Part 1 Organizational behaviour

Emotions at work: summary of recent literature (Shaun Tyson)

Introduction

Managerial activity tends to proceed on the assumption of rational behaviour in organizations. The idea of management as a science has encouraged managers to believe that when they are dealing with the conduct of work, people should follow the same rational processes as a machine – hence the idea of the ‘machine bureaucracy’. These assumptions fit well with production systems which depend upon each part of the system delivering a particular input with precision for a specific output. However, as the influence of the service sector has grown in size and significance to the economy, these old assumptions have become less realistic. Service delivery is all about people and their relationships, and because the quality of personal relationships affects performance so clearly in the service sector, companies have recognized the role of emotions in relationships as affecting their performance.

Emotional labour

People’s creativity, productivity and service innovation, their capacity for improvisation, and above all, their relationships, in working teams with customers and suppliers, in sales and in networking, have come to be accepted as some of the most important assets any business can possess. The importance of emotions in the workplace was made explicit by Arlie Hochschild’s seminal book *The Managed Heart* (1983). She explained how the growing service sector in our modern economies relies upon the way relations are managed between customers and employees. This relational work she examined in detail in her study of flight attendants, which requires them to be ‘nice’ and debt collectors which requires them to be ‘nasty’. They must display pre-established emotions according to the rules of the organization to their customers. These emotions must be displayed in the facial expression and in the behaviours of such workers, irrespective of their own feelings at the time. This requires what she calls ‘deep acting’.

There are many other roles in our society where employees have to adopt these behaviours and to present a specific countenance when representing the company to customers, such as hotel staff, shop assistants, nurses, doctors and dentists, as well as sales staff. Even in business-to-business relationships, there is always a customer.

These kinds of jobs require what has come to be called ‘emotional labour’ (Hochschild 1983:7). This is not limited to situations where there are meetings between the employee and the customer. Call centre staff, for example, have to adopt a friendly voice tone, to sound genuinely interested in the questions and responses of customers.

The suppression by the employee of their genuine feelings could in time produce a form of alienation because of the emotional dissonance between emotions felt and those revealed, so that it becomes impossible for individuals to give true expression to their feelings. It is suggested such repression produces burn-out and stress. Having constantly to act a role is emotionally exhausting. Alienation comes from the low self-esteem which follows, with cynicism and depression as a consequence.

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Background reading and references


Passion

Emotions at work can be useful for employers in a positive way. The release of genuine emotions is an attribute which can be a source of extra effort. Ho, Wong, and Lee (2011) proposed a model which links two types of passion – harmonious and obsessive – to work performance, which they argue is mediated through what they describe as the level of ‘cognitive engagement’. They describe passion as a job attitude, about how one feels about one’s own job. The cognitive element that a person has is a way of explaining the importance of the job for the person concerned, the degree of enjoyment or liking for the job, and is the affective element.

Harmonious passion seems to be akin to organizational citizenship behaviour, which is controlled by the person and refers to the internalization of the job’s objectives. Obsessive passion, on the other hand, is more of a psychological state, based on strong feelings about the superiority they believe is associated with the work.

Reference


Emotion in customer interactions

Emotions are not only important for employee and employer relationships and customer relationships, as part of the everyday work of people, but are also critical in problematic relationships, for example during service failure recovery encounters. Consumers also have emotional reactions to employee behaviour, therefore. Schoefer and Diamantopolous (2009) researched a typology of response styles elicited in customer service recovery encounters, which they were able to link to the customer’s subsequent view of the relationship with the company providing the service.

They argue that: ‘given that consumers are likely to experience multiple emotions during service recovery encounters … the overall levels (i.e. intensity) of positive and negative emotions may also be expected to systematically correspond to relational outcomes’ (p. 296). The quality of the relationship during these encounters was classified as ‘satisfaction’, ‘trust’, and ‘commitment’. The researchers developed a multi-scale classification of emotional response styles by consumers, using the labels: ‘pleasure’, ‘involvement’, ‘discontent’, and ‘concern’.

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Service quality is seen to be judged by consumers as an outcome of their emotional reaction to a service recovery situation. The positive emotional response style was dominated by the pleasure and involvement dimensions, rather than the concern and discontent emotions.

Reference

The impact of management actions on employee emotions
Perceptions of procedural fairness of managers’ actions elicit emotional responses from employees. These perceptions are often drawn from others: ‘within groups and organizations, procedural justice affects, for example, subjective and intuitive reactions like emotions’ (Cremer and van Hiel 2010: 280). In their article, Cremer and van Hiel explore whether or not emotions such as anger and frustration are elicited depends on the relationships within the teams or groups, for example where there are goal interdependencies. Goal interdependence affects whether or not one cares about the unfair treatment of others, according to this study.

Managers and first-line supervisors have a direct impact on the psychological state, the ‘frame of mind’ of those who work under their direction. This can have a positive affect, or a negative affect, depending on the management style adopted by those who have authority over others. Neidl (1996), showed how the targets of bullying became anxious, depressed, irritable, and suffered more psychosomatic disorders than those who were not victims.

In their study of abusive supervision, Chan and McAllister (2014) describe how bullying, aggression, victimization, and petty tyranny engender psychosomatic states which include stress, distrust, anxiety, and fear. These characteristics show how employees may be driven into a state of non-clinical paranoia, heightened by exaggerated feelings of persecution, mistreatment and of being disparaged by malevolent others in the organization (Kramer 1994). This state is induced particularly where there are low levels of trust in the organization, causing individuals to be extra vigilant and to ruminate over what is happening to them, which leads them to develop tendencies to sinister attributions, which are intensified by abusive supervision. This chain of reactions can result in the performance of the victim of bullying to underperform, giving more excuse for supervisors to be critical, producing a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy.

References

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**Signs of emotion at work**

Expressions of emotion at work are sometimes seen as failures, as a loss of control by the person concerned. In her 2011 book, Kreamer points out that although the expression of emotion may be unacceptable to managers if it embarrasses others, stress and anxiety are inevitable consequences from the pressure at work.

She sees crying as a warning sign of something wrong, usually an indication of frustration and anger, and perhaps of exhaustion. According to her research in the US, 41 per cent of women said they had cried at work in the previous year, and 9 per cent of men had cried in the previous year. The gender differences are explicable by physical differences between the sexes. Stress, for example, causes men to produce aggressive hormones (testosterone and cortisol), whereas women produce the caring hormones (oxytocin) and prolactin (which produces tears). In addition, since women have smaller tear ducts than men, this results in the tears falling down their cheeks, whereas in men, their eyes mist over. Interestingly, her research shows that women typically cry over work issues, because they feel undervalued and frustrated, but men cry because of emotional problems outside the work environment.

David and Congleton (2013), present a case for what they describe as ‘emotional agility’ to cope with the pressures of the modern world. They suggest that effective leaders do not try to suppress or give way to their inner feelings. Rather, they develop emotional agility by adopting a mindful, values-driven and more action-driven approach. They recommend four practices taken from acceptance and commitment therapy. These practices are: to recognize the patterns of thoughts which are repetitive, and are rigid feelings or stories stuck in one’s mind; to label these thought patterns, and to understand the emotions behind them; to accept these patterns for what they are; and to act on one’s own values, looking for expanding choices about how to act.

**References**


**Conclusions**

Emotionality at work is a fact of life for HRM. Learning to turn emotions to the advantage of the individual and of the business, while understanding and respecting the rights of others to express their emotions is the challenge in this area for HR managers. There are practical issues discussed above which should help to confront any bullying which is a cause of problems, to pay attention to what is causing frustration and anger, and to use emotions positively, by harnessing the natural enthusiasm people at work have, if they have the leaders who can create a high trust, and high performance environment.

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