Authenticity Effects of Leader’s Emotion Expression on Leadership Effectiveness and Followers’ Trust

Mr. Gang Zhang  
School of Labor and Employment Relations  
University of Illinois Urbana Champaign, U.S.A.  
Email: gzhang23@illinois.edu

Mr. Lu Wang*  
College of Business  
University of Illinois Urbana Champaign, U.S.A.  
Email: luwang1@illinois.edu

Dr. Arran Caza  
College of Business  
University of Illinois Urbana Champaign, U.S.A.  
Email: caza@illinois.edu

Preferred Stream: Leadership and Governance
ABSTRACT: This paper explores the consequences of authentic and inauthentic emotion expression by leaders. We develop a conceptual model describing how the authenticity of leader’s emotion expression influences followers’ trust in their leader as an explanation of the leader’s subsequent effectiveness. Theory suggests that leaders are more likely to gain trust from followers and, therefore, to be more effective, when they express authentic emotion as opposed to feigned emotion. Implications and future directions are discussed.

Keywords: Authentic leadership, Emotion expression, Followership, Trust

On January 7th, 2008, the day before the New Hampshire primary vote, one of the leading contenders for the Democratic nomination and the U.S. presidency, Hilary Clinton, displayed strong emotions in a campaign speech. She seemed very close to tears while discussing her experience. That expression of emotion attracted extensive media attention, and provoked heated debate about whether the unshed tears were authentic or not. Observers made competing claims about Clinton’s leadership potential based on the alleged authenticity of her emotion expression (e.g., Kornblut, 2008; Snow & Parker, 2008).

On the face of the matter, devoting this level of attention and concern to such an apparently minor moment may seem surprising. However, it is not surprising at all if one assumes that the widespread concern with the authenticity of Clinton’s emotion expression likely reflects pervasive concerns about leadership authenticity in general. In light of recent corporate and government scandals, some have suggested that there is a general lack of faith in leaders. Moreover, the second annual National Leadership Index taken by the Center for Public Leadership at the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard found that 7 in 10 Americans (70.8%) agreed or agreed strongly that there is a leadership crisis in the United States (Rosenthal, Pittinsky, Purvin, & Montoya). As a result, there has been increasing concern with identifying and understanding authentic leadership behaviour (Avolio & Luthans, 2006; Brown & Trevino, 2006; Goffee & Jones, 2005).
This growing interest in authentic leadership has led to a series of research investigations and new theories (e.g., Brown, Trevino, & Harrison, 2005; Walumbwa, Avolio, Gardner, Wernsing, & Peterson, 2008). In this work, authentic leaders have been defined as individuals who act “in accord with the true self, expressing oneself in ways that are consistent with inner thoughts and feelings” (Harter, 2002, p. 382), and who are transparent about their intentions (Luthans & Avolio 2003). Moreover, authentic leaders are expected to go beyond self-interest and exhibit concern for the common good and the welfare of their followers (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; May, Chan, Hodges, & Avolio, 2003). Such authentic leadership behaviour has been linked to numerous important behavioural and organizational outcomes (Jensen & Luthans, 2006; Walumbwa, et al. 2008).

Interestingly, although Harter (2002) and subsequent work define authenticity in terms of a leader’s thoughts and feelings, extant research on authentic leaders has focused primarily on leaders’ verbal communication and actions (e.g., Dineen, Lewicki, & Tomlinson, 2006; Simons, 2002; Walumbwa, et al., 2008). For instance, Dinnen and colleagues (2006) found that a leader’s behavioural integrity – the alignment of a leader’s words and deeds – influenced followers’ organizational citizenship behaviour. However, despite the growing research evidence that leaders’ expressed emotions have significant effects on followers’ attitudes and behaviours (e.g., Ashkanasy & Tse, 2000; Damen, van Knippenberg, & van Knippenberg, 2008; Michie & Gooty, 2005; Rubin, Munz, & Bommer, 2005), relatively little attention has been paid to the authenticity of leaders’ emotion expression (Burke, Sims, Lazzara, & Salas, 2007). Nonetheless, as the Clinton example illustrates, followers’ beliefs about the authenticity of a leader’s expressed emotions may have important consequences (also see Bauer, 2003).

This paper explores this issue by considering how the authenticity of a leader’s expressed emotion affects follower attitudes. Specifically, we develop a model showing how trust mediates the relationship between the authenticity of a leader’s emotion expression and leadership effectiveness. We begin by briefly reviewing past literature and defining authentic emotion expression. Then, we describe how the authenticity of a leader’s emotion expression influences leadership effectiveness by affecting the level of trust followers experience toward the leader. In the last section, we discuss both theoretical and practical implications, as well as future research directions.
AUTHENTIC EMOTION EXPRESSION

Theories from a number of different disciplines have associated authentic emotion with sincerity (e.g. Ashforth & Humphrey 1993; Grandey & Brauburger 2002; Pugmire 1998; Wentworth & Ryan 1992). According to this view, an authentic emotion is a sincere response to an eliciting situation (Salmela, 2005). The expression of an authentic emotion is therefore an emotion expression that matches the expresser’s inner experience. In other words, the emotion expressed is the emotion being felt. In contrast, an inauthentic or feigned emotion expression is an emotion expression that does not match the internal experience of the expresser.

Leaders may feign their emotion expression for a number of reasons (Ferris, Treadway, Perrewe, Brouer, Douglas, & Lux, 2007). For example, a business leader may fake a positive emotion expression, such as enthusiasm and excitement, in a business meeting to increase social influence and motivate others to feel excited about a particular project the leader endorses (Wang, Doucet, & Northcraft, 2006). A leader may also fake a strong negative emotion, such as anger, to induce compliance in followers. More generally, since emotion expression has been shown to be an important source of influence on followers, leaders may frequently see potential utility in feigning specific emotions (Treadway, et al., 2004).

Whatever the reasons for a leader’s decision to feign an emotion, research suggests that the deception could fail. Feigned emotion expression has been shown to differ from authentic emotion expression in several ways that can often be detected by observers (Ekman, 2003; Frank, Ekman, & Friesen, 1993). In part, this is due to the fact that authentic and feigned emotions are induced by different patterns of neural activity, and therefore their expressions involve different muscles (Ekman, 2003; Rinn, 1984). In addition, authentic emotion expressions are more symmetrical and of more consistent duration than feigned emotion expressions (Frank, Ekman, & Friesen, 1993; Rinn, 1984). For example, authentic happiness involves contractions of the zygomatic muscles around the mouth and the orbicularis oculi muscles around the eyes, while feigned happiness only involves contractions of the zygomatic muscles (Ekman, Davidson, & Friesen, 1990). These differences, although subtle, can reveal to an observer whether the emotion expression is authentic or feigned.
Although debate continues regarding how reliably observers can distinguish authentic emotions from feigned ones (Hess and Kleck, 1994; Port and Brinke 2008), a number of experiments have demonstrated lay people’s ability to successfully detect authentic and feigned emotion (Frank et al., 1993; Ekman, 2003; Grandey, Fisk, Mattila, Jansen, & Sideman, 2005). For example, Frank and colleagues showed (1993) that untrained observers can discern between authentic and feigned displays of happiness. In addition, Grandey and colleagues (2005) found that college students were able to successfully differentiate authentic emotion from feigned emotion communicated by an actor in a video clip. Moreover, in organizational contexts, individuals usually develop continuing relationships through repeated interactions. Such ongoing contact will typically lead to more accurate inferences because of greater familiarity and more information about the individual expressing the emotion (Elfenbein & Ambady, 2002; Elfenbein, Mandal, Ambady, Harizuka, & Kumar, 2004). Since leaders tend to be closely watched by subordinates (Bright, Cameron, & Caza, 2006; Cameron & Caza, 2002), we predict that followers are likely to accurately judge the authenticity of a leader’s expressed emotion.

**Proposition 1:** Observers, especially direct followers, can detect the authenticity of a leader’s expressed emotion.

**EMOTION AUTHENTICITY AND LEADER EFFECTIVENESS**

If one assumes that followers can detect the authenticity of a leader’s emotion expression, then that authenticity may have important implications for the leader’s effectiveness. Specifically, we argue that the perceived authenticity of a leader’s emotion expression will affect followers’ trust in the leader (see Figure 1). Trust is defined as a psychological state that is comprised of the intention to accept vulnerability based on positive expectations of the intentions or behaviours of another person (Rousseau, Sitkin, Burt, & Camerer, 1998). In other words, trust is the willingness to make oneself vulnerable to the intentions and actions of another (Jones & George, 1998).

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Insert Figure 1

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With regard to leadership and trust, Dirks and Ferrin (2002) advanced a two-part model to explain how a leader’s behaviour can influence followers’ trust. First, a leader’s behaviour can influence followers’ trust by affecting followers’ perception of the leader’s character (character-based perspective). At the same time, a leader’s behaviour can influence followers’ trust by affecting followers’ perception of the quality of their relationship with the leader (relationship-based perspective). As such, followers may trust a leader based on belief in his or her character, on the quality of their dyadic relationship with the leader, or both. Accordingly, we predict that the authenticity of a leader’s expressed emotion may influence followers’ trust through both of these mechanisms. More specifically, we argue below that followers are likely to draw distinct inferences about both the character of a leader and the nature of their relationship with that leader, depending on whether they judge the leader’s expressed emotion to be authentic or feigned.

The authenticity of a leader’s emotion expression may influence followers’ perception of that leader’s character and intentions. If an emotion expression is seen as an accurate reflection of the expresser’s attitudes and beliefs, it will be used to judge the expresser’s intentions and priorities (Fridlund, 1992, Keltner & Kring, 1998; Keltner & Hadit, 1999; Knutson, 1996; Scherer, 1986). For example, a display of positive emotion, such as excitement, when evaluating a new investment opportunity may be interpreted as a signal of a manager’s positive attitude toward the opportunity. In contrast, when a feigned emotion is detected, observers will not consider the outward expression to be an accurate reflection of the leader’s true attitude. Rather, they are likely to see the emotion as a facade intended to hide the leader’s ulterior motives. In fact, evidence suggests that observers often interpret others’ feigned emotion expression as calculated attempts to manipulate them (Rafaeli & Sutton, 1989). Followers may thus perceive leaders’ feigned emotion expression as an attempt to hide the truth and to take advantage of the followers (also see Burke, et al., 2007). As a result, followers are more likely to perceive the leader as being manipulative and deceitful (i.e., of less honest character).

Proposition 2: The perceived authenticity of a leader’s displayed emotion influences followers’ assessment of the leader’s character, such that authentic emotion expression increases belief in leader honesty, while feigned expression reduces belief in leader honesty.
In addition to influencing followers’ assessment of a leader’s character, authentic or feigned emotion expression may also influence followers’ perceptions of the quality of the leader-follower relationship. An authentic emotion expression can communicate a leader’s desire to develop a high quality relationship with followers, while a feigned expression may signal a lack of concern or even disrespect for followers (see Dutton & Heaphy, 2003). For example, Grandey and Brauburger (2002) suggest that feigned displays of emotion are interpreted as revealing a lack of interest and effort on the part of the expresser; observers assume that feigned emotion represents a lack of desire for close interaction. Consistent with this, Grandey (2003) found that feigned emotion expression by customer service agents was perceived by customers as a failure to provide individual attention. Extending the relational signalling effect of emotion authenticity to the leadership context, one would expect that authentic emotion expression will be interpreted as communicating an interest in developing a high quality relationship. In contrast, followers will perceive feigned emotion expression as a signal that the leader is only interested in a superficial relationship.

Proposition 3: The perceived authenticity of a leader’s emotion expression influences followers’ assessment of the leader-follower relationship, such that authentic emotion expression contributes to relationship quality, while feigned expression reduces relationship quality.

As stated earlier, followers’ assessments of a leader’s character and of the leader-follower relationship both influence subsequent trust in that leader (Dirks and Ferris, 2002). Individuals perceived as honest are judged more trustworthy, and thus more deserving of trust (Colquitt, Scott, & LePine, 2007). This effect may be particularly strong for leaders, because of their formal authority and organizational mandate. For example, when followers see their leader as a manipulative and deceitful individual, they are likely to believe that the leader is attempting to use and manipulate them in the service of organizational goals (Dirks and Ferris, 2002). On the other hand, when followers perceive their leader as an honest individual, they are more likely to trust the leader.

Proposition 4: Followers are more likely to trust a leader they assess as having an honest character.
Followers’ perceptions of the quality of their relationship with a leader will also influence their trust in that leader (Burke, et al., 2007; Dirks and Ferris, 2002). High quality relationships are characterized by mutual care, goodwill, and high levels of positive reciprocity (Blau, 1964; Dutton & Heaphy, 2003). These characteristics make the individual more willing to be vulnerable to the other person, because of a belief in their positive intentions; high quality relationships thus promote trust (Jones & George, 1998; Rousseau, et al., 1998). As such, followers’ perceptions of having a high quality leader-follower relationship will increase followers’ trust in the leader.

Proposition 5: Followers are more likely to trust a leader with whom they have a high-quality relationship.

Previous research has demonstrated that follower trust plays a crucial role in leader effectiveness (Bass, 1990; Dirks and Ferrin, 2002; Hogan, Curphy, & Hogan, 1994). Trust in a leader has been linked to many positive organizational outcomes, such as higher job performance, increased job satisfaction and organizational commitment, increased organizational citizenship behaviour, and decreased intention to quit (see Burke, et al., 2007 for a review). For example, Mayer, Davis, and Schoorman (1995) suggested that when followers trust their leader they are more likely to expend their energy and efforts on productive work-related behaviours than on worrying about “covering their backs” and being sabotaged by their leader. Therefore, trust is predicted to be an important source of leader effectiveness.

Proposition 6: Followers’ trust will lead to increased leader effectiveness.

CONCLUSION

This paper describes a model to explain the effect of authentic emotion expression in the leadership process. It argues that followers can distinguish between authentic and feigned emotion expression, and that this distinction has important implications for their trust in the leader. Followers are more likely to trust leaders who express authentic emotions, because followers will make a more positive assessment of the leader’s character, and they will judge their relationship with that leader to be of higher quality.

The model presented here has several important implications. For one, it begins to address the noteworthy lack of attention that has been paid to authenticity of leaders’ emotion expression. While
there are growing bodies of research about the effects of leaders’ emotion expression (e.g., Ashkanasy & Tse, 2000; Michie & Gooty, 2005) and about authentic leadership behaviour and communication (e.g., Jensen & Luthans, 2006; Walumbwa, et al. 2008), the two have rarely been combined to examine the effects of authentic leadership emotion. This is crucial however, since sincerity in thoughts and feelings is the foundation of authenticity (Harter, 2002). Moreover, by considering the authenticity of leaders’ emotion expression, our paper offers to begin providing a bridge between the research on leadership emotion and authentic leadership.

The model described here also has important practical implications. Past research suggests that it is essential for leaders to learn how to use emotions to influence followers (Humphrey et al, 2008). In fact, managers and supervisors appear to routinely engage in as much or more emotional labour (i.e. management and strategic use of emotion) as does any other occupational group (Brotheridge & Grandey, 2002). It is easy to imagine, for example, a manager feigning a display of enthusiasm and excitement in an effort to bolster group morale. However, our model suggests that this strategy could backfire on the manager. As described above, efforts to influence followers through emotion expression are most likely to work when the emotions are authentic or “from the heart”. Inauthentic emotion expression is likely to be recognized as such and to reduce subsequent trust in the leader. This fact underscores the need for leaders to be fully authentic, not only in thought and deed, but also in the expression of their feelings.

Of course, the propositions developed here remain to be tested. Although there is prior evidence in support of each link in the chain, it is crucial that future investigation test the model as a whole. Moreover, there may be reason to expect some factors to play an important moderating role in the relationship between emotion authenticity, trust and effectiveness. A number of such possibilities are raised by the Clinton example that began this paper. For example, does the valence of the expressed emotion matter? Would responses have been more or less strong if Clinton had been accused of feigning happiness rather than tears? Similarly, gender and culture are likely to be important consideration in followers’ response to leaders’ emotion authenticity. How different might the public response have been if it had been Obama who was accused of feigning tears, rather than Clinton? Finally, future research will also need to consider issues of self-interest and social
identification as moderators of the process. For example, follower responses to inauthentic emotion expression may be different if they believe that the inauthenticity is in their own self-interest. Would followers lose or gain trust if they observed their CEO faking positive emotion when talking to investors? As these questions indicate, the model described here is a crucial first step in understanding the important issues of authentic leadership emotion, but there is much work yet to be done.
References


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Figure 1: Model of Authenticity Effects of Leader’s Emotion Expression on Leadership Effectiveness and Followers’ Trust