

A CONCEPTUAL REVIEW ON THE ROLE OF EMOTIONS AT WORK AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR THE PROMOTION OF LIFELONG LEARNING IN THE WORKPLACE

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Abstract

This article examines the role of emotions in the workplace and analyzes their implications for the promotion of lifelong learning within organizations. Its primary purpose is to clarify how emotions, particularly positive emotions, shape interpersonal relationships, organizational climate, and employees' engagement in workplace learning. The study adopts a desk-based literature review and conceptual analysis, synthesizing key theoretical and empirical contributions from organizational studies, emotional intelligence research, and adult learning theory. Rather than generating primary empirical data, the article integrates existing scholarship to develop an interpretive framework explaining the mechanisms through which emotions influence learning motivation, participation, and learning outcomes at work. By highlighting positive emotions as a critical yet often underexplored factor in workplace learning, the article offers conceptual insights for leaders, managers, and educators on leveraging emotional dynamics to create supportive learning environments, enhance employee engagement, and strengthen lifelong learning practices within organizations.

Keywords: *Adult learning and education, emotional intelligence, emotions at work, lifelong learning, workplace learning.*

1. Introduction

Emotion and reason are two inseparable aspects that always exist side by side in every human being. The public often tends to admire and learn from famous leaders, scientists, and entrepreneurs because of their profound thinking and superior intelligence; however, historical practice also shows that the most sincere love and heartfelt admiration are reserved for individuals who exude a "special emotional quality" that can touch anyone – that is, compassion, kindness, a heart that knows how to be tolerant and caring for all unfortunate lives... This may explain why some people, who have passed away many years ago, such as Mother Teresa, Princess Diana..., and in Vietnam, President Ho Chi Minh – seem to have a legacy of warm human kindness stemming from compassionate hearts that will keep their images alive for many generations to come and continue to evoke strong emotions in people's hearts regardless of the passage of time or the changes in the world.

This partly shows that emotional aspect in each person and their influence and impact are of great significance in our daily lives, especially in the work environment of organizations. As Sandelands and Boudens (2000) observed, "as much as half of our waking life is spent at work" (p. 47), so we must accept the obvious presence and impact of emotions in the workplace. Although much research has discussed this topic, ideas regarding the importance and role of emotions in the workplace, or the impact of positive emotions on employees' learning in the workplace, remain an area with much room for further exploration.

Using a conceptual analysis and desk-based literature review, the author synthesized some key theoretical

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contributions in the areas of organizational studies, emotions at work, workplace learning and relationships among these factors. This article will discuss how emotions can impact each of us in the workplace and clarify the significance of positive emotions in promoting workplace learning among employees.

2. Research Content

2.1 . Emotions and the Importance of Emotions in the Workplace

2.1.1. Understanding of Emotions

Studies on emotions and their relationship to the organizational context reveal different understandings of emotions. Goleman (2009), for example, refers emotion generally to “a feeling and its distinctive thoughts, psychological and biological states, and range of propensities to act” (p.289), while Hokka et al. (2020) sees emotions specifically as the personal displays of affective states such as joy, love, fear, anger, sadness, shame, and embarrassment. Another author argues that in a broad context, emotions are seen not only as individuals’ personal and private responses to events, but also as part of everyday social and cultural life (Zembylas, 2007).

Although emotion may be taken slightly differently depending on the theoretical framework on which the writer’s argument is constructed, it is generally perceived as an important aspect - together with rationality - of people’s life, which helps us understand and interact with each other in certain contexts. Especially in the workplace, emotions play a crucial role in facilitating employees performing specific tasks as well as in the process of workplace learning and professional development.

2.1.2. The Importance of Emotions in the Work Environment and for Organizations

a) An organization’s image can be shaped and influenced by the emotions of its members

An organization (or agency, unit - as it’s more commonly called in Vietnam¹) is a place where members work together to achieve a common goal. At the same time, organizations are also the places where people spend a significant amount of time together and share their personal lives with one another (Sandelands & Boudens, 2000). We come to the workplace not only because of the work itself, but also to feel included and to share our thoughts, our feelings with others in a community. Emotion is, therefore, inherently a significant factor in the relationships and interactions of organizations’ members. In Sandeland and Boudens’ (2000) research on employees’ feelings at work, one of the important findings is that when asked about their jobs, the surveyed employees generally do not talk about the nature of their jobs itself; instead, they talk primarily about other people and the relationships with them, about “the intrigues, conflicts, gossips and innuendoes of group life” (p.51). Emotions seen on people’s faces, felt in their hearts, or circulated in their relationships can reflect and predict the organization’s image. This signifies that emotion is one of the crucial elements that can shape and affect the overall image of an organization. A workplace where its members show positive emotions and attitudes towards their jobs and colleagues is likely to create a good impression for the public as well as for the stakeholders of the organization itself. Moreover, these emotions also strongly affect the internal climate and operational efficiency of organizations.

b) The emotions of members can impact the psychological environment and operational efficiency of an organization.

In order to perform the job assigned successfully, organization members need to cooperate with and depend on each other (Waldron, 2000; Goleman, 2009). In this process, they exchange knowledge, skills, and also emotions and feelings related to the job. Even in some specific types or stages of work, according to Hokka et al. (2020), such as making decisions or negotiation, the tasks are strongly affected by people’s feelings. Since feelings and emotions are contagious (Cappella, 1980, 1981, cited in Yoon & Doucet, 2006, p.275), an individual’s emotions can influence the group, and a group’s emotions can further influence other groups in the same organization. Consequently, a negative or positive emotional climate of the

1) The terms “agency, unit” have a similar meaning to “organization,” and “learning unit” is equivalent to “learning organization,” as stipulated in Circular 22/2020/TT-BGDĐT of the Ministry of Education and Training on the evaluation and classification of Learning Unit/Organizations.

organization considerably depends on the emotions felt and expressed by its members. Piper and Monin's (2006) research reveals that detrimental emotions like powerlessness and frustration can undermine the health of the organization and thus adversely affect its effectiveness. Conversely, constructive emotions like pride, gratitude, a sense of belonging or emotional safety will help bind organization members together and create a climate conducive to productivity and development. However, emotion can only be utilized and managed effectively if organizations understand the ways it influences the workplace.

c) Positive emotions help improve teamwork effectiveness within an organization

As discussed earlier, team working has become a beneficial and widely used form of collaborating in organizations due to the requirements of job characteristics and the optimum use of the organization's resources. However, the effectiveness of team working depends on different factors, such as the interpersonal interactions and behaviors of the team members, group intelligence (Goleman, 2009), and trust (Kouzes & Posner, 2006). All these factors are strongly influenced by emotions. Without emotional expression and understanding, group members will encounter difficulties in interacting with each other, building trust and efficient work relationships, because emotions can be used as a meaningful tool in managing relationships at work (Waldron, 2000).

Group intelligence, as stated by Goleman (2009), is not simply an accumulation of all members' intellectual capacity, but is significantly shaped by their emotional competencies. This might indicate that however smart and highly skilled the group members may be, the whole group's strength is not likely to attain its peak unless members are emotionally aware of and able to manage the feelings that negatively interfere their relationships. As observed by Goleman (2009), emotions which can cause a static and unproductive state in the group, such as fear, anger, rivalry, or resentment, will prevent group members from offering their best to solve the tasks assigned.

Furthermore, the socio-emotional theory of group effectiveness suggests that its fundamental principle is a set of emotionally competent norms that a team must develop and conform to during their interactions and co-operations (Druskat & Pescosolido, 2006). In other words, cognitive skills or reasoning abilities alone do not guarantee the success of team work if the group's emotional aspects are not taken into account. Another issue is how leaders and managers of organizations utilize and regulate these emotions appropriately to make the most of their advantages and enhance employee motivation in both working and learning.

d) Emotions can be a useful tool in organizational leadership and management

Leading and managing organizations are complex processes which require certain skills and qualities of the leaders and managers, one of which is emotional intelligence, or "the ability to perceive one's own emotions, regulate one's own emotions and to perceive the emotions of others" (Sporrle & Welpel, 2006, p.292). Since leadership and management are to deal with people with their various needs, wants, motivations, and feelings, leaders and managers definitely need to use their emotional competencies to fully understand and influence the people in their organizations. According to Krone and Morgan (2000, p.95), "managing organization is managing emotion". Furthermore, a wise utilization and management of emotions, which motivates people's working spirit and encourages organizational solidarity, might help the organization's head become a true leader/manager instead of merely a "power wielder" (Burns, 2012, p.18) in the organizational hierarchy. People come to the workplace with both their mind and heart, hence they expect to be not only technically recognized in terms of their professional skills and abilities, but also emotionally understood and sympathized by the leaders/managers.

Different kinds of emotions among organization members and within each member, therefore, need to be detected, regulated, and acknowledged in constructive ways for the benefit and well-being of the organization and its people (Waldron, 2000; Krone & Morgan, 2000; Cote, Miners & Moon, 2006; Druskat & Pescosolido, 2006). As Waldron (2000) says specifically about the impact of expressed emotions: "Praise, particularly when it is applied in a judicious and timely manner by a powerful leader, can create feelings of elation, gratitude and respect" (p.73). This suggests that as long as leaders and

managers are aware of the significance of emotions and able to manage them wisely, they can use emotions as an efficient tool in their leading and managing strategies to achieve organization's goals and build relationships with workers. Moreover, in order to better ensure the success of emotional management, it is also important that leaders are able to recognize and control their own feelings and emotions. As Goleman (2009) argues, true leadership is not domination but the way of convincing others to contribute towards a common goal, and making people deeply recognize their feelings about what they are doing or the change they need to make in order to be satisfied with their work.

Apart from being an influential instrument of organizations' leaders and managers, emotion also plays its part in the process of organizational change, as discussed below.

e) Emotions help signal and facilitate positive changes within the organization

Although often regarded as something that contradicts or interferes with rationality, emotion is in fact a valuable channel of information in the workplace (Krone & Morgan, 2000), which can help signal and promote positive changes in organizations. As "a barometer of moral and relational ethics" (Waldron, 2000, p.79), emotions expressed and felt by members in an organization might signal the necessary changes during the operation and development of the organization. Despite the fact that emotions are generally what people feel or sense, which might reflect only part of the reality, people do have certain reasons or expectations behind those feelings. Often these are hidden even from ourselves. Thus, by looking at and correctly analyzing these implications of emotions, organizations might draw a clearer picture of what needs to adjust or change. For example, the dissatisfaction (or even discontent) of some employees upon receiving their monthly salary may prompt human resource personnel or leaders to reconsider the fairness of the salary and benefits these employees are receiving, thereby seeking to adjust or renegotiate to achieve a balance between the organization's ability to pay and the employees' desired income.

Not only signifying change, emotions also contribute in supporting and facilitating change in the workplace. As organizational change involves "moving from the known to the unknown" (Cummings & Worley, 2001, p.156), it might generate tensions, fears, or resistance in people who participated. These indicative emotions will help organizations to better realize the members' psychological state and support them more effectively during the execution of change. Change generally takes considerable time and efforts to be gained, and organizations as well as their members sometimes need to experience a deep level of hurt before they seriously undertake meaningful changes. Thus, empathy, sharing, and other emotional supports are significant catalysts to organization members and the whole process of change. Cummings and Worley (2001, p.158) states.

"When people feel that people who are responsible for managing change are genuinely interested in their feelings and perceptions, they are likely to be less defensive and more willing to share their concerns and fears. This more open relationship not only provides useful information about resistance but also helps establish the basis for the kind of joint problem solving needed to overcome barriers to change".

Furthermore, positive emotional supports are also necessary for a vital force of organizational change - the change agents (Cummings & Worley, 2001). According to this argument, during the difficult periods of a change process, change agents often must give the participants emotional support, but they may receive little support themselves. Therefore, an appropriate exploration and accurate analysis of emotions among different groups of people in the organization during the whole process of change will positively assist all members in accepting and promoting the necessary change. Change often benefits organizations in a number of ways, and so do emotions.

f) Positive emotions help increase both the tangible and intangible benefits of an organization.

Organizations might gain both tangible and intangible benefits from effective management of emotions. Tangible benefits, or the outcomes related to financial achievements and measurable profits (Mowbray et al., 2024), resulting from an effective utilization of emotions may be more visible in the organization that deals with customer service on a frequent basis. Although there may be a dissonance between what employees really feel internally and what they are expected and trained to

show externally in front of customers, as discussed in the above mentioned work, the literature review conducted in this research does indicate that the general profits of organizations will increase when their staff show positive emotions during interactions with customers or partners.

Certainly the profits gained by organizations depend on various factors, however, if all other factors are held equal, it is likely that the expression of positive emotions and friendly attitudes by organization members can increase the sale and profits (Mowbray et al., 2024). In our daily life, anyone of us as the product and service users may also have evidence of this important effect of emotions. A smiling face and 'customers-first' attitudes can keep people coming back to the same product or service and encourage them to spend more money, while indifferent or unenthusiastic staff can drive customers away even when their product/service quality is good.

Besides this, intangible benefits of organizations, such as social harmony (Goleman, 2009), healthy interpersonal relationships, and positive organizational learning (Piper & Monin, 2006) can also result from an effective management of emotions. It is clear that an organization's common spirit cannot be enhanced if its members are emotionally in conflict or find it hard to understand each other's feelings and expectations. Such an adverse atmosphere will severely damage interpersonal relationships and hinder people from reaching a harmony which allows them to move towards the same direction. Especially when it comes to the issue of people wearing "masks" (Piper & Monin, 2006, p.103) to hide their real feelings in organizations, it is crucial to understand and act sensitively towards organization members' emotions so that "masks may be lifted, real perceptions and emotions revealed, and interpersonal health restored" (p.103).

This suggestion is consistent with Goleman's (2009) argument in terms of an organization's beneficial outcomes when the members are emotionally skilled in their interactions and their diverse relationships. According to Goleman (2009), it is of great value if companies' employees can possess core emotional skills such as sensing and responding to others' emotions, and managing conflicts before they intensify.

All things considered, it is to an organization's and its members' common benefit, both tangibly and intangibly, when emotions in the workplace are appropriately perceived, acknowledged, and managed. However, it does not mean that emotion should be considered a unique magic therapy for any organizational problem, nor it is totally separated from rationality (Sporrle & Welpel, 2006). For workplace learning – one of the areas of activity that increases the intrinsic strength and sustainability of an organization – positive emotions of both teachers and learners are of crucial importance.

3. The Significance of Positive Emotions in Promoting Learning in the Workplace

Workplace learning is one of the pillars that lay a solid foundation for a learning society. Workplace learning is the process of adult education and learning, a method of "investing in the future" that can yield quick and sustainable returns and "investment efficiency" for both employees and their organizations – especially in the context of the constantly changing and developing socio-economic and scientific and technological landscape, which demands high adaptability from individuals. Recognizing the importance of workplace learning, the Ministry of Education and Training issued Circular No. 24/2023/TT-BGDĐT on the evaluation and recognition of learning units at provincial and district levels² (MOET, 2023).

Viet Nam's third National Project on Building a Learning Society for the period 2021-2030 (Government, 2021) also emphasizes the importance of workplace learning through one of the project's guiding principles - building a lifelong learning environment in the workplace that meets the requirements for productivity, efficiency, ethical standards, and professional culture.

In the above Vietnamese context, examining the significance of positive emotions for adult learning within organizations and institutions can suggest useful ideas for practical application for leaders and managers.

3.1. Positive Emotions of Instructors/mentors can Promote Employee Engagement and Learning Enthusiasm in the Organization

Besides knowledge and specialized skills according to the profession, the instructors/mentors of

2) In the Vietnamese context, "Don vi hoc tap" (Learning Unit) has a similar meaning to "To chuc hoc tap" (Learning Organizations).

workplace learning must also have the ability to understand and effectively handle both expressed and unexpressed emotions in the learning process of employees. This is especially important in a context still heavily influenced by East Asian culture like Viet Nam, where not everyone is comfortable expressing their personal emotions in public. Therefore, the instructor's sensitivity for effectively managing emotional states in the classroom is very crucial – especially the ability to encourage and foster positive emotions that benefit the learning and dialogue process. Furthermore, in Vietnamese culture, the teaching profession is often highly respected, therefore students may be considered rude or impolite if they express opposition or disagreement with teachers (Canh, 2007). Therefore, some negative emotions in the learning process may not be openly expressed but are still deeply felt and have the potential to create underlying tensions that are detrimental to the learning and interactions of employees in the organization.

In addition, the positive emotions of instructors when guiding workplace learning can influence and encourage participation, even with the students who are shy or lack a motivation to learn. As practice shows, instructors who consistently demonstrate a friendly, enthusiastic, and humorous demeanor during class or on-site instruction often find it easier to establish a friendly, open relationship with learners – a crucial initial factor in boosting their motivation to learn.

A recent study by researchers from the Institute of Psychology on the influence of emotions, their intensity and duration, on employees' work performance showed that: when employees experience positive emotions such as enthusiasm, joy, and comfort, their overall work performance (including learning and mentoring each other to complete assigned tasks) increases, and vice versa (Huong and Hang, 2022).

Workplace learning practice also shows that when instructors, presenters (or colleagues who mentor/coach each other daily) express positive emotions (such as encouragement, motivation, sense of humor, etc.) during interaction and guidance, learners/workers tend to absorb and memorize the learning and training content more easily and quickly.

Furthermore, the positive emotions of the instructor or trainer help them to be better prepared when starting a course (formal or informal) at work, making them more enthusiastic about the teaching and learning process, thus more attentive to the learners' needs. These factors help motivate, encourage, and engage learners, increasing their participation in learning activities, thereby improving the quality of learning.

3.2. The Positive Emotions of Each Learner Contribute to Creating a Healthy Psychological Environment for Workers when Learning at Work

Workplace learning is actually adult learning and education, so supportive psychological environments and learning spaces are crucial for motivating employees. In this context, positive emotions among organization members throughout the learning process are vital; they act as both a learner's incentive and a desirable outcome. Specifically, positive emotions in learners help create a safe and emotionally supportive learning environment that allows everyone to feel welcome, respected, accepted, and valued (Vella, 2002). As a well-known adult educator has affirmed the nature of adult learning: "adults learn best in informal, comfortable, flexible, non-threatening settings" (Knowles et al., 2005, p. 61).

Emotions - especially positive ones like joy, excitement, and enthusiasm - are contagious, hence the feelings of one or a few individuals can quickly become the general psychological state of a large group or even an entire team (especially if those individuals have influence within the group). This clearly has a positive impact on the acquisition of new knowledge, exchange, and discussion during workplace learning. Furthermore, a healthy psychological atmosphere created by harmonious and comfortable emotions in the workplace will also positively affect the quality of learning within an organization, because even though learning is basically a cognitive process, it is also strongly influenced and guided by emotions. It is obvious that a negatively emotional state will affect people's ability to think, learn, and make proper decisions (Goleman, 2009).

A study by Piper and Monin (2006, p.102) on emotions experienced in employee - supervisor relationships also showed that the learning process of members and of the organization as a whole improved significantly when emotional experiences related to the work context were acknowledged and discussed openly.

3.3. Positive Emotions among Groups during the Learning Process Help to Enhance the Quality and Results of Learning

Workplace learning is largely a dynamic, multi-dimensional interactive process, not a passive or one-way transmission of knowledge as in some other formal settings. Therefore, emotions arising among learners can quickly become a shared emotional state for the entire group, which has a significant impact on the quality and outcome of employee learning. For example, while performing assigned learning tasks, if group interaction is driven by positive emotions such as mutual encouragement, caring attitudes, enthusiasm, and cooperation, these will act as catalysts to help complete the common task with better results.

On another level, positive emotions within one group can easily spread to other groups during shared learning activities and exchanges, thereby creating a chain effect that supports participation in learning. In fact, learning in schools, families, and workplaces shows that when participation is increased and maintained, the quality and results of learning increase accordingly.

4. Conclusion

Emotions are an integral part of mental life, daily life, and even in each person's work process. Emotions can be powerful, constructive, and supportive, but they can also indirectly or directly create negative impacts on the overall psychological atmosphere of the workplace, and on workplace learning in particular. Recognizing the important role of emotions in the workplace must go hand in hand with the ability to leverage their positive aspects and manage them effectively. This not only provides leaders and managers with an additional tool to identify and resolve problems within the organization, but also offers useful suggestions for using positive emotions to promote workplace learning among employees.

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