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Affect, Emotion and Emotion Regulation in the Workplace: Feelings and Attitudinal Restructuring

Abstract

[Excerpt] Almost 40 years after publishing *A Behavioral Theory of Labor Negotiations* in 1965, the fields of negotiations and organizational behavior experienced an “affective revolution” (Barsade, Brief and Spataro 2003). Although Walton and McKersie could not have predicted the widespread academic and public interest in emotion and emotional intelligence, they foreshadowed this affect-laden direction in the section of their book on attitudinal structuring, which identified the dimension of *friendliness-hostility* as a critical aspect of the relationship between negotiating parties in the workplace and other settings.

Keywords

emotional intelligence, organizational behavior, friendliness-hostility, negotiation

Disciplines

Industrial and Organizational Psychology | Labor Relations | Organizational Behavior and Theory | Organization Development | Work, Economy and Organizations

Comments

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Affect, Emotion and Emotion Regulation in the Workplace: Feelings and Attitudinal Restructuring

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Forthcoming: *Negotiation Journal*

Special Issue on A Behavioral Theory of Labor Negotiation

Almost 40 years after publishing *A Behavioral Theory of Labor Negotiations* in 1965, the fields of negotiations and organizational behavior experienced an “affective revolution” (Barsade, Brief and Spataro 2003). Although Walton and McKersie could not have predicted the widespread academic and public interest in emotion and emotional intelligence, they foreshadowed this affect-laden direction in the section of their book on attitudinal structuring, which identified the dimension of *friendliness-hostility* as a critical aspect of the relationship between negotiating parties in the workplace and other settings.

Affect refers to a positive or negative visceral response to stimuli (Zajonc 1980; Keltner and Haidt 1999). It is a broad category that includes dispositional tendencies, moods, directed affective experiences, such as liking and affective bonds, as well as discrete emotions, such as anger, contempt and empathy (Fridja 1988; Ellsworth and Scherer 2003). Feelings associated with friendliness have a positive affective tone and typically involve liking, affective bonds and empathy.

A substantial body of research has found that positive affect influences helping behavior and the maintenance of social bonds (Fredrickson, 2001; Niven, Totterdell, Holman and Headley, 2012) as well as decision making and creativity (Estrada, Isen, and Young 1997; Fredrickson and Branian 2005; Isen 1987; 2008)—all of which can facilitate integrative bargaining and collaboration in the workplace (Isen, 2001). Further, empathic concern has been linked to better joint outcomes for negotiators in both competitive and cooperative contexts (Galinsky et al. 2008; Gilin et al. 2012), to altruistic behavior (Batson 2011) and to forgiveness and conflict resolution in the workplace (Fehr and Gelfand, 2012). These influences of positive affect undergird the importance that Walton and McKersie placed on friendly feelings and their observation that feelings form a critical foundation for attitude change in bargaining.

Walton and McKersie also recognized the effects that strong negative feelings of hate, anger, and contempt could have on the negotiation processes because these emotions motivate destructive behaviors—i.e., “the inclination to destroy the other... or to contribute to their downfall” (p. 186). The intense expressions of anger, contempt and hatred, often associated with competitive

negotiations and intergroup competition, can provoke reciprocal negative feelings, aggressive behavior and the desire to punish others (Fischer and Roseman 2007; Van Kleef, De Dreu and Manstead 2010; Melwani & Barsade 2011). Research on felt anger, especially intense physical displays of anger, support the possibility of these suboptimal outcomes; however, recent work has also taken the nuanced approach of understanding when anger can lead to positive outcomes in the workplace such as the change in unfair policies (Geddes and Callister 2007; Gibson, Schweitzer, Callister and Gray 2009; Gibson and Callister 2010 for review). This more nuanced perspective is also consistent with the implied anger associated with the fruitful civil rights negotiations that Walton and McKersie describe at the end of their book. The contrast and interplay between experienced anger and expressed anger in negotiations is an area that is promising for continued research.

Finally, Walton and McKersie stressed that changes in the quality of a relationship often require that negotiators work through their own negative feelings and help their counterparts work through theirs. Research on emotion regulation in the workplace, which stems from Hochschild's (1979) work on emotional labor in service industries, Gross' (1998) work in emotion regulation in social psychology and Mayer and Salovey's model of emotional intelligence (Mayer, Roberts and Barsade 2008 for review) as well as more recent work on interpersonal emotion regulation (Niven et al. 2012; Williams 2007), provides evidence that reappraisal (i.e., changing how one thinks about the emotion provoking elements of a situation) is positively related both to employees' personal well-being and to their interpersonal functioning (Grandey & Gabriel 2015 for review). Moreover, attempts to increase the positive affect that others feel, even in emotionally intense work setting such as a high-security prison setting, have been related to positive affect, friendship and trust among employees and between employees and clients (Niven et al. 2012). Given the dynamic changes in many workplaces today, an understanding of the role of attitude reappraisal in negotiations will be of continuing importance.

Walton and McKersie realized early on that the benefits of attitudinal structuring and improved relationship quality required a subtle interplay of personal and interpersonal decreases in negative emotions and concomitant increases in positive feelings. Continued research on emotion and emotion regulation in negotiation contexts owes a great debt to the foundation provided by Walton and McKersie's *A Behavioral Theory of Labor Negotiation* (1965).¹

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¹ It was my great honor and joy to guest lecture on the topic of threat regulation, one type of interpersonal emotion regulation, in one of Bob McKersie's programs on Interest-based Bargaining for Labor-Management Teams.

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