

## Abstract

Leaders play a unique role in the disaster management context as they address the safety needs of communities and manage the complexities of the response and recovery task. Leaders who effectively navigate the challenges of leading in this unique context bring hope and positivity, uniting the efforts of community and government to address the needs of those seeking safety and support. Positive affect is one aspect of effective leadership that receives considerable attention in the academic literature but has, as yet, received little attention in the disaster and emergency management area. This paper draws on contemporary literature on the understanding of positive affect in leadership, bringing together the limited current literature in the area of leader affect in the emergency management context and identifying a significant gap. It calls for a research focus on positive affect in the unique context of disaster and emergency management and consideration of the implications for wellbeing and performance.

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# Leadership emotion: how leaders influence employee wellbeing and performance in the disaster and emergency management context

Peer reviewed

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## Introduction

Leaders have a unique role in emergency and disaster management situations, navigating uncertain timeframes, dealing with high levels of community vulnerability and coordinating stakeholders (Lin, Kelemen & Kiyomiya 2017; Suhaimi, Marzuki & Mustaffa 2014). Leaders in these roles play a vital role in providing for people seeking safety, support and information (Mahmud, Mohammad & Abdullah 2020).

While managing the complexities of response and recovery tasks, the leader brings hope and positivity to foster a united effort among stakeholders (Mahmud, Mohammad & Abdullah 2020; Lin, Kelemen & Kiyomiya 2017). Effective leaders who navigate these unique challenges have a significant impact on outcomes for communities and on the wellbeing of staff, volunteers and community members (Chi, Chung & Tsai 2011). This effect is particularly relevant for emergency and disaster management personnel who often experience high job-related stress that can lead to short term and chronic health problems (Baek, Choi & Seepersad 2021; Thyer, Simpson & Nugteren 2018), high rates of burnout (Kalemoglu & Keskin 2006; Adriaenssens, Gucht & Maes 2015; Beldon & Garside 2022) and high job turnover (Das & Baruah 2013; Montminy, Russell & Holley 2021).

In navigating these challenges and supporting the wellbeing of staff, a leader's positive affect can have a significant influence on employees and volunteers. A leader's positive affect is conveyed through the leader's behaviours and through their verbal and nonverbal communication (Damen, Van Knippenberg & Van Knippenberg 2008; Pressman & Cohen 2005). Leaders who demonstrate positive affect inspire a positive vision of the future (Carleton, Barling & Trivisonno 2018) by taking a future-orientated perspective and influence others through a process of emotional transference, also

known as emotional contagion, where employees are more likely to demonstrate positive affect when positive affect is shown by the leader (Peñalver, Salanova & Martínez 2020; Mukherjee & Sreeja 2018). Leader's positive affect can also influence interactions between individuals by enhancing communication and facilitating the positive social interactions of groups (Damen, Van Knippenberg & Van Knippenberg 2008).

This paper draws on contemporary literature on positive affect in leadership and contributes to the understanding of leadership related to the influence of a leader on the wellbeing of others with the aim to reduce burnout and fatigue. This paper adds to the body of knowledge about the wellbeing of emergency management employees by drawing connections between positive affect and the role of leaders. It brings together some of the current research and identifies a gap in the research related to 2 emergency management contexts; the crisis and the everyday. The findings have practical application as leader's positive affect contributes to positive outcomes for employees.

## Leadership

The role of the leader is complex in any context and, while considerable research has been done to advance the understanding of leadership (Megheirkouni & Mejheirkouni 2020, Kort 2008), a commonly agreed definition of leadership remains elusive (Kort 2008, Clarkson *et al.* 2020, Nawaz & Khan 2016). There are, however, some commonalities across various approaches (Summerfield, 2014). One is the understanding of leadership as a social relationship, whereby the leader influences the followers, often through an emotional or interactional process (Yan *et al.* 2021, Summerfield 2014, Kort 2008). It is also considered to be an enhancing role that improves the situation or environment, moving towards a desired goal (Summerfield 2014, Kort 2008). Leadership occurs within a context, with the leader's style, traits and skills being shaped by contextual factors (Summerfield 2014, Zaccaro & Horn 2003) and leaders working effectively to ensure that the combination of traits, skills and motivations that they apply to this unique context ensure the support and safety of others and the end of the suffering as quickly as possible (Mahmud, Mohammad & Abdullah 2020; Summerfield 2014). Thus, the leader uses their skills effectively, including interpersonal skills, to achieve the desired outcome and to generate positivity and hope (Waugh & Streib 2006; Mahmud, Mohammad & Abdullah 2020; Feldmann-Jensen *et al.* 2019).

Leaders within the emergency management and recovery context are vital to the success of their organisations and the achievement of desired outcomes (Maxfield & Russell 2017). Leaders must navigate complex challenges when working with employees and volunteers, as well as community members and volunteer groups to undertake a variety of vital services including response and recovery as well as mitigation and preparedness (Jensen & Kirkpatrick 2022; Alshayhan & Yusuf 2021, Lin, Kelemen & Kiyomiya 2017).

## Positive affect

Limited studies have been conducted on leader positive affect in the specific context of emergency management and recovery.

Positive affect has, however, been studied extensively in other contexts with positive affect being considered useful in the work environment most of the time (Ashkanasy, Humphrey & Huy 2017). 'Affect' is a broad concept that encapsulates terms such as emotions, feeling and mood (Wang *et al.* 2019, Clarkson *et al.* 2020). It is considered to be a positive affect if the general feeling, mood or emotion is good, positive or pleasant (Ashkanasy, Humphrey & Huy 2017; Harmon-Jones & Harmon-Jones 2021; Shiota *et al.* 2021). Positive affect is considered to be generally consistent with a high level of energy and concentration, reflecting engagement in a pleasurable way with the environment (Pressman & Cohen 2005; Carleton, Barling & Trivisonno 2018). Emotions and feelings like joy, excitement, contentment, amusement, calm, satisfaction, positiveness, cheerfulness, happiness, attentiveness, being interested and alert all fit within the broad category of positive affect (Pressman & Cohen 2005; Carleton, Barling & Trivisonno 2018). On the contrary, feelings of hostility, guilt and irritability are consistent with negative affect (Pressman & Cohen 2005).

## Positive affect and leadership

In terms of leadership, individuals who demonstrate a positive affect are said to be more successful in many areas of life (Carleton, Barling & Trivisonno 2018) and attract followers (Maxfield & Russell 2017). One reason for this is that leaders who demonstrate positive affect demonstrate prosocial actions, verbal communication patterns and nonverbal patterns of behaviour including eye contact, body language and facial expressions that are associated with emotional support (Jia & Cheng 2021; Carleton, Barling & Trivisonno 2018). They also provide vital information to followers orientated towards the relationship (Damen, Van Knippenberg & Van Knippenberg 2008). Leaders who demonstrate positive affect are more likely to see events as positive and to draw on memories of positive events to share with others (Carleton, Barling & Trivisonno 2018) in addition to engaging in behaviours that create positive experiences (Carleton, Barling & Trivisonno 2018). This is in contrast to the demonstration of negative affect by leaders, which increases negative moods in others (Clarkson *et al.* 2020, Petitta & Jiang 2020), lower performance (Xie, Wilson & Sherron 2022; Carleton, Barling & Trivisonno 2018) and decreases morale (Xie, Wilson & Sherron 2022).

Another that positive experiences for followers is created is through emotional contagion (Mukherjee & Sreeja 2018, Yan *et al.* 2021, Wang *et al.* 2019). This process can occur at an unconscious or conscious level (Mukherjee & Sreeja 2018, Yan *et al.* 2021). Followers with leaders who demonstrate positive affect are more likely to demonstrate positive affect (Clarkson *et al.* 2020) and to be in a positive mood (Peñalver, Salanova & Martínez 2020, Mukherjee & Sreeja 2018). This can occur at the individual follower level or at the whole-group level and research suggests that positive affect also increases group cohesion in addition to positive affect among group members (Wang *et al.* 2019, Yan *et al.* 2021).

Research indicates that leaders who demonstrate positive affect are more successful in taking a future-orientated perspective and

in using emotion to inspire a positive vision of the future (Carleton, Barling & Trivisonno 2018). Positive affect can also generative creative solutions and flexibility in thinking (Yan *et al.* 2021), prosocial behaviour (Shiota *et al.* 2021) and greater citizenship behaviour (Wang *et al.* 2019; Xie, Wilson & Sherron 2022).

Overall, based on the literature, positive affect is seen to have a significant positive effect on followers including wellbeing and performance. In a study by Rackoff and Newman (2020a)), individuals who demonstrated lower positive affect were determined to have a higher risk for depression and anxiety when measured years later. Positive affect mitigates the stress (van Steenbergen *et al.* 2021, Folkman & Moskowitz 2000) including long-term, chronic stress that generates physiological responses in the brain and body (Folkman & Moskowitz 2000, van Steenbergen *et al.* 2021) and during stress events (van Steenbergen *et al.* 2021, Folkman & Moskowitz 2000). Research suggests that positive affect builds resilience through a hopeful and optimistic view of stressful events (Pillay 2020). This is of particular interest for those providing emergency and recovery response as stress is recognised as an ongoing problem with significant negative health implications (Thyer, Simpson & Nugteren 2018; Beldon & Garside 2022).

At the organisational level, positive affect demonstrated by leaders has a positive influence on employee engagement and performance. Leaders positive affect can improve the creativity and emotions of individuals and groups (Mukherjee & Sreeja 2018; Carleton, Barling & Trivisonno 2018) shaping social interactions and boosting an individual's belief in their role within the organisation and their ability to perform within the given context (Damen, Van Knippenberg & Van Knippenberg 2008; Carleton, Barling & Trivisonno 2018). Leaders who express positive emotions boost productivity (Carleton, Barling and Trivisonno 2018; Clarkson *et al.* 2020) through higher levels of employee engagement (Yan *et al.* 2021; Peñalver, Salanova & Martínez 2020) and a greater belief in the abilities of leaders and individuals (Carleton, Barling & Trivisonno 2018; Mukherjee & Sreeja 2018).

## Positive affect, leadership and emergency services

Leaders in emergency and recovery contexts operate in 2 contexts (Brandebø 2020), one being an everyday context and the other a crisis context (Lin, Kelemen & Kiyomiya 2017; Suhaimi, Marzuki & Mustafa 2014). A number of studies examined positive affect of employees in emergency services. For example, in 2021, a study was conducted on the emergency response to the COVID-19 pandemic and the construction of emergency hospitals in 2 areas of China (Wang *et al.* 2021). The study found a positive correlation between positive affect in individuals, such as pride and determination and citizenship behaviour, however, leadership affect was not addressed (Wang *et al.* 2021). Similarly, a study by Feng *et al.* (2022), included positive affect of emergency physicians as one factor that was directly associated with lower turnover intentions. In a conceptual paper by Reyes *et al.* (2020), the importance of leaders maintaining a positive

affect during crisis situations was highlighted in order to convey optimism, openness and confidence. Some research has included alternative findings, such as Rosing *et al.* (2022) who determined that the presence of leadership humour can have a detrimental effect on communication in emergency situations, particularly in a firefighting context. Overall the research around leader positive affect and its influence on followers in the emergency services remains low.

## Discussion

Given the prevalence of burnout (Kalemoglu & Keskin 2006; Adriaenssens, Gucht & Maes 2015; Beldon & Garside 2022), stress (Baek, Choi & Seepersad 2021; Thyer, Simpson & Nugteren 2018) and job turnover (Das & Baruah 2013; Montminy, Russell & Holley 2021) in emergency management organisations, opportunities for leaders to operate effectively within these organisations should not be overlooked. Given that the role that leaders play in emergency management and recovery occurs in 2 distinct contexts, that of the everyday and the other being the crisis context (Brandebø 2020), a key finding of this review is the lack of research to support an understanding of the impact of the leader's positive affect on followers in the unique contexts experienced by emergency management leaders (Rosing *et al.* 2022, Reyes *et al.* 2020). While extensive research has been conducted on positive affect (Ashkanasy, Humphrey & Huy 2017; Harmon-Jones & Harmon-Jones 2021; Shiota *et al.* 2021) in alternate contexts highlighting the significant impact a leader's positive affect has on followers (Carleton, Barling & Trivisonno 2018; Maxfield & Russell 2017; Jia & Cheng 2021) in the everyday context, limited research exists as to whether this applies in the unique crisis context also,

## Conclusion

In navigating the challenge of leadership, leader's positive affect is shown to have a significant influence on the wellbeing of followers and the performance of organisations. The leader's role in the specific context of emergency management and recovery is unique and especially challenging as they address high levels of community vulnerability while managing their own organisation. This unique role that occurs across the 2 distinct contexts of the everyday and crisis (Brandebø 2020) provides a rich context for research, which has not as yet been addressed. While limited research exists in this area of positive affect in the emergency management context, the high rates of burnout and stress experienced within emergency management provides a compelling imperative for ongoing future research.

Positive affect is conveyed through the leader's patterns of behaviour and communication activities. This paper draws on the limited literature on positive affect in leadership in the emergency management context and highlights the extensive research available in alternate contexts. An opportunity exists to explore positive affect in the emergency management context with reference to the specific behaviours and communication employed by emergency management leaders to convey positive affect. An understanding of leader positive affect in emergency

management contexts of the crisis and the everyday remains elusive. Further research is needed to determine the influence of these behaviours, communication, employee wellbeing and performance. The need for further research is apparent.

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