

LEADERSHIP AND EMOTIONS IN CHALLENGING TIMES

Rebecca K. Lee

Abstract:

How do we think about emotions when it comes to organizational leadership? To what extent do we think emotions are relevant to the project of leading? Do they get in the way of leadership, or do they enhance it? The emotional aspects of leadership tend to be under-recognized and under-prioritized, and at times even dismissed. Institutional leaders often focus on rational strategy as the way to move their organizations forward. But they do not as often focus on addressing and cultivating specific emotional states in the individuals who make up the organization or on infusing the organizational culture with particular emotional levers. This applies to all kinds of organizations, such as large and small companies, law firms, law schools, and public sector entities. The inclination towards emphasizing institutional or business strategy tends to be more pronounced when leaders have to steer their organizations through challenging times, and yet this is exactly when leaders have to direct more of their attention to the emotions within their institutions. A focus on strategy without a focus on people's emotional states does not work well because organizational members first need to be emotionally primed to create and implement a successful game plan. There also needs to be an emotionally-driven organizational culture to support that plan. As a result, an organization in which leaders highlight strategy and ignore the emotions of its membership will likely be an organization that under-achieves. And when an institution is facing difficulties, a leader's extra-attentiveness (or not) to emotions may have even greater repercussions. An organization is at its core a human enterprise, and this predominant human feature should not be ignored. As such, I argue that leaders ought to pay special care to the emotional underpinnings of organizational work and organizational life. I further contend that understanding and tending to emotions in the organization become even more important during times of economic uncertainty and anxiety.