

How Can Emails from Different Types of Leaders Influence Employees?

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Abstract. How can different types of emails be perceived by readers as different leadership styles? Is email content understood as a part of leadership? How can emails develop or destroy the e-leadership? This research tries to answer these questions. It studies the influence on what work and their involvement in their job represents for employees through the different kinds of e-communications used by supervisors. Three scenarios that represent three different kinds of e-communications sent by email from a direct supervisor were designed to relate to Transformational, Transactional and Laissez-Faire leadership styles. A questionnaire measuring (a) motivation to succeed on a project, (b) emotional commitment to superior, (c) perceived performance and (d) perceived interpersonal justice were associated with the three scenarios. Scenarios and questionnaires were submitted to 51 employees. They had to put in the state of mind of the employee who receives the three kinds of e-communication, then they had to answer the questionnaire. The results show that there are real differences in the perception of leadership. Emails sketching characteristics of transactional and transformational leaderships had significantly higher scores than emails drawing on a “Laissez-faire” type leadership; i.e. (a) motivation to achieve and succeed in a project, (b) emotional commitment, (c) perceived performance of the employee, and (d) perceived interpersonal justice become higher when the emails seem to be more related to transactional and transformational e-leaderships. Hence, this paper underlines the important effect of leaders’ e-communication on the subordinates’ perceptions about their own work through the measurement of perceived performance and motivation, but also their hierarchical relationship through their perceived interpersonal justice and their emotional commitment.

Keywords: e-leadership · Organizational communication · Email work’s perceptions · Hierarchical relationship

1 Introduction

More than one hundred billion business emails are sent each day! How are they perceived by employees, including those written by managers, asking them to work within the constraints of time, quality, money, market, and customers...? Several studies have highlighted the importance of electronic communications in managing emotions at work and the psychosocial risks attached [19]. They have sought to characterize such emails

[7], to define the effects of dispersion and confusion on users [8], to regulate the uses of emails [18] or to understand the intensive uses of emails by managers. But few studies have apprehended emails in the form of hierarchical communications to measure the effects of emails on the perception of leadership by employees.

Nowadays, some employees receive only emails from their managers, without having face-to-face contact with them. The aim of this paper is to sum up a research on the influence of emails written by supervisors on the representations that employees have for their work, their involvement and their leader: How and why emails develop or destroy e-leadership?

2 Theoretical Background

Professional communication plays a central role in leadership efficiency as well as promoting a good working environment when it is of good quality as it motivates and engages employee commitment. An essential aspect of the quality of the supervisor's communication is the information content conveyed [4, 5]. The language used by the supervisors when communicating with subordinates will guide their performance [15]. Bad communication from the supervisors will lead to employees misunderstanding the goals required by the organization. With time it will result in lower performance levels. However, when leaders give clearly indicated goals, in a motivating, enthusiastic language with an appropriate choice of words this could result in increased performance. This is what this article seeks to illustrate.

2.1 The Different Types of Leadership Styles

There are many different approaches to studying leadership. We will focus on three leadership styles which have been frequently studied over the last few years [15, 26].

Transformational Leadership. It encourages employees to become committed members of their work group and to devote themselves to the company's success. Four dimensions have been related to this leadership style [10]:

- Idealized influence which refers to the ability of the leader to motivate employees through his/her charisma, making him a role model;
- Inspirational motivation, the ability of the leader to inspire the employees with a sense of challenge.
- Intellectual stimulation which consists in the leader's ability to boost his/her employees to be innovative and creative in their projects and to challenge their routine work practices.
- Finally, individualized consideration which relates to the attention given to each employee by the leader enabling employees' self-fulfillment.

Transactional Leadership. Here the action to motivate is concentrated more on the individual's interest than on collective interest. Rewards or punishments will depend on

the achievement or not of goals targeted. Three dimensions are often related to this type of leadership [10]:

- Contingent reward is the ability to set goals to be reached and then reward the employee according to goal achievement [17];
- Active management by exception where the manager supervises the employee's work and corrects it to keep it in line with the company's targeted aims.
- Passive management by exception, here the leader intervenes when standards are not met.

Laissez Faire Leadership. Here professional conduct has only one dimension, i.e. the absence of leadership behaviour. The leader abdicates responsibilities and avoids making decisions.

In short, leadership can be understood through 8 dimensions (4 for transformational, 3 for transactional and 1 for laissez-faire). The 8 leadership dimensions have been reduced to 6 in the "Full range leadership theory" [1]. Inspirational motivation and idealized influence are grouped under 'charisma' and passive management by exception and laissez-faire are grouped under 'passive avoidant' (Table 1).

Table 1. Dimensions of the "Full range leadership theory".

Leadership	Transformational	Transactional	Laissez-faire
Full range leadership theory (reduced from 8 to 6 dimensions)	– Charisma (idealized influence + inspirational motivation)	– Contingent reward – Active management by exception	
	– Intellectual stimulation – Individual consideration	Passive avoidant (passive management by exception + not invested in relations)	

2.2 Leadership and Electronic Communication

Few studies have focused on leaders' electronic communication. Initial research studies have indicated a positive link between the transformational leader and communication skills, hence revealing the relationship between styles of leadership and communication. More recently, an important link has been shown between communication and certain types of leadership [24] highlighting the fact that the type of leadership style practiced would produce a particular style of communication.

2.3 The Effect of Different Leadership Styles on Work

Lots of effects of leadership are well known. Leadership styles influence employee performances and results, but also how employees perceive their work. Illustrating this, transformational leadership is a good predictor of job satisfaction whereas transactional leadership is a good predictor of job performance [10]. But what about the leadership which is expressed through emails? When receiving an email what does the employee perceive about the leadership of his/her supervisor? Is he/she motivated by it or not? Do

they think that their leader's reaction is fair or unfair? Does the email encourage them to commit themselves to their company's goals or remain indifferent?

In order to understand these questions, we must broaden our understanding of the dimensions related to leadership, also taking into account: motivation, perceived performance, emotional commitment to superiors and perceived interactional justice.

- Motivation represents the energy of our behaviors. It describes the inner and outer forces which produce the spark, the direction, the intensity and persistence of behavior. There is an undeniably positive link between transformational leadership and motivation in the workplace [10]. Employees who work with a transformational leader have better job satisfaction and are more motivated to achieve better performance in their work [3]. Transformational leadership is able to motivate its employees to achieve better performance [11]. Transactional leadership can bring about greater employee motivation. [25] Both transformational and transactional leaderships seem to increase motivation through interaction with their co-workers.
- Perceived performance is a good indicator of the effective performance of employees [14, 16]. For the company it relates to the total value of behaviors carried out by one person at a given period. Several meta-analyses [9, 10, 22] have found an important positive link between transformational and transactional leadership styles, and different indicators of objective and subjective performance, whereas the laissez-faire leadership style is negatively correlated with these indicators.
- Emotional commitment corresponds to a sort of emotional force which connects a person to a process of professional action [2, 13]. Emotional commitment reflects a person's attachment to his/her company. It is both a good indicator of job satisfaction, but also a predictor of an intention to leave a company [23].
- Organizational justice [12] renders the person's reaction to decisions made about them by the organization as well as the procedures used to make these decisions. Perceived justice has a positive effect on commitment and job satisfaction within the organization. Perceived justice is also a predictor of the quality of the relationship between the leader and his/her employee, particularly of interactional justice.

For these four variables, the laissez-faire leadership style has not been widely researched upon, namely because it is a style of leadership where the leader's role is avoided and is passive. Subsequently, communication means being poor, we expect a negative impact on the employee's representation of work.

3 Problem and Method

Many studies have investigated the impact of the amount of emails on work intensification and its effects. However, very few studies have focused on the impact of the content of supervisors' emails on the representations of employees. None has sought to experimentally measure the impact of e-leadership types on the perceptions that employees have of their work and their relationship to the supervisor. In this research, we aim to evaluate the effects of three e-leadership forms (Transformational, Transactional and Laissez-Faire leaderships).

3.1 Problem and Hypothesis

Our main problem is to understand, on the one hand, if the different types of leadership are identified in the emails and on the other if the four variables measured in this study, i.e. – motivation, perceived performance, emotional commitment, and perceived justice, vary significantly according to the type of email received.

Our main assumption is therefore: the difference in leader's emails leads to significantly different results in employees' perception of work. More specifically, we postulate that receiving a transformational style email will lead to scores for "Perceived interpersonal justice", "Perceived performance", "Perceived emotional commitment" and "Motivation to succeed in a project" being higher than scores for emails received with a transactional leadership type, the latter getting a higher score than an email with a "laissez-faire" leadership type.

As a consequence, we postulate that the "Laissez-faire" type leadership results in much lower scores than the transactional and transformational types of communication on the four variables studied.

3.2 Method

Building the Scenarios and Defining the Instructions. 51 employees were faced with three types of email using expressions extracted from professional emails of 5 employees over three months.

The instructions for the experiment were the following: 'You have to deal with Mr. Smith's case. Whatever the content of this file, put yourself in the situation in which you receive emails of type *"A, B and C from your superior in the firm's hierarchy asking you to carry out your work... Read these emails carefully, putting yourself in the state of mind of an employee who receives them"* (Table 2).

These three types of emails were divided into four parts: an informative part; a complaint by the customer reported by the superior; monitoring of the work carried out, an email at the end of the task and congratulations. However, there are also differences:

- Email A renders a weak leadership of the 'laissez-faire' type. The sentence "I am not concerned" is an example of avoidance of the role of leader.
- Email B includes sentences such as: "I'd like you to take up the challenge" in order to reflect the inspirational motivation dimension. Or the sentence "If ever you find a new angle, don't hesitate to submit it to me" reflects intellectual stimulation. Finally, the sentence "I'm always available in case of a problem" reflects both individual consideration and the personal sacrifice which a charismatic leader will always be prepared to make.
- Email C is based on the principles of transactional leadership. For example, the sentences "I'd like you to sort this out to avoid any repercussions on the company's image"; "We'll have to meet our deadline soon" reflects active management by exception, the sentences "You have achieved the goal expected for this file, I'll keep this in mind"; "I'll take your performance on this file into account" reflects contingent reward.

Table 2. Descriptions and contents of the emails.

Email A “Laissez-faire”	Email B ‘transformational’	Email C “transactional”
Hello, Please find attached Mr. Smith’s file which is a sensitive one. I have been instructed to give it to you to handle	Hello, Please find attached Mr. Smith’s file which is a sensitive one. I know it’s a tricky file and will be challenging for you, but I know that you are capable of dealing with it. You can work on it with John, try a new approach and don’t hesitate to contact me if you have any problems, I’ll be available	Hello, Please find attached Mr. Smith’s file which is the sensitive one we talked about and which I think you can handle. Try to get it sorted rapidly, I’ll take your performance on this file into account during assessment
<i>Then the following day a new email, with usual polite forms, and the following elements:</i>		
I have received a complaint from Mr. Smith about you. I am not concerned so I’m sending it to you to deal with	I have received a complaint from Mr. Smith. According to him the solutions offered are not satisfactory. I know he’s a difficult customer but I’d like you to take up the challenge. I know you are capable of convincing him and sorting things out. Let me know how things go	I have received a complaint from Mr. Smith. According to him the solutions offered are not satisfactory. I’d like you to sort this out to avoid any repercussions on the company’s image
<i>The day after a new email with usual polite forms and the following elements:</i>		
I have received your reminders on the Smith file, I’ll send you my conclusions later	For the Smith file, if you find a new angle don’t hesitate to submit it to me, I’d like to see your report soon	I’m expecting your report on the Smith file. Our deadlines will have to be met soon
<i>Finally, a new email with usual polite forms and the following elements:</i>		
Thank you for dealing with the Smith file. Good Day	I’d like to congratulate you on the Smith file, the customer is delighted you’ve done a great job with the team! Good Day	You have achieved the goal expected for the Smith file. Congratulations. I won’t forget, I will keep it in mind. Good Day

Characteristics of the Sample. The final sample was made up of 51 people (27/51 men and 24/51 women) executives (21/51) employees (30/51). The average age was 33 years old and varied between 20 and 57 years old. The average time spent on messaging for their job is approximately four hours a day. The employees receive an average of 20.6 emails every day in their job, of which 4.6 emails come from their superior. 62.7% of the people in the sample live with partners and 37.3% are single. Finally, their professional experience averaged at around 9.8 years.

Procedure and Measures. In this study, four variables particularly interest us: emotional commitment to the supervisor, employee’s perceived performance, motivation to succeed in the project entrusted and employee’s perceived interpersonal justice.

These four measures were evaluated in the questionnaire with items taken from several scales.

- Emotional commitment to the supervisor: 6 items from Vandenberghe [23]. The items from the initial research were not changed. Here is an example of an item: “I admire my supervisor”.
- Perceived performance: 3 items from Sanchez, Truxillo and Bauer [20]. The initial items were changed in order to adapt them to our questionnaire, for example: “I think I have passed the test I have just taken” was changed to “I think I have succeeded in the project assigned to me”.
- Motivation to succeed in the project: 7 items from Sanchez, Truxillo and Bauer [20]. The initial items were changed in order to adapt them to our study for example, the item: “If I concentrate and work hard I can get a high score” was changed to “If I concentrate and work hard on this file I can successfully deal with it”.
- Perceived interpersonal justice: 4 items, Colquitt [6]. The items from the initial study were not changed. Here’s an example of an item: “My superior treats me with dignity”.

4 Results

How did the 51 people respond to the scales – Emotional commitment to supervisor; Perceived performance; Motivation to succeed in the project; Perceived interpersonal justice – according to the emails they were reading? What do their answers teach us?

Our main assumption is that different emails generate a significant difference in the psychological impacts on the scores of the variables studied. To this end, a variance analysis with repeated measures was carried out between the different types of communication and each dimension of the questionnaire. Table 3 indicates the averages of the scores obtained for each type of communication according to the four variables.

Table 3. Score averages for each scale according to the type of communication.

Types of emails received	Perceived interpersonal justice	Perceived performance	Perceived emotional commitment	Motivation to succeed in the project
A-Laissez-faire	1,70	1,46	0,78	1,32
B-Transformational	5.20	5.22	4.86	4.80
C-Transactional	4.21	4.68	2.92	5.00

The results of the Student test validate most of the assumptions: the laissez-faire leadership communication obtained much lower scores than the two other forms of communication on the four variables studied (always $p < .05$).

Concerning the emails of the transactional and transformational type, the results merit a more detailed analysis:

- For the variable “perceived interpersonal justice”, we note a higher average score for the transformational email (5.20), the transactional email has a score of 4.21 and

finally the laissez-faire communication has a weaker score, of about 1.7. The variance analysis shows significant differences for each type of communication ($p < .02$).

- Perceived performance indicated different scores depending on the type of communication received: the transformational email obtained the highest average with about 5.22. This is followed by the communication inspired by a transactional leader which obtained an average score of about 4.68, finally the laissez-faire type of communication with a score of about 1.46. For each pair the differences are significant (using Bonferroni's method, $p < .02$).
- Emotional commitment is strongest in the transformational situation (4.86), weaker in the transactional situation (2.92), and very weak (0.78) in the laissez-faire type communication. The Student tests revealed significant differences for each pair ($p < .02$), i.e. between "transformational – transactional emails", "transactional - laissez-faire" and "transformational - laissez-faire".
- Motivation to succeed in the project introduced a slight difference. In fact, the average score for transactional communication is higher than for transformational communication. However, there isn't a significant difference between transactional and transformational communications for motivation to succeed in a project. ($p > .05$).

5 Discussion and Conclusion

The four variables measured in this study vary significantly depending on the type of communication received. Even if the electronic communications do not contain non-verbal pointers which could support leadership [21]; our study confirms that electronic communications generate similar results to oral communications.

But this research also highlights another major phenomenon: the important impact of the language used on the employees' perceptions of their relationship with the supervisor, their perception of justice, their performance and their motivation. Each type of communication has resulted in noticeably different scores. The employees receiving specific information concerning a project entrusted to them are extremely sensitive to the wording and the content. Our research confirms the fact that communication is a fundamental factor for the successful of organization and employees' performance [22]. The wording chosen in the emails impacts directly on employees' perceived performance and their perception in general, as suggested in Murphy and Clark's study [15].

Since the direct supervisors spend between a third and two thirds of their time interacting with their subordinates [27] it is important to take into account the way in which information is communicated in order to motivate co-workers, enabling them to increase their commitment to their organization and to their supervisor and consequently improve their overall performance to the benefit of their company. It is therefore an important issue, the wording in a sentence can completely change the vision that a person has of his/her project goals, performance and relationship with his/her contact person. This vision will directly affect results of the work done such as satisfaction and the employees objective performance.

The transformational leader possesses specific characteristics which enables him/her to establish a good working relationship with his/her employees. His/her way of

communicating motivates employees to exceed the levels of performance initially planned [11].

As for transactional leadership, it obtained much higher scores than the laissez-faire leadership communication but lower than transformational, except for the variable-motivation to succeed in a project. Quite often this type of communication is more focused on economic or material exchange. It focuses its communication on rewards, which motivate employees and is consistent with several studies according to which transactional leadership can bring about high levels of employee motivation [25].

Finally, the “laissez-faire” leadership communication reveals an avoidance of the role of leader, there is very little communication as he/she withdraws from situations in which he/she could be involved. This lack of communication has a negative impact on the employees’ representations. It obtains much lower scores than the two other types of communication, and for each of the variables tested. Thus illustrating that badly constructed communication weakens organizational performance.

This study reveals the importance of electronic communication in organization psychology and information systems management, and more precisely its effect on the employee representations concerning their work and their relationship to their direct supervisor. The content and quality of the information conveyed in an email from a direct supervisor affects motivation, perceived performance, perceived interpersonal justice and emotional commitment to the supervisor. The three types of emails based on the different leaderships styles were simulated through three scenarios. The results are unmistakable: minimal communication and avoidance behavior from the laissez-faire leadership will lead to much lower scores than richer communications from the transformational and transactional leaderships. However, a type of behavior and communication based on the relationship that transformational leadership is likely to produce leads to much higher scores than communication based mainly on goal achievement likely to be produced by transactional leadership.

Even if the obvious limitation of this study is its experimental methodology (but also its strength!), it nevertheless raises the very topical question of electronic leadership, of the relational quality of emails, and the harmful repercussions for both the employees and the organizations. Our study proves that the emails received correlate to the employee’s perceptions. It also draws a management line: writing emails using transformational leadership characteristics is profitable for the professional perceptions of the employees and no doubt for the employees themselves!

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