders: A qualitative study

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Abstract: Organisational change is a potentially affective experience. The relationship between emotional intelligence and the leadership of organisational change has been the subject of very little quantitative research and apparently no qualitative studies have been done. We outline why we chose a qualitative approach and report on how this has shed new light on how change followers perceive an aspect of the emotional intelligence of change leaders. We found that when followers of change believed that leaders understood their emotional reactions, and responded appropriately, they felt more comfortable and had a more positive orientation to the change.

Key words: emotions, emotional intelligence, leadership, organisational change

EMOTIONS AND ORGANISATIONAL CHANGE

Organisational change can be an emotional experience when people anticipate or experience gains and losses (Wolfram Cox 1997; Dirks, Cummings & Pierce 1996; Huy 2002) and when processes are perceived as fair or unfair (Paterson & Cary 2002; Brennan & Skarlicki 2004; Matheny & Smollan 2005) or too quick or too slow (Huy 2001; Bridges 2003). Emotions are short-lived responses to events (Fridja 2000) that may diffuse into moods (Barsade & Gibson 2007). During change emotions can “range from fear to envy, from rivalry to anger, from enthusiasm to cynicism, or from energetic enjoyment to apathy” (French 2001: 480). However, emotions have traditionally been seen as illogical and disruptive (Domagalski 1999; Lazarus 1991; Solomon 2003) and accordingly people, especially in organisational settings, have been discouraged from displaying them (Mann 1999; Bolton 2005). For example, Vince (2006: 351) suggests, “Self-protective behaviour based on fear is one of the ways in which silence is maintained in organizations.” Nevertheless, when the emotions of change are deliberately hidden from managers, stress and resentment ferment in employees (Turnbull 2002; Bryant & Wolfram Cox 2006) and prevent managers from detecting signs of resistance. Support for change and resistance to change have cognitive, affective and behavioural components (Piderit 2000; Szabla 2007). The affective elements are often ignored but have been found in various studies to have played a major role in how employees responded to change (Huy 2002; Paterson & Cary 2002; Kiefer 2005; Vince 2006).

When employees facing change find that their supervisors, and those more senior, respond inappropriately to their emotions, they are likely to feel less comfortable and resist the change.
Demonstrated leader empathy signals to followers that their emotions have been acknowledged (Kellett, Humphrey & Sleeth 2002). The attributed emotional intelligence (EI) of the leader is thus a crucial factor in follower reactions to change. While there are differences between the roles of change leaders (initiators) and change managers (implementers) (Caldwell 2003; Higgs & Rowland 2000), we will use the terms change leaders for formal management roles and followers for subordinates. We are aware that these terms are ideologically loaded and that employee perceptions of their managers embrace their own notions of leadership and followership (Ford & Lawler 2007; Nye 2002).

**EI AND THE LEADERSHIP OF CHANGE**

The concept of EI is one of the most controversial in organisational behaviour. For some examples of the debate see Antonakis, Ashkanasy and Dasborough (2009), Matthews, Zeidner and Roberts (2007) and the special issue of the *Journal of Organizational Behavior* 26(4), 2005. Goleman (1995) claims that EI is a mixture of ability, personality and other factors and that it contributes substantially to a person’s career success. He also insists that it is critical for leadership (Goleman, 1998). However, many academics (e.g. Jordan 2005; Daus & Ashkanasy 2005; McEnrue & Groves 2006; Zeidner, Matthews & Roberts 2009) have criticised Goleman’s approach because his claims have never met the test of peer-reviewed academic journals and because these researchers conceptualise EI as ability only. Bar-On (1997, 2006), who has a stronger research pedigree, has also used a mixed model of EI, and his concept has been used in a number of empirical studies (e.g. Barling, Slater & Kelloway 2000; Mandell & Pherwani 2003; Butler & Chinowsky 2006; Brown, Bryant & Reilly 2006). Another school of thought contends that trait EI is distinct from ability EI (e.g. Van der Zee & Verbeke 2004; Tett, Fox & Wang 2005; Petrides, Furnham & Mavroveli 2007). However, the weight of academic opinion is that the EI model of Mayer and Salovey (1997) is the most rigorous, even though it may have flaws (Conte 2005; Jordan 2005; Daus & Ashkanasy 2005; McEnrue & Groves 2006; Zeidner et al. 2009). Mayer and Salovey view EI as the ability to understand one’s emotions and those of others and to manage both sets of emotions appropriately. Yet another group of critics has maintained that research
into EI has produced little extra insight into emotions beyond extant studies of cognitive intelligence or personality (e.g. Antonakis 2004; Landy 2005; Locke 2005).

The ways in which leaders respond to emotional cues of followers, or send out emotional signals to them, can influence followers’ perceptions of leadership EI and integrity, but the messages may be misconstrued. As Newcombe and Ashkanasy (2002: 603) suggest:

- a leader who feels negatively towards a member may unconsciously display negative emotion while expressing a positive message as a means of influencing the member through symbolic management…If the member can detect unconscious indicators of negative (felt) emotion, then it is likely that the leader’s influence attempt will be ineffective, resulting in a breakdown of trust, an essential ingredient of the leader-member relationship.

In an experimental study they demonstrated that people with high EI are able to judge the authenticity of the leaders’ emotional displays. Other researchers (e.g. George 2000; Humphrey 2002; Dasborough & Ashkanasy 2002; Bono & Judge 2003) indicate that leaders often elicit and respond to follower emotions. Consequently, leaders often need to call on their own EI to establish sound relationships.

Studies of the relationship between EI and leadership have frequently focused on Bass’ (1985) transformational leadership (TL) theory. Transformational leaders are those who are able to engage followers through individualised concern, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation and idealised influence. Empirical studies, which are overwhelmingly quantitative, have demonstrated the relationships between TL and EI (or just aspects of them). Bass (2001) himself refers to a range of research studies linking the two constructs. Some researchers have used measures of self-reported leader EI and TL (Mandell & Pherwani 2003; Gardner & Stough 2000; Palmer, Burgess, Wall & Stough 2001; Butler & Chinowsky 2006), others have elected to use the self-reported EI of leaders and follower perceptions of leader TL (Sosik & Megerian 1999; Skinner & Spurgeon 2005), but very few studies measure follower perceptions of leader EI (e.g. Rubin, Munz & Bommer 2005).

While TL, almost by definition, is about change, only a few researchers have explicitly related it to organisational change (e.g. Eisenbach, Watson & Pillai 1999; Kan & Parry 2004), and even fewer have examined the role of EI. Most have explored follower EI in conceptual articles (e.g. Jordan 2005; Scott-Ladd & Chan 2004; Paterson & Hartel 2002). In one empirical study, Vakola, Tsaousis and
Nikolaou (2004) found a positive relationship between employee EI and attitudes to change. In others, Ferres and Connell (2004) found that followers who rated their leaders as high in EI reported less change cynicism and Bommer, Rich and Rubin (2005) discovered that TL also produced less cynicism about change in followers.

Qualitative research into EI and leadership is very thin. Akerjordet and Severinsson (2004) explored EI by interviewing seven Norwegian mental health nurses on their emotional experiences at work. Some noted the benefits of supervisory and collegial support, for example, “It is about sharing experiences, cognitive learning, emotional maturation and reflection” (p. 167). In a British study of hospice nurses Clarke (2006: 456) used focus groups to document their affective experiences in a “climate where individuals are able to discuss freely the emotional content of their work.” In an Australian study Cross and Travaglione (2003) interviewed five entrepreneurs and concluded that all their respondents showed evidence of EI. Having interviewed 20 American school principals, Williams (2007) concluded that EI distinguished the ‘outstanding performers’ from the ‘typical performers’, using a mixture of performance criteria. None of the research deals with change.

![Figure 1: Model of attributed leader emotional intelligence during organisational change](image)

Our model of attributed leader EI in change is presented in Figure 1. Given the paucity of evidence of leader EI as perceived by followers in the context of organisational change, and the apparent absence of qualitative studies, we sought to interview participants in change on their perceptions of two related aspects of leader EI: their empathy as reflected in their ability to respond to the emotional reactions to change of their followers. In so doing we are driven to answer the following
research question: *How do employees’ attributions of the emotional responsiveness of change leaders affect their own cognitive, affective and behavioural responses to the change?*

**METHODOLOGY**

One of the controversies in EI has been about measurement (Ciarrochi, Chan, Caputi & Roberts 2001; Conte & Dean 2006). Of those who believe that EI is a form of ability there is agreement that it can only be assessed through tests (Mayer, Salovey & Caruso 2000, 2004, 2008; Matthews et al. 2007; Daus & Ashkanasy 2005; McEnrue & Groves 2006). Moving out of the quantitative paradigm of EI is therefore fraught with hazards because it has almost gone unsaid that EI must be *measured* with validated - albeit contested - instruments. The logic is quite clear. Scientists, even if they do not agree with each other, determine the components of ability, and, in developing instruments, include all the items they believe are relevant (Fineman 2004). Qualitative investigations might be deemed even more inexact if they exclude key elements. Yet qualitative approaches to the experience of emotions in organisations have been employed (e.g. Dasborough 2006; Williams 2007; Cross & Travaglione 2003), including those relating to change (e.g. Kiefer 2005; Vince 2006; Bryant & Wolfram Cox 2006; Turnbull 1999). As Fineman (2004: 736) argues, “it is certainly possible to research emotion without measuring it…The understandings so produced are inherently less precise than the simplifications of measurement, but they are likely to be abundant in insight, plausibility and texture.” The role of leadership has also been the subject of qualitative approaches (e.g. Parry & Bryman 2006; Bryman 2004; Bryman, Stephen & á Campo 1996; Alvensson & Sveningsson 2003), including those in the context of organisational change (Parry 1999; Kan & Parry 2004; Barker 2006).

We take on board the views that the best way to *measure* emotional intelligence is through performance tests (Mayer et al. 2008). Reports of other’s EI are subjective interpretations rather than scientific measures of ability. However, in using a qualitative approach, we believe we can add to the depth and diversity of the EI debate by seeking evidence of how change participants viewed the ability of leaders to understood and dealt with follower emotions. In our study we are not investigating whether change leaders are high in EI or even in a few of the many EI abilities. We are more concerned with how followers construct the EI of leaders during the processes of organisational
change. The ideographic accounts of our respondents supplement rather than supplant quantitative measures of EI and provide different insights into the relationships between organisational change, leadership and workplace emotion.

Twenty-four people were interviewed in Auckland, New Zealand, in 2006 and 2007 as part of a wider project on emotions and organisational change. The participants consisted of 13 men and 11 women, 16 European, two Maori, three Asian and three of Pacific Island backgrounds, and varied in age from their 30s to their 50s. They reported on experience in a variety of industries, organisations, departments and hierarchical levels, and on different types of change. They were sourced through management consultants and fellow academics so that we had no previous relationship with them. To gain insight in their perceptions of the EI of their managers participants were asked whether their managers (and others more senior) had understood what they had thought and felt and responded appropriately. We also asked how this impacted on their reactions to change. Comments reflecting leader EI were also made in response to other questions throughout the interview that dealt, inter alia, with trust, leadership ability and fairness.

To aid in data analysis the interviews were transcribed and a table was drawn up to document participants’ views on managerial reactions to their affective responses. We also noted how employees processed these management reactions. It should be pointed out that EI consists of a range of abilities (for example, Mayer and Salovey (1997) identify 16 separate abilities), but the ones we were looking for in interviewee comments related to the leaders’ ability to manage emotion in themselves and others. Emotional self-management by leaders was by itself not relevant to our quest because much of it cannot be discerned by others. However, we were interested to see if managers were unable to control their own emotions - and whether this created negative responses in the interviewees. The 24 participants were coded from A to Y (excluding I).

FINDINGS

There are three key issues in the findings: first, follower perceptions of the degree to which their leaders understood how they thought and felt; second, how appropriately leaders had communicated this understanding; and third, how the leader response influenced follower reactions.
Participants appreciated the showing of empathy in a sincere way and found that this form of support gave them strength in coping with the change processes and outcomes. This was particularly noticeable in the responses of participants who were in management positions. P said that the way her manager had responded to her concerns “validated my feelings”. This form of acknowledgement goes a long way in creating good relationships, and even if it may not increase commitment to the change, it helps an individual come to terms with negative outcomes. Leader EI may also have given some participants emotional capabilities of their own. Q said, “I was occasionally told to calm my enthusiasm. They felt I was too strong, too passionate.” There were negative aspects of the change and it was believed she was exaggerating the benefits. Although she did not explicitly indicate that this was a positive contribution, it seemed that she had adjusted her behaviour to match the expectations of her boss and other managers without negative consequences to herself.

On the other hand, a number of respondents were unimpressed at the lack of understanding and emotional support provided. D was called into her boss’ office and told that she was to be made redundant with immediate effect. She remarked that when she refused to leave instantly, “he was quite angry because I think he wanted to see it done and dusted and he was very uncomfortable over the whole thing.” She also commented that he had probably mistakenly believed that she was not emotionally affected by her redundancy because she had not cried about it. However, she thought that her boss felt guilty about her redundancy and would not look her in the eye. H was the general manager of an organisation until demoted after a takeover. While she had enjoyed considerable support from the previous chairperson, with the new one she said, “It became awkward because I obviously was upset and I had an emotional outburst.” This made the chairperson extremely uncomfortable and he was unable to respond with conviction. When X literally cried with frustration at missing a promotion due to what he perceived was an unfair process, his boss “put her hand on my back and she said I understand, that’s all she says, and she says, let’s say a prayer together.” He saw this as a hypocritical and cynical mismanagement of his feelings “and I think that’s when I made a decision that I’m not going to work there anymore.” M, a senior manager, found that some of his conversations with his boss were peppered with emotive and abusive language which made him feel angry, frustrated and weak.
Some respondents thought that their managers had understood their feelings but had not discussed them or shown sufficient psychological support. For example, S remarked of her manager, “He never saw the pain people went through”, and that as a result he was of little assistance to her when she had to manage the emotions of her staff. Others were less charitable: “It was more lip service than true understanding” (J); “it just doesn’t go in…he heard the noise but he didn’t understand the message” (M).

Some participants found their bosses to be somewhat inconsistent. C said his manager had been surprisingly sensitive given that “he could be a proper bastard when he wanted to.” O thought that the CEO was “cold and clinical” but had detected that that many staff were feeling gloomy about the changes. B very ambivalently remarked of her manager:

he is the loveliest man…and very supportive…but he just doesn’t care when people are drowning… he’s got the lowest EQ of anybody I’ve ever met…he’s oblivious to how people are feeling. I remember one day going into his office and bursting into tears and he just couldn’t work out what was going on…he didn’t really know what to do. He kind of patted me on the back.

L felt that the managers she reported to were “patronising in some situations, empathetic in others.” She resented the remark of her manager, “may the best man win”, when referring to a changed role for which she had to compete with another female employee. She recalled that when she cried one day she was told that she was too soft and vowed never to cry at work again.

A number of other participants observed that their managers were not aware of their feelings because they had deliberately refrained from expressing them. X said that if employees expressed their feelings, or any opposition to change, they become targets and “a target is always hit upon”. When asked whether his manager knew how he felt, C replied, “Probably not, because I’d learnt not to talk about those things at that level with my bosses over the years.” In this sense, it appeared to several employees that their leaders were unable, and even unwilling, to deal with follower emotions. Conversely, G, a senior manager, spoke of the value of peer counselling and managerial support in his organisation, and how this had particularly helped him deal with change issues. E, also a senior manager, noted how his manager had “high EQ” and how helpful this was during change.
DISCUSSION

The perceived EI of their managers helped our participants deal with change, particularly when the difficulties they were facing were acknowledged and sufficient support was provided. Huy (2002) reports that middle managers in his study were expected to be task-oriented and not get emotionally involved. Those, however, who ignored these instructions, were able to facilitate work groups that “could adapt to change and avoid the serious underperformance associated with extreme chaos or inertia” (p. 59). Emotional support strengthens the capacity of employees to deal with change. In their qualitative studies of EI, Clarke (2006) and Akerjordet and Severinson (2002) found that sharing emotional experiences with colleagues and supervisors in a supportive environment was a helpful way for nurses to deal with their emotions, and of learning new ways of doing so.

Conversely, employees who feel that their emotions are ignored or must be hidden, experience even more negative emotions, and become more resistant to change, as Bryant and Wolfram Cox (2006) and Turnbull (1999) report. One form of emotional labour is the effort people need to exert to curtail emotional expression (Mann 1999). Whether this form of emotional regulation causes stress depends on a variety of factors, such as employee EI and personality, how often emotions needs to be suppressed, what type of emotions are in question, how serious the issues are that trigger the emotions, and what the consequences are of expression (Côté 2005; Schaubroeck & Jones 2000; Erickson & Ritter 2001). Therefore, whereas Q did not appeared to be fazed by being told to calm her enthusiasm, because she did not see this as a serious criticism and it might have been delivered in an appropriate fashion, X’s need to bottle his negative emotions had a corrosive affect on him. When he did cry in a meeting with his boss he felt embarrassed and became afraid to voice his opposition to change in other forums. L was both embarrassed and incensed when told that crying in public meant she was too soft. Gender itself can be an issue. In interviewing female leaders, Sachs and Blackmore (1998: 271) found a common theme, articulated by one of their respondents: “You never show you can’t cope. Being in control of your feelings and emotions was important if you wanted to be taken seriously in the job and if you were to be rewarded by promotion.” The ability of leaders to create a safe haven for the expression of followers’ emotions is indicative of EI (Akerjordet & Severinson 2002) and evokes a sense of comfort rather than anxiety or embarrassment in followers.
The role of transformational leaders, in particular their capacity to demonstrate individualised consideration, has been shown to lead to affective commitment (Bono & Judge 2003) and positive attitudes to change (Kan & Parry 2004). In contrast, D’s perception that her boss felt too uncomfortable to look at her when discussing her redundancy echoes the findings of Folger and Skarlicki (1998), Clair and Dufresne (2004) and Gandolfi (2008) that managers of redundancies try to reduce their guilt by distancing themselves from the victims.

Some participants believed they could detect when their leaders were acting authentically or not in providing emotional support. Researchers of authentic leadership (Fields 2007; Michie & Gooty 2005; Parry & Proctor-Thomson 2001) have commented that the credibility of a leader depends to a large extent on perceived integrity.

While this study has mostly been concerned with the EI of the immediate supervisor, a number of participants also referred to the contribution of other managers and the influence of organisational culture. Theorists have pointed out that the affective culture of an organisation plays a big part in how employees (including managers) express or suppress emotions at work (Zembylas 2006; Barsade & Gibson 2007; Tse, Dasborough & Ashkanasy 2002). Huy (1999) has gone so far as to call this form of organisational EI, emotional capability. In a rare empirical study Menges and Bruch (2008) demonstrated that employee perceptions of organizational EI improved performance in a number of ways, including innovative capability.

We have shown that follower perceptions of aspects of leader EI influence their own cognitive, affective and behavioural responses to change. We have thus made a contribution to the literature of EI, leadership and change and introduced a qualitative methodology that has not previously been explored.

**LIMITATIONS AND FURTHER RESEARCH DIRECTIONS**

While we have investigated follower perceptions of leader EI we have not identified what influences these perceptions other than leader reactions to subordinates’ affective responses to change. There are therefore a number of potential explanations which merit further study.
Firstly, the role of the follower’s own EI was not examined. It is plausible that the ability to recognise an appropriate affective response is partly dependent on a person’s own EI. Mayer and Salovey (1997: 12) note that “because emotionally intelligent individuals know about the expression and manifestation of emotion, they are also sensitive to its false or manipulative expression.” This might explain how our participants could judge whether their managers were acting authentically or not when providing psychological support (Newcombe & Ashkanasy 2002). However, Côté (2005: 519) suggests that “little knowledge exists about when and why observers perceive one emotion when another one is actually displayed.” One’s own EI can be judged by self-reports (Mandell & Pherwani 2003; Gardner & Stough 2002; Palmer et al. 2000) but this has been criticised as potentially being inaccurate and self-serving (Zeidner et al. 2009; Mayer, Roberts & Barsade 2008; Mayer et al. 2000). Formal expert testing, which is advocated by Mayer et al. (2000) can reveal a person’s EI and identify the specific ability of gauging whether the leader is showing genuine empathy.

It is interesting to note that a number of our participants used the terms EI or EQ of their own accord. Calls have been made to train leaders and others in EI (e.g. Jordan 2005; Sosik & Megerian, 1999) but academics have questioned both the quality of the programmes and the models on which they are based (Groves, McEnrue & Shen 2008; Zeidner et al. 2009). Studies of the effectiveness of these programmes have only recently surfaced (McEnrue, Groves & Shen 2009). Training leaders in change management should also incorporate emotional responses to change and the role of EI, and rigorous studies need to be conducted on how they influence interpersonal change dynamics.

Secondly, constructions about others’ EI are formed from multiple discourses. Our interviews focused on one change experience and did not attempt to fully engage how followers developed perceptions of leader EI. Further qualitative and/or quantitative research could investigate perceived evidence of EI in general organisational settings in addition to those that are specifically related to change. People’s evaluations of others are also formed not only in dyadic leader-follower relationships but also from conversations with peers and others. Arguments that leadership is socially constructed by followers (e.g. Meindl 1995; Spillane, Hallett & Diamond 2003; Ford & Lawler, 2007) lend weight to the view that perceptions of leader EI can be similarly developed through such discourses.
Thirdly, followers’ personality traits may influence how they perceive the emotional responsiveness of their leaders. High neuroticism, one of the Big Five personality factors (Digman 1990; McCrae & Costa 1987; McCrae & John 1992), may predispose people to demand extreme levels of emotional support or paradoxically distrust those who provide it. High disagreeableness, another Big Five dimension, may also sway people into negative evaluations of others. People who are high in dispositional cynicism (Reichers, Wanous & Austin 1997; Dean, Brandes & Dharwadkar 1998; Stanley, Meyer & Topolnytsky 2005), may see any expression of empathy as inauthentic. Stanley et al. reported dispositional cynicism to be one of a number of cynicism constructs that played a role in resistance to change, but how this impacts on perceptions of managerial EI in change contexts has not been explored. Those who are high in resilience and self-efficacy may need less emotional support during change. They may therefore not detect leader EI because it is not salient to them. Personality tests (which operate through self-reports and are also subject to inaccuracy) (e.g. Hofstee 1994; Petrides & Furnham 2000; Westen & Gabbard 1999), have been found to correlate to EI (Van Rooy & Viswesveran 2004; Law, Wong & Song 2004). Vakola et al. (2004) testing for both EI and Big Five personality traits, found that high scores on EI, openness to experience, assertiveness, agreeableness and conscientiousness, and low scores on neuroticism, led to more constructive attitudes to change. However, exactly which personality traits underpin follower perceptions’ of leader emotional responsiveness needs further empirical investigation.

Fourthly, perceptiveness is an ability to see people ‘accurately’ but perception is highly subjective. Emphasising a social constructionist approach to leadership Ford and Lawler (2007: 419) maintain, “What ‘exists’ are varied, multiple, legitimate interpretations of a situation, rather than a single truth.” It could also be rightly argued that sensory overload, prior experience, stereotyping, self-serving bias and other barriers (Miller & Ross 1975; Roberson & Kulik 2007) influence these constructions by followers of leaders. Perceptions of leaders are therefore coloured by many factors (Nye 2002), including how authentic (Fields 2007; Michie & Gooty 2005) or emotionally intelligent they are believed to be (Kellett et al 2002). The influence of follower perceptiveness, in the context of EI and organisational change, therefore needs further research.
CONCLUSION

Bryman (2004) has argued strongly for more qualitative research on leadership, both separate to and in tandem with quantitative research, but cautions against the former becoming the ‘handmaiden’ to the latter. No such clarion calls have been sounded in research into EI. We have provided qualitative evidence of how followers in organisational change have evaluated the responsiveness of leaders to their emotional reactions, and how these triggered further cognitive, affective and behavioural responses. In presenting a model we have established a framework that allows for further investigations of the attributed EI of leaders of change.

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