



# EMOTIONS AT WORK



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by Jack Zenger

## EMOTIONS ARE POWERFUL DRIVERS OF BEHAVIOR

*The basketball team went into the locker room at half time 14 points behind. Body language signaled that they were discouraged and frustrated. They had played badly. When they came running back on the floor after the half-time break ended there was a palpable difference. They looked more determined and confident. As the second half began it was obvious that they were scrambling hard for every ball, trying to intercept every pass, and following up on every shot. There was an intensity in their play that was totally absent in the first half. The point gap was narrowed. Then they eked ahead and finally won the game.*

What happened? Something was said and done in the locker room that changed behavior. Maybe it was something said by one of the players. More likely it was something that the coach said or the coach's candid observations regarding ways the team played during the first half. Bottom line, their emotions had been touched in some way that clearly led them to behave differently.

## EMOTIONS ARE STRONGLY CORRELATED WITH PERFORMANCE AND PRODUCTIVITY

One scholar wrote:

*"In the last two decades, over 500 studies conducted around the world have revealed the benefits of optimism in creating superior achievement in various*

*settings (at work, in school, and in sports). Optimism has been able to distinguish the high performers from the low performers in various domains of achievement. In sports, optimism predicts performance among nationally ranked college swimmers. In academia, optimism predicts college grades and dropping out.*

*In the business world, optimism predicts sales productivity among salespeople in virtually every industry. Studies conducted with two insurance companies, for example, found that salespeople with optimistic explanations of what was happening to them went on to sell significantly more insurance and were less likely to quit than those with pessimistic explanations. To be exact, the optimistic salespeople sold 35 percent more insurance than the pessimists. Also, the pessimists were twice as likely as the optimists to quit by the end of their first year. Pilot research with salespeople in various industries—telecommunications, real estate, office products, auto sales, banking, and others—have found results similar to the insurance research. Optimists outsold the pessimists by 20 to 40 percent. Optimism has an impact on sales productivity regardless of the industry, whenever persistence is to overcome adversity."<sup>1</sup>*

We conducted research on the impact of inspiration on productivity. Here are our conclusions:

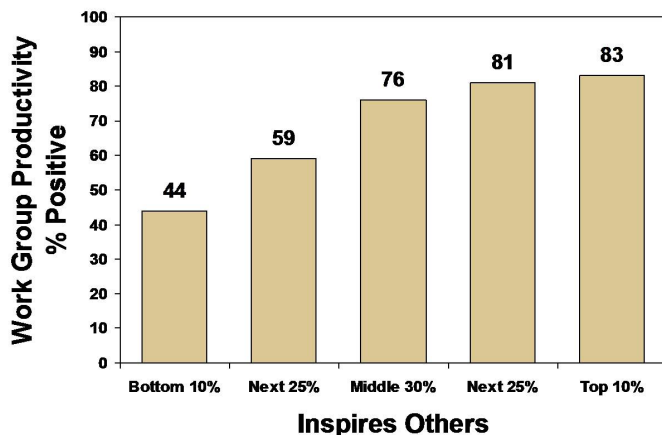
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<sup>1</sup> Peter Schulman, "Applying 'Learned Optimism' to Increase Sales Productivity," University of Pennsylvania Journal of Personal Selling & Sales Management, Winter 1999 p.31.

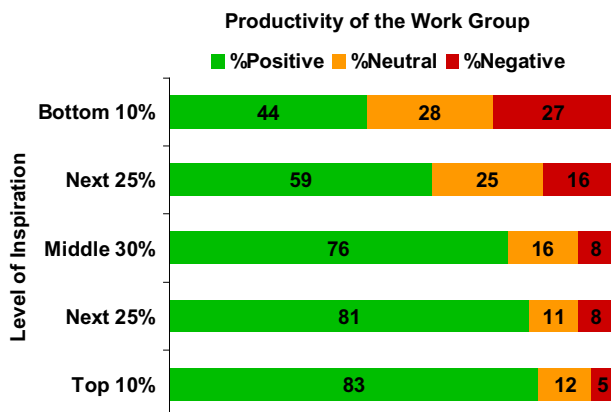
## Impact of Inspiration on Productivity

Employees were assessed on their perceptions of the productivity of their work group. They also rated their immediate manager on inspiration. Five items assessing productivity are as follows:

1. In my business unit or department, we are striving to continually improve work processes, procedures, and work flows to enhance overall productivity.
2. Conditions in my job allow me to be as productive as I can be.
3. In my business unit or department, there is very little wasted time because people can be productive without delays or distractions.
4. Meetings I attend are a productive use of my time.
5. My business unit or department is run efficiently.



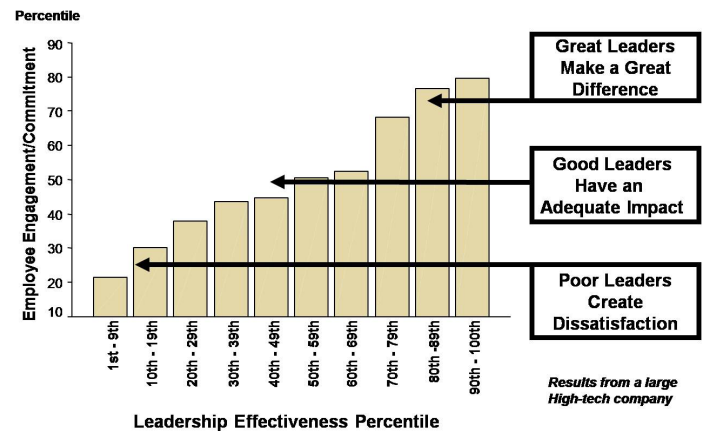
*Inspiration Impacts Work Group Productivity*  
(Results based on ratings of 849 direct reports)



*Impact of Inspiration on Productivity*

## LEADERS STRONGLY IMPACT EMPLOYEE'S FEELINGS OF COMMITMENT AND ENGAGEMENT

Our research has provided strong evidence for the relationship between leadership and levels of employee commitment. The chart below summarizes that research. It has been replicated in various industries, within public and private sector organizations and on several continents around the world. The results are essentially identical.



*Leadership vs. Employee Commitment*

## LEADERS EMOTIONALLY CONNECT WITH THEIR TEAM IN MANY WAYS

We analyzed data from approximately 11,000 leaders. From this group we selected the top 10% on their scores for “inspires and motivates” and from this group of approximately 1,100 we conducted an analysis of the varying ways this group went about inspiring people with whom they worked. By separating the top 10% from the rest and then seeking those items that best separated these two groups we found six clusters of behaviors. These were distinctively different ways that leaders connected with their group.

We arbitrarily described these six styles as:

1. Enthusiast
2. Visionary
3. Involver
4. Expert
5. Principled
6. Driver

This analysis confirms the variety of ways that leaders can inspire and motivate their colleagues. When people think of highly inspiring behavior they often zero in on the first cluster having to do with enthusiasm. Without question the highly energetic, enthusiastic cheerleader is perceived by most as being inspiring. While that behavior is the stereotype that many have of leaders making an emotional connection, it is not typical of the majority of leaders we know. The really good news is that a wide variety of behaviors work.

Leaving aside the style with which the leaders connects with the team, there is also the question of the “substance” of what they do. Our research addressed that as well. We examined those leaders who received the highest scores from their managers, their peers and their direct reports on the items that measured “inspires and motivates to high performance” and then determined the other behaviors that were most highly correlated with “inspires and motivates.” We wanted to know distinguished those leaders who were seen as extremely motivating and inspiring.

The specific actions that the leader takes include things such as:

1. Setting stretch goals
2. Providing clear vision and direction
3. Communicating extensively
4. Developing people
5. Encouraging teamwork and collaboration
6. Sponsoring innovation

## EMOTIONS ARE THE “SWITCH” THAT CONNECTS THE LEADER WITH THE GROUP

Anyone who has taken a class in chemistry has heard about catalysis. This term describes how an agent in a chemical reaction accelerates the speed or the magnitude of the reaction. Emotions are the catalytic agent in relationships. Emotions focus people’s attention on a topic. They move the person to act and overcome the inertia that often holds them back.

In our book *The Inspiring Leader*, we wrote:

*“Emotions and inspiration are two sides of the same coin. The entire topic of a leader’s ability to inspire subordinates comes down to the leader’s willingness and ability to both be aware of and to comfortably use*

*emotion. One broad and extremely important kind of emotion is “enthusiasm”. We think of enthusiasm as describing a feeling of excitement, anticipation, and elation about some prospect for the future.*

*In short, if you want to be more inspirational, understand that you have to become more comfortable in the world of emotions, feelings, and moods. This may sound like a formidable task. You may also be thinking to yourself, “I am what I am.” “I’m too old to change.” “I don’t want to get it to all this squishy emotion stuff.” Yet, the late Andrall Pearson, a former McKinsey Director and CEO of Pepsico and later Yum declared that “emotion is a companies secret competitive edge.”<sup>2</sup>*

## EMOTIONS ARE EXTREMELY CONTAGIOUS

In 2002, Sigal Barsade of Yale University examined the effect of emotional contagion within the group context. In her experiment, a trained actor was placed within group contexts and directed to participate in the groups’ activities while enacting varying levels of pleasantness and energy. The groups were working to assign pay a pay bonus; they had a fixed amount of money they could spend and had to allocate it based on a set of performance criteria. After the activities were completed, participants were asked to complete self-assessments of their mood. Results of the study clearly suggested that the effect of one group member’s emotions had an unconscious affect on the mood of the other group members. This held true both for “positive” and “negative” moods[2].

## THE EFFECT OF MOOD

Given that mood is contagious, one important consideration is the effect of mood on performance. Some authors focus on the idea that “positive” moods have a positive effect on performance, but in reality sometimes a “negative” mood is appropriate.

In the Barsade study discussed above, a negative group member seemed disrupt the groups and reduce efficacy, while having a positive confederate was associated with increased cooperation, fewer group conflicts, and heightened task performance. Likewise, in a similar study, Alice Isen (1993) assessed radiologists, finding positive mood enhanced their accuracy. Positive mood has a far-reaching effect on work performance, supervision, decision-making, and even on team members voluntarily acting for the good of the organization [7].

<sup>2</sup> John H. Zenger, Joseph R. Folkman and Scott K. Edinger, *The Inspiring Leader*, McGraw-Hill, New York, 2009, p. \_\_\_\_\_

## THE LEADER'S EMOTIONS ARE HIGHLY CONTAGIOUS

There are different explanations of the effect that positional and power or authority have on mood contagion. It may be that those with authority have greater impact. Maybe it has to do with those who are either liked or respected have a greater effect. What is clear is that leaders affect the group mood:

*"In a study of the influence of the contagion of mood of a group leader on group members, the positive mood of the leader positively influenced group members at both the individual and collective level with the opposite for a leader's negative mood. The leader's positive mood also had a subsequent influence on group coordination and effort."*<sup>3</sup>

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3 Sy, T., Cote, S., & Saavedra, R. (2005). The contagious leader: Impact of the leader's mood on the mood of group members, group affective tone, and group processes. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 90, 295-305.

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**John H. "Jack" Zenger, D.B.A.**, was inducted into the Human Resources Development Hall of Fame in 1994 and received the Thought Leader Award from his industry colleagues in 2005. He is the author or co-author of seven books on leadership and teams, and is considered one of the most authoritative voices on improving organizational performance and developing leadership.

## CONCLUSION

Like it or not, emotions play a big role in every aspect of our lives. They strongly impact our own productivity and performance. And the emotions of one person are highly infectious to everyone contacted. Leaders who recognize the power of making an emotional connection with their associates magnify their impact. Fortunately, there are many ways for that emotional connection to occur. The broader the repertoire the greater the leaders impact because it would be rare to have a group of subordinates who would all be touched by the same approach.

Effective ways for this emotional connection to be made are far wider and more diverse than most leaders would assume.

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