

# Emotion contagion in leadership: Followercentric approach

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The main purpose of this article is to explain leadership process from followercentric perspective through emotion contagion theory. The article provides overview of followercentric approaches in leadership research and emotion contagion theory with the recent developments of (social) neuroscience and psychology, which allowed examining emotions in a more comprehensive way. Finally, the conceptual model of emotion contagion in leadership process is presented.

Emotion contagion is rarely addressed in leadership context. This article contributes to stimulation of this debate and discussion on still underrepresented subjects in leadership research, such as followercentric approach, importance of emotions in leader-follower communication, and emotional contagion theory in leadership context. Moreover, the proposed model is an integrated model that can be considered in empiric research, including the most recent developments in alternative methods (e.g. (social) neuroscience methods in leadership), enabling further development of leadership theory and contributing to leadership effectiveness.

**JEL Classifications:** M12

**Keywords:** Emotional contagion, followercentric approach, leader, follower, leadership

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Without emotions - without the ability to feel joy and sadness,  
anger and guilt - we would really not be human beings at all  
(Izard, 1991, p.8)

## Introduction

Even though "more articles and books have been written about leadership than about any other topic in the field of management" (Steers et al., 2012, p.479) our knowledge about this field is still limited (Barker, 1997). However, leadership maintains its importance in research due to its crucial significance to human achievement (Gill, 2011). The importance of leadership lies on its impact on organisational outcomes (Uhl-Bien, Riggio, Lowe, and Carsten, 2014), competitiveness and performance (Boin, 2005), and society at large (O'Reilly et al., 2010).

The relevance of leadership for today's business world and its significance is evident, however this field has been faced with a lot of criticism and even call for end of it (Kellerman, 2012). The criticism for leadership field originates in few aspects that are discussed below.

The first issue is a high number of leadership definitions (Schein, 2010; Steers et al., 2012) and leadership theories (at least 60 theories, see Dinh et al., 2014). On the one hand this

variety provides a freedom of choice for researcher, however, it also complicates research - the conceptual, theoretical and empirical choices of the researcher (Snaebjornsson, 2016). Furthermore, it makes comparison and overview of the research difficult or even impossible (Hamlin, 2005). Even though all leadership definitions have particular focus or emphasizes one element over the other, however, all of them are similar in regard to four common elements of leadership: leader, follower, process (communication/interaction), and goal/aim/purpose (Northouse, 2013). Communication or process of interaction between leader and follower is of the particular importance, as it impacts whether/how successfully the overall goal will be achieved. Based on above mentioned, in this article particular focus is placed on dyadic leader-follower communication.

The second source of criticism stems from a long tradition of leadercentrism in leadership research (Snaebjornsson, 2016). Shamir (2007) suggests that the focus on follower has been neglected in leadership researcher, even though research indicates the importance of the follower in leadership process (Uhl-Bien, et al., 2014; Andreesc and Vito, 2010). Responding to this line of criticism, this article investigates dyadic leader-follower communication process from followercentric perspective, presenting and summarising variety of approaches in leadership literature.

The third issue addressed by the critics of leadership field, is lack of integration in leadership research where calls for merger of perspectives and paradigms are made (Anderson et al., 2008; Pearce and Conger, 2003). This type of criticism is particularly relevant today when broad spectrum of science fields (e.g. social psychology, (social, cognitive) neuroscience) are presenting research findings (e.g. activity of mirror neurons, see Watson and Greenberg, 2011; Rizzolatti, 2005) that could benefit leadership theory, contributing to its development and advancement. As response to this criticism, this article analyses leadership process (leader-follower dyad) using emotion contagion theory aiming to contribute to the integration of paradigms in leadership field.

Based on the above outlined, the main question in this article is: ***How does emotion contagion process affect leader - follower interaction in leadership process?*** As mentioned above, the followercentric approach will guide the answer to the research question of this article.

To summarise, this article discusses emotional contagion in a dynamic follower-leader relationship, from followercentric perspective, as means to advance our understanding about complex phenomenon of leadership by integrate existing knowledge. Furthermore, to propose a conceptual model, based on literature analysis. The aim is to encourage academic debate on the newest developments in management related fields and attract attention of organisational leadership scholars to the integration of paradigms and use of new theoretical lenses in leadership theorizing and research. Latter will enable better understanding of leadership and consequently contribute to effectiveness in leadership and leader-follower communication.

## **Followercentric approaches in leadership research**

For decades leadership field was dominated by leadercentric research and neglected focus on followers (Shamir, 2007). However, literature indicates the benefits of an alternative - followercentric approach in many aspects of leadership, including assessment of and attitudes on leader effectiveness (Uhl-Bien et al., 2014; Andreesc and Vito, 2010).

When considering dyadic relationship between follower and leader from followercentric point of view, it is essential to investigate existing followercentric perspectives in management literature. Shamir and colleagues (2007) summarised the main directions in followercentric research and follower's role in it. The first approach considers followers as the recipients of leader influence. Here the follower is seen as an implementer of a dominantly passive role and leadership is viewed as a linear one-way process (Jackson and Parry, 2011). Second approach in literature views followers as moderators of leader

impact. This view corresponds to the contingency theories of leadership (e.g., situational leadership, Fiedler, 1967; House, 1971; Vroom and Yetton, 1973) as it highlights the significance of the context and timing in leadership process. The third approach considers followers as substitutes for leadership (Kerr and Jermier, 1978). This perspective de-emphasizes the significance of a leader and hypes the significance of a follower, however, fails to elaborate on followers' role in the leadership process. Yet another view in followercentric leadership sees followers as constructors of leadership. It states that leadership becomes leadership only if a follower recognizes it as one. The focus here is on the thoughts of the followers, how they construct the leaders (Jackson and Parry, 2011; Meindl, 1993; Stech, 2004; Goethals, 2005; Shamir, 2007; Van Knippenberg and Hogg, 2003). One of the newest views presents followers as leaders (as in shared leadership, co-leadership, distributed leadership). This approach abandons the leader - follower distinction and considers leadership to be a function that can be shared (see Hock, 1999; Gronn, 2002; Raelin, 2003; Toegel and Jonsen, 2016). Shamir's et al. (2007) typology ends by presenting the views where followers are the co-producers of leadership. This is a broad approach (see Hollander, 1958; Messick, 2004), covering such theories as servant leadership (Greenleaf and Spears, 2002), leader-member exchange (LMX) (Graen and Uhl-Bien, 1995) and others. This approach sees leadership as an exchange-based relationship between leader and follower.

Above summarised variety of followercentric approaches in leadership theories indicates the awareness of follower's role in leadership process and effort to redefine leadership theories accordingly. However, shortcomings of the theories indicate the need for further development (Uhl-Bien, Riggio, Lowe, and Carsten, 2014).

The focus on followers in leadership research created two streams of research which even though are overlapping, have very different initial point of departure and underlying assumptions. The first is followership approach, which stems from a critical stream of theorizing (Kelley, 2008; Alvesson, and Spicer, 2012) and is focused on researching followers' roles in followership. The development of this approach brought some of the most interesting advances in leadership field (Bligh, 2011). The main criticism toward this stream comes from the same arguments as criticism of the leader-centric approach: dependency on a single underlying philosophical paradigm (critical theory) and concentrating just on one side of leadership (follower on followership vs. leader on leadership).

The other stream is followercentric approach in leadership. This stream considers followers' perspectives of leadership (Meindl, 1993) and in this way deepens leader-centric analysis (Weick, et al., 2007). This is achieved through the shift of the questions from leaders to followers, which in return leads to the emergence of new issues and new questions (Bligh, 2011). However, the follower-centric approach still faces criticism that is mainly related the limited amount of research employing this perspective and keeping it in the infancy stage (Bligh, 2011). Calls are made for more follower-focused research, employing various research methods, in order to bring new insights, develop emerging theories and test the results (Carsten et al., 2010).

To conclude, followercentric leadership literature suggests the importance of the followers in leadership process and leader's influence on the followers (Kaiser et al., 2008; Avolio et al., 2009). The followers are seen as evaluators of leadership, experiencing it daily and therefore, able to make the most accurate evaluation of a leader (Spreitzer et al., 2005) and leadership effectiveness (Hunter et al., 2007). However, it is evident that followercentric theories of leadership do not take advantage of the most recent developments in other fields of science (e.g. neuroscience, psychology), resulting in an inability to provide strong explanation of some of the crucial aspects of the interaction between leader and follower (e.g. charisma). Therefore, this article analyses follower-leader dyad in regard to emotion contagion, using emotion contagion theory which is virtually salient in leadership discourse. Moreover, the follower is a point of departure in further theorising in this article and when considering leader-follower interaction.

## Emotional contagion

Early psychology and organizational researchers have recognized that emotions and moods spread between individuals and their impact on individual's performance. The process that individuals can "catch" the emotions from others during their interaction and defined as emotional contagion. More recently, neuroscience studies have revealed the neurological basis of emotional contagion via mirror neurons patterns (Rizzolatti, 2005). These neuroscientific results provide insights how individuals may observe and imitate other individual's actions or "catch" emotions of the others during the interaction (Rizzolatti, 2005; Hatfield et al., 2014). Research provides an explanation how leader may impact the follower with his emotions even despite the conscious awareness of this existing. Hence, the process of emotional contagion lies on mimicry and synchrony mechanisms, emotion experience and feedback (Tee, 2015). Moreover, according to Tee (2015), emotional contagion may work through the combination of mechanisms such as emotional, motoric, and cognitive.

Recent literature review suggests that the use of two terms such as "emotional contagion" (Tee, 2015) or "mood contagion" (Bono and Iliés, 2006; Johnson, 2009) when referring to the impact on emotion in leader-follower interaction. It was indicated that the terms are used as synonyms and interchangeably. However such use is incorrect as emotional contagion refers to automatic processes and is largely without conscious awareness, but mood contagion includes cognitive process of the emotion appraisal. Furthermore, there are many definitions for emotions and usually are used interchangeably with the terms of affect and moods. Therefore, literature reveals that there is a lack of clarity of the emotion definition (LeDoux, 2012). Emotions are more intense and less stable than moods (or feelings). Emotions can vary from positive to negative and can be experienced consciously or unconsciously. On the contrary, moods are a longer-lasting (Goleman et al., 2013). Moreover, the mood is associated with individuals' inner experience (Lochner, 2016) and lacks the stimulus of contexts such as environment or event.

Emotion can be analyzed at different levels of analysis such as individual and organizational levels. Furthermore, based on the psychophysiological and cognitive appraisal theories of emotion, emotion is defined differently. Psychophysiological theories of emotion view emotions as individuals' physical responses to the environment. According to James (1884) *"my thesis on the contrary is that the bodily changes follow directly the perception of the exciting fact, and that our feeling of the same changes as they occur is the emotion"* (p.189-190). Theory explains that individuals interpret their physical responses and constitute the cognitive appraisal based on these feelings. On the other hand, appraisal theories define emotions as the cognitive appraisal to the environment by the individuals (Frijda, 1988; Izard, 1991). In this article emotion is considered as occurring without conscious awareness and intensive.

Emotional contagion is defined as *"tendency to automatically mimic and synchronize facial expressions, vocalizations, postures and movements with those of another person and, consequently, to converge emotionally"* (Hatfield et al., 1994, p.5). This implies that individual's tendency to "catch" other individuals' emotions is driven primarily by unconscious, automatic motor mimicry mechanisms. For example, when individuals feel happy (mood) because others around him feel happy (Walter, 2012). This example presents that the individuals' subjective experience which is outcome of cognitive systems mechanisms for emotion appraisal. Moreover, emotional contagion phenomenon is a multilevel phenomenon and includes psychophysiological, behavioral and social aspects (Barsade, 2002; Tee, 2015). Hence, emotional contagion includes implicit (primitive) and explicit (cognitive) emotional contagion (Tee, 2015). However, in this article emotional contagion is considered in a sense of its broad definition.

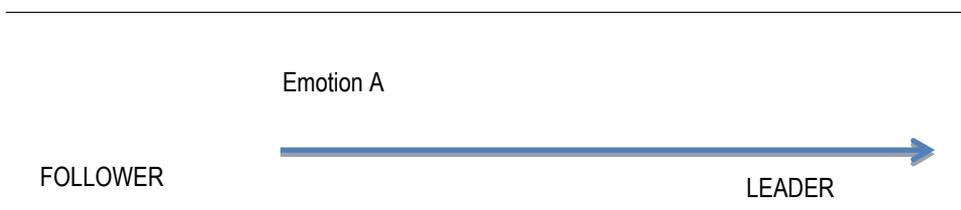
To sum up, literature suggests that individual communication is effected by the emotions of those interacting; moreover the interactors tend to "catch" the emotions of each other and hence influence each other on emotional, consequently behavioral level.

## Emotion contagion in leadership: Conceptual model

Earlier part in the article provides overview of followercentric approaches in leadership and highlighting difference in focus, however indicating the common aspect: consideration of a follower as a point of departure in conceptualizing and analysis of leadership process. The next part described the subtle, however, evident process of emotion contagion that effects human interaction greatly. After considering both aspects, the answer to the research question (How does emotion contagion process affect leader - follower interaction in leadership process?) to this article can be attempted to answer.

Dyadic communication process between follower and leader is considered here in search of the answer to the research question. The Figure 1 illustrates leader-follower interaction, in regard to emotion, from followercentric point of view. This model reflects the main effects of emotion contagion - "catching" the other person's emotions. In this case leader catches follower's emotion (not its intensity!). Literature review indicated that effect of follower's emotions on leader is far less researched question that the effects of leader's emotions on follower.

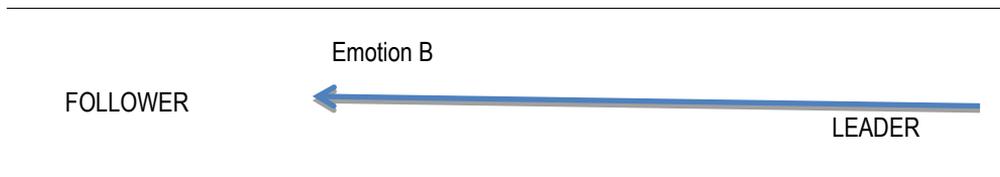
FIGURE 1. EMOTIONAL CONTAGION PROCESS: FOLLOWER TO LEADER CONTAGION



However as leader - follower communication is a process involving interaction between two people, the effects of emotion contagion from leader to follower need to be also considered. Hence, Figure 2 illustrates the other half of the communication process between leader and follower in emotion contagion process: leader "infecting" follower with his emotion. Leadership research contains a lot of unanswered questions, particularly in regard to "soft aspects" of leadership. The example here can be inspirational leadership. Literature suggests that inspirational leaders inspire followers (Michie and Gooty, 2005). Consequently, inspired followers can show better performance and achieve goals of organizations. However, research fails to explain the exact process of "inspiration" - how does it happen and through which mechanism or levels? As the role of emotions has been indicated in this process, it can be argued that emotion contagion theory can explain the "inspiration" effect. Inspirational leadership is attributed to ability to affect followers emotions (Michie and Gooty, 2005).

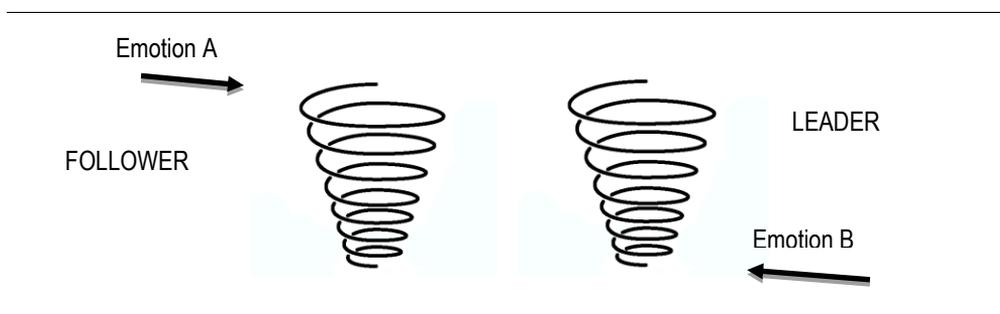
However, from literature on emotional contagion is known that well-expressed and high-intensity (degree of pleasantness) emotions are more contagious (Barsade, 2002). Hence, inspirational leaders can be considered those leaders who inspire followers through the high intensity positive emotions, by the process of "contagion". This is consistent with the research of Sy, Cote and Saavedra (2005), suggesting that leaders have stronger emotional influence than followers, particularly leader, who are perceived to be effective.

FIGURE 2. EMOTIONAL CONTAGION PROCESS: FOLLOWER TO LEADER CONTAGION



When considered together, both processes illustrate the emotion contagion theory in leader - follower interaction (see Figure 3). However, as the interaction is lasting one, and arguably with changing emotions (due to "catching" of one other's emotions), this process should be illustrated as continues, not linear. The Figure 3 illustrates the proposed model of emotional contagion process in the leader-follower dyad of leadership. The model indicates the stronger emotional influence of a leader onto a follower. This is due to the research, indicating stronger emotional "radiance" of a leader (particularly effective leader) (Sy, Cote and Saavedra, 2005; Michie and Gooty, 2005). Latter research indicate that charismatic and inspirational leaders tend to have higher intensity emotions and therefore be more successful in "infecting" followers with their own emotions (Sy, Cote and Saavedra, 2005; Michie and Gooty, 2005). Therefore, when considered both processes of contagion (follower to leader and leader to follower), follower's emotion is "underrepresented" as being overshadowed by leader's emotion. During the process of "co-contagion", sort of neutralization of the initial emotions is being created, where original emotion is reduced. However, the overall outcome of this process results in reduction of both original emotions. Implications of such process, particularly in the case of effective leadership (when leader's emotional "radiance" is stronger than follower's, see Sy, Cote and Saavedra, 2005), can could include situation where follower does not feel fully "understood" (emotional transference/emotional level) or situation where follower feels overshadowed by the leader.

FIGURE 3. CONCEPTUAL MODEL: EMOTION CONTAGION IN LEADER-FOLLOWER INTERACTION



## Conclusion and discussion

The main purpose of this article was to explain leadership process from the followercentric perspective through emotion contagion theory. In this article is argued

that the dominant stream of research in the followercentric leadership theories considers (to different degree) followers as more passive receivers of leader's influence than proactive in leadership process (Jackson and Parry, 2011). However, the proposed conceptual model in this article follows a rather narrow and new approach, which assumes follower as an active receiver of the leadership or co-constructor of it.

Research has shown that leaders can have more "emotional contagion" power (based on their higher emotional influence, see Sy et al., 2005). Hence, the leader has more influence on follower than follower has on a leader, when considering their interaction in regard to emotional exchange. This process may be explained through emotion contagion and depends on the intensity of leader's emotion.

The followercentric approach in leadership, focusing on the contingency and situational aspect in leadership process is also of relevance when explaining emotion co-contagion process between leader and a follower (Hersey and Blanchard, 1977; Fiedler, 1967; House, 1971, Vroom and Yetton, 1973). This view is of relevance with the proposed model on emotion contagion when considered on a macro level, namely in the view of the environment and contingency as having an effect on any and all human interaction. However, it does not define the dyadic process of leadership and does not serve in interpretation leader-follower emotional contagion.

Yet another view considered in the overview of the followercentric approaches, considers followers as constructors of leadership through necessity of follower to recognize leader as being one (Jackson and Parry, 2011; Meindl, 1993; Chen and Meindl, 1991; Stech, 2004, Gabriel, 1997; Goethals, 2005; Shamir, 2007; Van Knippenberg and Hogg, 2003; Lord, 1985). In the context of proposed conceptual model, this view is useful, particularly when considering effective leadership. As mentioned above, effective leaders are possibly emotionally more contagious and could neutralize (negative) primary emotion of a follower. Changed emotion could lead to follower's perception about the leader as being understanding (or being able to effect/influence, e.g. "replace" follower's bad emotion with a more positive) and hence, satisfy the initial need of a follower - to be understood.

The above outlined suggest that followercentric approaches of leadership have varying relevance in the context of emotion contagion theory, even though emotion contagion theory compliments some of the perspectives of followercentric leadership (e.g. contingency and situational). However, seems like the most relevant approach of followercentric leadership in regard to emotion contagion theory, is the view of followers being the constructors of leadership. Overall, it is suggested that better understanding of leader - follower interaction process in regard to emotion contagion could help us to develop further followercentric leadership theories and contribute to the development of theory of general organisational leadership. The new findings for neuroscience research on emotions could add another level of understanding about such a complicated phenomenon as leadership and consequently lead to more effective leadership developing programs.

## Discussion

In accordance to the aims of this study, dominant streams of emotion contagion research in leadership were outlined and their importance in the leader-follower dyad was argued. For the future research four areas are proposed that should be addressed. First, there are diverse definitions used between terms emotion contagion and mood contagion. Thus, there is a tendency to focus on the broad phenomena of emotional contagion process. Hence, emotion contagion can be studied as implicit and explicit emotional contagion process (Tee, 2015). Following literature (see Barsade, 2002; Tee, 2015) this differentiation approach enables to study emotional contagion process in more detail way. Thus, researchers should examine organizational outcomes due the emotion process during leader-follower interactions. Hence, future research should pay more attention to

aforementioned issues. Secondly, there is a need to consider individual differences in emotional contagion process. Despite the individual differences in appraisal evaluation, there are differences in individuals' brain structure. Thirdly, research should further examine the different cultural context that may have the impact on emotions. For example, traditionally, Western cultures' leaders are more emotional and charismatic and may express more emotions than Eastern leaders. Finally, based on emotions intangible nature,

The use of interdisciplinary research approach and the availability of social neuroscience methods, enables the researcher to capture more information about emotional contagion process. Hence, future research can integrate a comprehensive methodology (to apply neuroscience methodology) for the study of contagion emotion process in leader- follower dyad and enhanced the current literature in leadership theory.

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