

**Could you tell what I felt?: Exploring Leaders' Experienced and Observed Affect in
Organizational Change Processes**

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ABSTRACT

In change management literature, leaders are primarily depicted as executors of change rather than recipients of change who might also experience affective responses. This study empirically explores leader's affect in change processes grounded in the affect-based circumplex of change recipients' responses to change. Through four case studies, we found empirical evidence that in reality, affective experiences by leaders are not as neatly categorizable as put forward by Oreg et al. (2018). We found leaders could concurrently experience affect of *both* positive and negative valence, and *both* high and low activation. Incongruities between leaders' experienced affect and affect as observed by employees suggest the presence of emotional labor, highlighting the affective regulations leaders need to engage in while navigating roles of both executor and recipient of change. These affective regulations are influenced by role perception and stress. Theoretical and practical implications are discussed.

(142 words)

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INTRODUCTION

Successfully implementing organizational change is challenging (Decker et al., 2020), as change processes are often emotional endeavours (Helpap and Bekmeier-Feuerhahn, 2016; Smollan and Sayers, 2009). Shaping employees' emotions (affect) towards the upcoming change is an important factor for successfully implementing change (Ashton-James and Ashkanasy, 2009; Scott and Barnes, 2011; Szöts-Kováts and Kiss, 2023). Affect encompasses emotions, moods and temperament of an individual (Matheny and Smollan, 2005), and influences how individuals recall, select and interpret information (Klarner et al., 2011). Change management literature so far has mainly focused on the affective experiences and responses of employees (Kiefer et al., 2024), often identified as 'change recipients' (Bouckennooghe et al., 2009, Oreg et al., 2011).

Leaders play a pivotal role in change processes (Mangundjaya, 2013; Rafferty et al., 2013), as they guide employees through changes (Ajmal et al., 2012; Graetz, 2000; Lorentzen, 2022), shape employee change readiness (Metwally et al., 2019), offer sense giving (Kraft et al., 2018), and manage affective responses of employees (Tee, 2015). Research on leaders in the role of executors of change showed how a leader's affective state significantly influences their agency, desire, and ability to influence employees during organizational change (Agote et al., 2015; Lorentzen, 2022). This is in line with what is found in leadership research outside of the field of change management (e.g. Rajah et al., 2011).

Most studies on the role of leaders in change process primarily depicted leaders as executors rather than as individuals who experience affective responses to change (e.g., Agote et al., 2015; Hartge et al., 2019; Lorentzen, 2022), and overlooked the role of affect of leaders in the change process (Rafferty et al., 2013) or the fact that leaders are change recipients as well (Ozawa, 2020). For example, line managers responsible for executing change processes within their teams often receive instructions from higher-ups, as they are expected to implement change processes aligned with a revised vision or organizational goal. This dual role of executor and change recipient might lead to affective responses being at odds with each other.

So, how do leaders reconcile this paradoxical tension of affective responses as executors, while simultaneously also being change recipients themselves? Grounded in Oreg et al.'s (2018) affect-based model of recipients' responses to organizational change events, we seek to explore the role of affect of leaders during processes of change. In particular, we examine their experienced affect (i.e., affect as reported by them during in-depth interviews) and observed affect (i.e., perceived affect of leaders as reported by their followers), and the congruence between them.

The objective of our research is two-fold. First, we aim to shine a different light on the complicated position of leaders during change processes, combining their role as executors on the one hand with their place as recipients of change on the other. This deepens our understanding of the tremendous role, task and influence these individuals have within a change process. Second, we aim to address the paradox of what leaders 'feel' compared to the affect they demonstrate in reality. This contributes to literature on emotional labor among leaders during organizational change (Bryant & Cox, 2006). Through the results of our study, practical implications for managers can be deduced.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Affect

Affect is an '*umbrella term encompassing a broad range of feelings that individuals experience, including feeling states, such as moods and discrete emotions, and traits such as trait positive and negative affectivity*' (Barsade and Gibson, 2007, p. 38). Affect comprises of

emotions – which are intense, targeted, and short-term reactions to an event or a trigger – and moods – which refer to transient episodes of feelings and are often untargeted (Watson, 2000). Affect develops over time (Matheny and Smollan, 2005), and plays a critical, yet often unconscious, role in shaping attitudes, decision-making, and behaviors – both individually and in group dynamics – creativity, and teamwork (e.g. Barsade and Gibson, 2007; Kuppens et al., 2010; Scherer, 2009; Scott and Barnes, 2011; Seo, et al., 2009). From the change management literature, Seo et al. (2009) stated that affect should be considered as a construct with two dimensions: activation and valence. Activation refers to the degree of mobility and tendency to undertake action within the individual. Valence, either positive or negative, refers to the feelings of the individual towards a certain phenomenon.

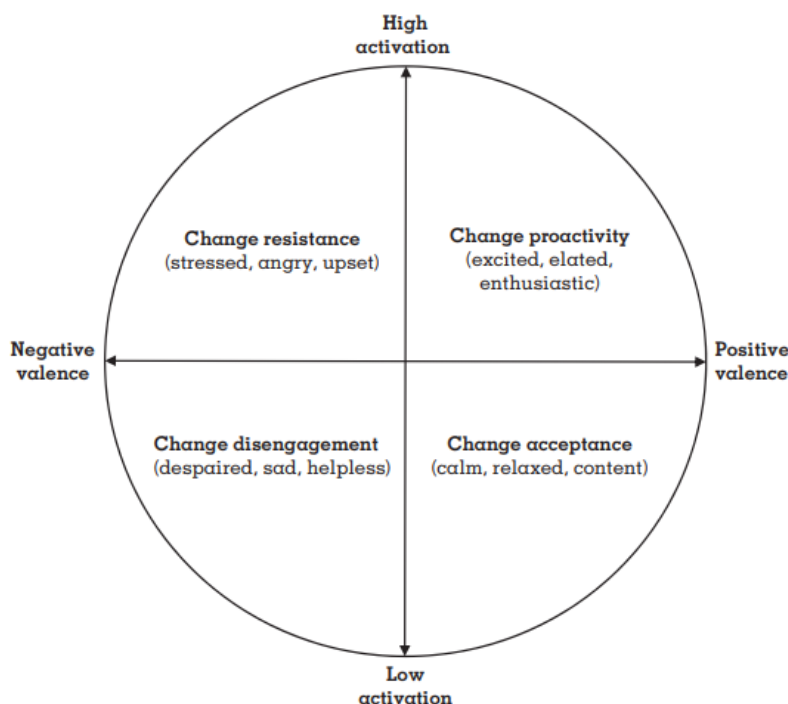
From the organizational behavior literature, an individual's affective state is said to predict their tendencies to act on certain events (Ashton-James and Ashkanasy, 2009; Scott and Barnes, 2011). It primarily comes into play during 'affective events', such as organizational change and exchanges between the leader and team members (Ashton-James and Ashkanasy, 2009). The Affective Events Theory (AET) is a framework that explains the effects of affect, emotions, and mood on individuals' attitudes and affect-driven behavior (Weiss and Cropanzano, 1996). The idea is that certain events from the environment trigger affective responses within individuals (Scott and Barnes, 2011) based on their perception and evaluation of that event (Weiss and Cropanzano, 1996). The direction of this affective response (positive or negative), and its magnitude, depend on several stable (dispositional) (Judge, 1992) and dynamic (social information processing) factors (Salancik and Pfeffer, 1978).

Affect and Organizational Change Processes

Building on the conceptualisation of affect above, organizational change can be on the one hand perceived as a short-term event that triggers high-activation responses, i.e., triggers emotions (Helpap and Bekmeier-Feuerhahn, 2016). However, due to often relatively long continuous processes of communicating, onboarding, and implementing change (Weick and Quinn, 1999), organizational change can be on the other hand understood as a long-term event, which leads to longer episodes of affective states, i.e., general moods. Affect is thus the appropriate variable of interest in our research.

Developing on the work of Barsade and Gibson (2007), Feldman Barrett and Russell (1998), and Larsen and Diener (1992), Oreg et al. (2018) put forward an affect-based model of change recipients' response to change and the underlying core affect. The basis of this model is the model of Russell (1980): a circumplex structure of core affect. Oreg et al.'s (2018) adjusted model consists of two axes the valence of change recipients (negative/positive response to the change) and the degree of activation (passive/active) shown by the change recipients. The circumplex contains four quadrants of emotion types: negative and deactivated (e.g., despaired), negative and activated (e.g., stressed), positive and deactivated (e.g., relaxed), and positive and activated (e.g., excited). The model proposed in Oreg and colleagues' 2018 article includes valence and activation dimensions of both affect and behavioral intentions in response to organizational change, the cognitive appraisal processes that precede them, and their likely impacts. In the quadrants, the various types of emotions are spread in a way that the multiple types of affective experiences fit into each quadrant (see Figure 1).

FIGURE 1: Circumplex of change recipients' response to change and underlying core affect



Source: Oreg, et al., 2018

Affect, Organizational Change Processes, and Leadership

The importance of the role of leaders' affect during critical events of organizational development is not new. Drawing from literature on crisis management (a large change event), we know that displayed affect from leaders is crucial in employees' evaluations of leadership (Madera and Smith, 2009). Madera and Smith (2009) found that leaders' display of either sadness or anger in times of crises affected how positively they were evaluated by their followers. In their review article, Rajah et al. (2011) highlighted the role of leaders' emotional competencies (emotional expressiveness and emotional intelligence) on employee outcomes like burnout and performance. Partly due to the contagious nature of affect (Barsade, 2002) and the role it may play in the dyadic relationship between leader and follower (Graen and Uhl-Bien, 1995), leaders who display positive affect tend to be more positively evaluated (e.g., Bono and Ilies, 2006) and those who display negative emotions tend to be rated as less effective (Lewis, 2000). It is also important that leaders display affect that is congruent with the tone of the message. For example, negative feedback should not be given with a smile (Newcombe and Ashkanasy, 2002).

As such, affect has implications during organizational change due to its prediction of attitudes and behaviors during 'affective events' (Ashton-James and Ashkanasy, 2009). Like crisis situations or when giving negative feedback, in organizational change processes, followers may perceive there to be a 'correct' emotion to be displayed by leaders (Newcombe and Ashkanasy, 2002). However, as leaders themselves may be experiencing negative emotions and stress when managing change, but may feel an obligation to display emotions incongruent with their true affect, emotional labor, or emotion work, occurs during the narrative of organizational change (Bryant and Cox, 2006).

Emotion work refers to the effort individuals invest in managing their own emotions and those of others, in particular the way they manage both their inner and outward affect (Hochschild, 1983). Hochschild (1983) defined emotional labor as 'the management of feeling to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display' (p. 7). The work or labor comes when there is a dissonance in the affect felt by an individual and the affect that is

outwardly displayed. Often, this constitutes negative inner affect paired with positive outward affect (Humphrey et al., 2015), as display rules, such as ‘service with a smile’, act as norms for the appropriate expression of affect in a job (Rafaeli and Sutton, 1989). To the best of our knowledge, research on emotional labor among leaders in organizational change processes is underexplored.

Connecting this with the circumplex of change recipients’ responses to change, we aim to explore where (in which quadrant) leaders lie in terms of affective responses. Based on our knowledge on emotional labor and the role it may play in change management, we also examine if leaders’ affective responses could be ‘neatly’ categorized into one of Oreg et al.’s (2018) quadrants, or if manifestations of multiple quadrants are possible. By interviewing both leaders and their followers regarding leaders’ true and displayed affect, our research seeks to investigate paradoxical tensions which may be present when examining leaders’ affect during organizational change. To achieve our research objective, we adopted a case study method, which we discuss in more detail in the next section.

METHOD

Research strategy

To develop a rich understanding of the affect of leaders during processes of change we adopted the inductive approach, using a multi-case study. Multiple case studies allow comparison of different scenarios, and the comparison of outcomes subsequently increases the reliability of the research (Eisenhardt, 1989).

Case selection

Eisenhardt (1989) suggested to purposefully select four to ten cases for building theory. For this research four cases were selected through purposeful sampling according to preselected criteria set by the researcher, relevant to the research objective (Patton, 2002). The following selection criteria were used: 1) employee only has one manager (leader), 2) the leader and employee interact with each other multiple times per week, and 3) the team is undergoing a significant organizational transformation as described by Chrusciel and Field (2006; a change that is frame-breaking, culture-changing, transforming, radical or revolutionary). Selection criteria one and two were chosen to increase both validity and reliability of the research. Criterion one ensured that employees were thinking of the exact same person while answering the interview questions. Criterion number two ensured that the employees were able to say something about the perceived emotions of the leaders. An employee must be in contact with their leader in order to be able to perceive emotions. The last selection criterion is linked to the topic of the research question.

See Table 1 for an overview of the case characteristics.

TABLE 1: Overview of the case characteristics

	Description of the change
Case 1: IT developers in the PMS team in a large Dutch hotel chain (approx. 14000 employees).	Change is the procurement and implementation of a new property management system (PMS). The PMS is expected to have a substantial impact on business processes throughout the entire hotel chain, making the change particularly transformative and wide-ranging. The team finds itself currently in the early stages of this significant change process.
Case 2: App developers team in the same large Dutch hotel chain as in first case.	Change is the procurement and implementation of a new PMS subsequently the app developers need to design new apps that link into this new system. The new software is expected to have a substantial impact on business processes throughout the

	entire hotel chain, making the change particularly transformative and wide-ranging. The team finds itself currently in the early stages of this significant change process.
Case 3: IT administrator team in a Dutch school association/district (approx. 330 employees)	Change is that the six schools making up the school association have decided to centralize their IT services. Subsequently several IT administrators now must work from a different location with a different IT system.
Case 4: Front office of the Equipment Control Centre of a large Dutch Railway company (approx. 22000 employees)	Change is introducing a new way of working by centralizing control using a new IT system and adding a new role to the team. Before the change the employees were helpdesk and planner at the same time. Now they are either helpdesk employees (helps train drivers with technical issues) or planner (directs trains and maintenance movements), plus the work is automated for the large part.

Data collection: Semi-structured interviews

Face-to-face interviews were conducted in a closed room to prevent social desirability (Chung and Monroe, 2003), and were conducted in the mother tongue (Dutch) of the participants, increasing the reliability of the data as discussing emotions and feelings proves more difficult in a non-native language (Denscombe, 2017). Per case, one manager and three of his/her employees were interviewed. Contact with the leaders was established via the personal network of the researchers, and they were asked to select a diverse group of employees for the interviews (see Table 2).

TABLE 2: Overview of the characteristics of the research participants

	Gender ratio (M=male/F=female)	Tenure (y=years/m=months)	Age	Team size
Case 1	Leader: M Employees: 3x M	Leader: 4y Employees: 1m/2m/7y	Leader: 35 Employees: 41/44/44	8-10 employees
Case 2	Leader: F Employees: 3x M	Leader: 2y Employee: 1m/5y/2y	Leader: 30 Employee: 29/31/41	6-8 employees
Case 3	Leader: M Employees: 3x M	Leader: 2 y Employees: 11y/3y/2y	Leader: 42 Employees: 55/42/33	8 employees
Case 4	Leader: M Employees: 2xM, 1xF	Leader: 3y Employees: 12y/1,5y/8m	Leader: 39 Employees: 51/25/29	30-40 employees

Both the interview with the leaders as well as employees started with an introduction of the research, underlining confidentiality, as well as an explanation of how the data will be used and stored. Then, the interviewer asked the interviewee to introduce him/herself and to shortly describe the change the team was going through to ease them into the interview (Rabionet, 2011). Afterwards, the employees were shown Oreg et al. (2018)'s model (see Figure 1) and were asked to point out which affect their leader displayed and to what extent their leader's affect impacted them during the change process. Leaders were asked to point out their experienced affect, the extent they displayed their affect, and their reasoning for doing so.

Data analysis

The Gioia method was used to analyse the data as this method provides rigor in qualitative data analyses and supports theory building (Gioia, 2020; Magnani and Gioia, 2023). The Gioia method is a multi-stage coding process involving 5 stages. In stage 1 the researchers actively take notes and begin forming initial conceptualizations and draft codes based on interviewee comments. Then in stage 2 the researchers systematically create first-order codes directly from intriguing quotes, using the interviewees' own terms. In stage 3 these first-order codes are grouped into similar categories to form second-order themes, which become more theoretical while still reflecting the original language. In stage 4 the analysis progresses to identify broader emerging themes or aggregate dimensions that explain the phenomena central to this research. In the last stage, a data structure is developed to visualize the journey from raw data to theoretical findings, forming the basis for a theoretical framework (Gioia, 2020). To further solidify the reliability of the data analysis, the researchers discussed the codes, emerging themes, and aggregate dimensions throughout the data analysis phase (Cheung and Tai, 2021).

RESULTS

Case 1

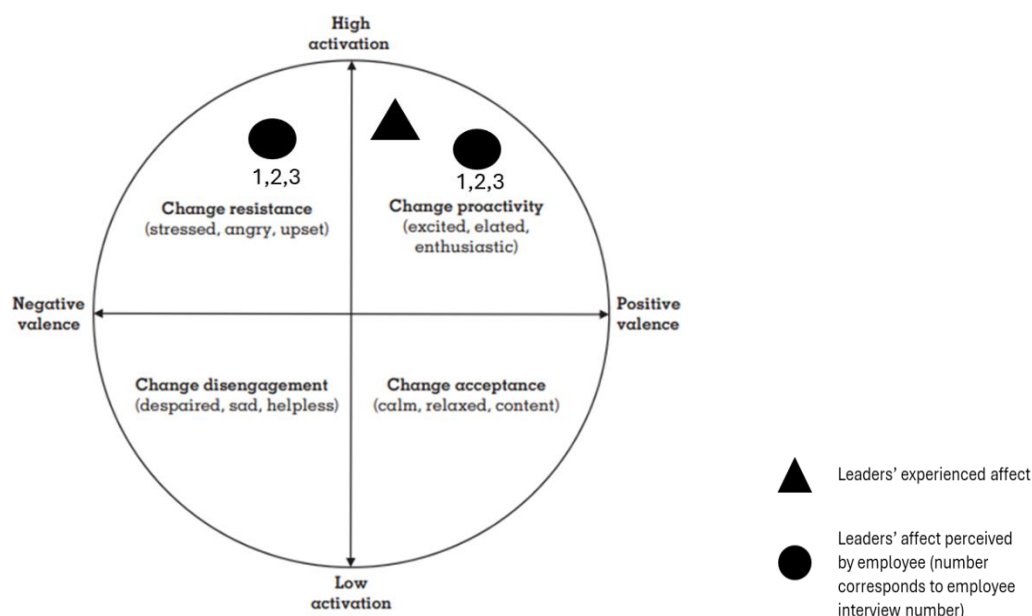
The leader describes himself as the “wait and see”-type; carefully assessing situations before taking action. *“I always try to observe the situation first.”* The leader sees it as their role too: *“There are colleagues who are very engaged and sometimes see obstacles that aren't necessary. And it's then the task to keep that managed.”* Plus, he feels that he has a certain responsibility as a member of the management team. *“I'm also part of the management team here. So, from that role, yes, you need to be a bit discreet.”* The leader believes it pays off to involve their employees in the change process. *“If someone is involved in something, then they already accept about 90% of it. Whereas if you don't involve someone and say the exact same thing two weeks later, it's not their idea and they aren't involved.”* Subsequently, he *“...regularly involve(s) the team in the decision-making process and the potential impact that any decision might have.”* During the change process, the leader is reserved in displaying negative affect, demonstrating a high level of self-awareness regarding the potential impact of their affective expressions on employees. The leader enthusiastically tries to frame this change as an opportunity for the team. *“Yes. I have actively tried to impose my perspective on the team. With the people I've spoken to I often tried to emphasize that it's mainly an opportunity. [...] the opportunity to improve issues, we often encounter and that are limiting, in a good and effective way.”*

Table 3 and Figure 2 provide an overview of the affect the employees observed displayed by leader. Interestingly, even though the leader neither openly expressed nor intended to convey stress, the employees appeared to perceive this negative affective state.

TABLE 3: Overview leader's affect and observed leader's affect for case 1

Leader's affect	Observed affect by employees:		
	Employee 1	Employee 2	Employee 3
Enthusiastic, elated, calm and relaxed	Enthusiastic, stressed and excited.	Excited and stressed	Excited and stressed

FIGURE 2: Leader's experienced and observed affect plotted on Oreg et al.'s (2018) model



The leader reports being conscious about the possible influence his affect might have on their employees. Hence, his strategy is to share merely positive emotions to foster positivity and filter out his negative emotions to avoid any negative influences on employees experiencing organizational change. The employees in this case are aware of the leader's efforts to influence them positively. They mention that the leader is especially proactive in showing their positivity about the change: *"Yes, it really gets you involved and gives positive energy. I feel more motivated to actually get started."*, *"I do have the feeling that there is a conscious effort to express positivity to drag us along in that positivity."*, and *"The leader sees this change as something positive. That has been expressed."*

Case 2

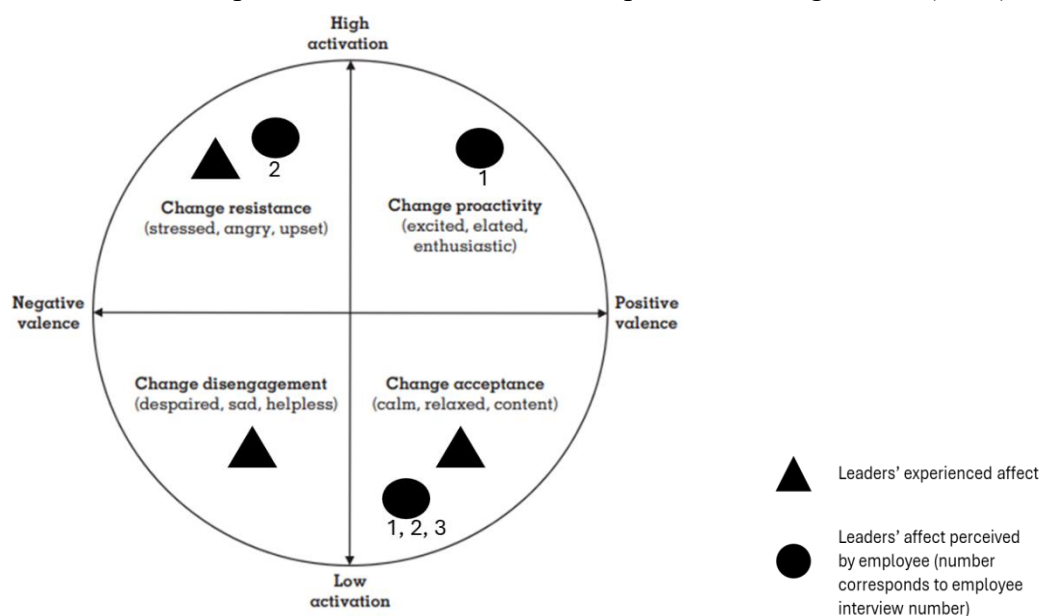
The leader's communication style is measured and professional, with little overt affective expression toward their employees. The leader intends to be transparent, hence the information shared with the team is very factual and computed. *"I do want to be somewhat transparent. At the same time, I also try to keep some things to myself. So, I haven't shared everything. But I think there are some things of which it is important for them to know how I feel about it."* Moreover, the leader is aware of her attempts to influence the sentiment of her employees; she tries to foster a forward-looking perspective among the team, striving to instil a sense of optimism about the future. *"Usually, we're pretty much on the same page. Sometimes we are not. And then I do try to encourage them to look positively at the world again. So I think I've tried to do influence them a little, but not excessively."*

Table 4 and Figure 3 provide an overview of the affect the employees observed displayed by leader. It seems that the employees pick up on the different emotions of the leader. The leader experiences more negative emotions than the employees have noticed: *"Indeed, I believe there is a certain level of scepticism. It is unsettling to feel inadequately informed. Consequently, I feel somewhat apprehensive."* The leader tries hard to stay factual, transparent and maybe this is what has been perceived as 'calm'. *"I think no one in our team is really outspoken positive nor negative, we are really in the middle."* One employee picked up on the leader's level of stress and distrust in follow-ups to the team about the process: *"Yes, maybe a bit upset sometimes. I did notice it, maybe a bit of an influence."*

TABLE 4: Overview leader's affect and observed leader's affect for case 2

Leader's affect	Observed affect by employees:		
	Employee 1	Employee 2	Employee 3
Calm, stressed, upset and helpless	Calm, and excited	Calm, stressed and upset	Calm and relaxed

FIGURE 3: Leader's experienced and observed affect plotted on Oreg et al.'s (2018) model



“There is a positive energy, I think, and a willingness from everyone on the team to cooperate, but somewhere there's still something. I think communication in general remains a challenge and because it went really wrong in the beginning, there's still a bit of... Yeah, sometimes a bit of cynicism or a bit of suspicion like, 'we'll just have to see how this all plays out'.” An explanation for this could be the active approach of the leader to dispense positivity about the future, framing the change as less impactful for them as a team compared to the organization as a whole, and framing it as something they are all obliged to: *“We are compelled to change”*, and *“The leader is burdened with it and has no choice.”* At the start of the transformation, the leader was angry and suspicious as to how the process was developing. Even though she did not want to show such emotions to her employees, the leader was unable to conceal these negative emotions. The employees immediately picked up on these emotions and copied them: *“A bit of fear about what's going to change.”* Interviewer: *“Do you notice that yourself, or is it something you only see with your leader?”* Employee: *“Well, I recognize that myself as well.”* Regarding the influence of their leader's affect on them as employees, the employees mention: *“Yes, it's quite interconnected, so what the other person thinks definitely has an influence.”*, and *“When you have the same feelings as someone else, then you naturally start to reinforce each other's feelings.”*

Case 3

The leader adopts a highly people-oriented approach to leadership and dedicates considerable time reflecting on their own behavior and that of their employees. He considers it a fun challenge to effectively connect with his employees, inspires them to join in, and encourages self-reflection. *“As a leader you are merely a motivator”*. The leader is the driving force behind the change, and firmly believes in the substantial value the change will bring to

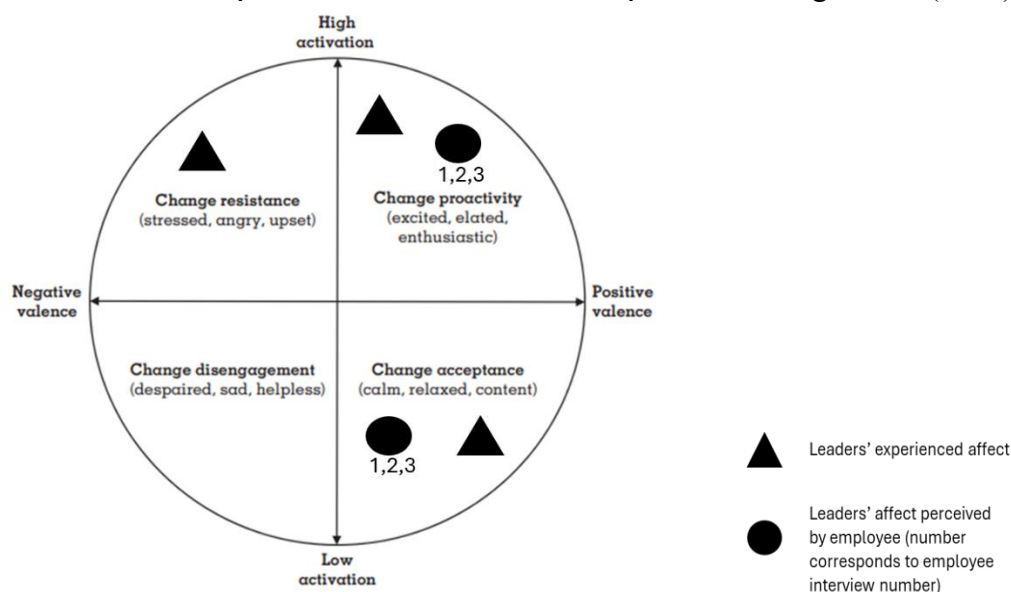
the organization. The leader employs his affect as a strategic tool to inspire and engage stakeholders. *“I actively expressed my views and emotions [...] to the rest of the team.”* For example, *“if things are not very clear then this can become a problem for some. Then I tell them that, you know I also wish things were different but that for now it is just the way it is.”* He is confident that his sincere affective expressions play a crucial role in articulating the narrative of the change with impact and clarity. *“I think if you show your true emotions and fully support what you are doing the message lands better.”*

Table 5 and Figure 4 provide an overview of the affect the employees saw displayed by leader. Interestingly, none of the employees picked up on the leader’s stress. It appears that he has been very successful in displaying and ‘pushing’ their positive emotions/energy about the change or displaying emotions beneficial to the conversation.

TABLE 5: Overview leader’s affect and observed leader’s affect for case 3

Leader’s affect	Observed affect by employees:		
	Employee 1	Employee 2	Employee 3
Enthusiastic, relaxed, stressed and content	Enthusiastic, relaxed and calm	Enthusiastic, relaxed, calm and excited	Enthusiastic, relaxed and excited

FIGURE 4: Leader’s experienced and observed affect plotted on Oreg et al.’s (2018) model



Regarding the influence of their leader’s affect on them as employees, the employees mention: *“Well, he is mainly relaxed and enthusiastic, and well excited. Yeah, he can really take you along in that.”*, and *“He just tries to encourage everyone.”*

Case 4

The leader has a clear idea about his role. *“I create a sense of clarity as to why we are doing this and also inspire what this change can potentially bring us.”* The way he approaches the transformation is very incremental. *“We’ll do our best, and then we’ll assess how it went. You know, sometimes you just must dive in, experience things, and even make a few mistakes.”* He also tries to help their employees along the way: *“When issues were raised that were truly seen as blocking issues, we listened and investigated them. [...]. We tried to help people move forward, offering support. We also provided backup to IT and supported them on the floor. We*

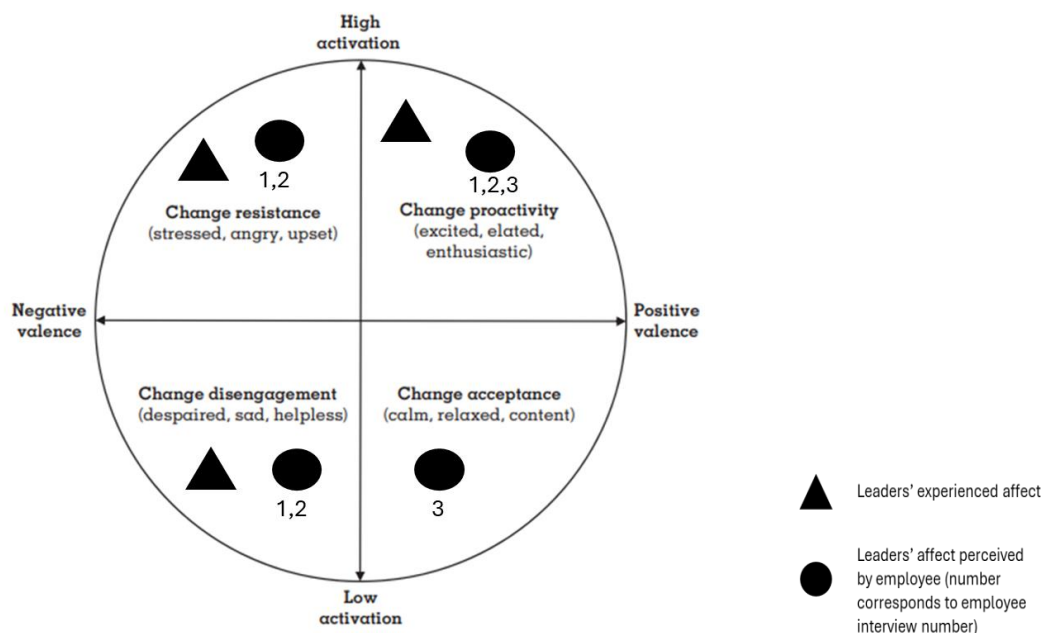
made sure they didn't feel alone.” The leader describes himself as being open and honest, yet he is aware that he keeps negative emotions to himself. *“I believe I've always been vocal about my opinions and experiences. I consider myself to be quite open with my colleagues [...]. Of course, I haven't explicitly stated that I've occasionally wondered if we're doing the right things, as that wouldn't be constructive. However, I do voice my concerns about what's happening now, why things aren't working, and what we can do to improve. So, I don't sugarcoat things, but I might have adjusted my words.”*, *“I express fewer doubts.”*, and *“Yes, the funny thing is, there is a manipulative element to it, so I've also thought, 'Am I now seducing people into continuing, and what if I'm seducing them into some kind of abyss?' I've had that feeling too.”* The leader chooses to explicitly display his positive affect and rely on the contagion effect. *“Yes, I've always tried to inspire the people in operations to move forward. Trying to tell the right story, so they can feel that energy or support to continue.”* *“So, I sometimes admit that I can't always be 100% sure. But perhaps, subconsciously, I hold back some uncertainties or doubts. Maybe to avoid resistance.”*

Table 6 and Figure 5 provide an overview of the affect the employees saw displayed by leader. The employees, however, also pick up on negative emotions the leader unintentionally displays. *“Frustration. When a release happens and tons of issues pop up, it's clear the operation is grinding to a halt”*, and *“I think they're on the cusp of being positive and negative. [...] but I can't say I find them truly positive.”*

TABLE 6: Overview leader's affect and observed leader's affect for case 4

Leader's affect	Observed affect by employees:		
	Employee 1	Employee 2	Employee 3
Stressed, excited, helpless and angry	Angry, stressed, helpless and enthusiastic	Stressed, helpless and enthusiastic	Excited, relaxed, calm and content

FIGURE 5: Leader's experienced and observed affect plotted on Oreg et al.'s (2018) model



Regarding the influence of their leader's affect on them as employees, the employees mention: *“The energy he has to tackle this change. He involves everyone and is quite upbeat.”*, and *“He is completely 100% behind it. We know that it's serious, so to speak.”*

"He's quite relaxed; I find him very calm. He seems content. [...]He's pleased to see progress, to see what's working and what isn't."

Cross-case analysis

The cross-case analysis yielded the following results.

Leaders' affect is not confined to one quadrant

The finding that stands out the most is that in three out of four cases, the leaders' affect was not 'confined' to just one of the quadrants of Oreg et al.'s model (see Figures 3, 4 and 5). In these three cases, the leaders' affect was spread over three of the four quadrants. We found that organizational change processes can indeed trigger affect of both positive and negative valence, and reflective of both high and low activation (Cases 2, 3, and 4). We even found that the leader can experience affect on orthogonal opposites. In Cases 2 and 3, leaders displayed affect aligned with change resistance and change acceptance, whereas in Case 4, we found that the leader experienced affect aligned with change proactivity and change disengagement.

Alignment between leaders' affect and the perceived leaders' affect

All four leaders seemed highly aware of the influence their emotions (might) have on their employees, and stated that they consciously decided what affect they show to whom. This conscious decision seems to be influenced by two variables: role perception and the amount of stress experienced.

Leader's role perception: Whether a leader's displays affect is a deliberate choice influenced by how a leader thinks he or she ought to behave in a change process. From the four cases, we could make out two distinct role perceptions: as a strategist or as an anchor. The leader who identifies his or her role to be a strategist strategically uses their affect as a tool to influence their employees. They connect with their employees through their authentic affect and mirroring the affect of employees. *"I think if you show your true emotions and fully support what you are doing the message lands better."* (Case 3) The other kind of leader appears to believe that a leader should act as an anchor during a change process, actively filtering out their negative affect, aiming for stability, grounding presence, and minimizing emotional turbulence. *"I think it's really important for a manager of a department that's going through a rough patch to stay calm. At least, to appear so, because if I seem unstable, it creates unrest among the team."* (Case 4) This kind of leader keeps to facts and tries to influence the cognitions of the employees by positively framing the change, displaying enthusiasm as a fellow subject-matter-expert. Interestingly, a leader's strong conviction about their role tends to wane when they share a more personal relationship with an employee or is among peers. For example, *"Well, you know, I speak to my manager regularly, we have personal conversations, and I think - or actually, I'm quite certain - that he also feels it's moving a bit too quickly."* (Case 4) *"I remember standing in that room while the entire management team was discussing this. Yes, it was really heated. I felt a lot of stress trying to find a way to break through that."* (Case 4).

Amount of stress a leader experiences: The ability of the leader to consciously filter their affect appears to be influenced by the amount of stress they experience. In Case 3 and 4, the teams were experiencing the immediate negative side-effects of the new way of working on the operation, causing stress and anger toward the new system. During those moments, the leaders were less able to filter out their negative affect, and their employees picked up on them. In the first case, the team found itself in the early stages of a transformation. There was little to no stress, thus the leader was able to consciously filter any negative affect. Lastly, in Case 2, the leader experienced stress in the early stages of the transformation, as the way the process was developing seemed to be unfavorable for their team. The leader was angry and

suspicious and even though she did not want to show negative affect to her employees, the leader was unable to conceal them effectively.

Leaders' affect influences employees' affect

Even though our research was focused on the affect of leaders, we also found that the employees in all four cases both notice their leader's attempts to influence them during the change process as well as that this influence was effective. *"Yes, it's quite interconnected, so what the other person thinks definitely has an influence."*, *"When you have the same feelings as someone else, then you naturally start to reinforce each other's feelings."*, *"Well, he is mainly relaxed and enthusiastic, and well excited. Yeah, he can really take you along in that."*, *"He just tries to encourage everyone."*, and *"I do have the feeling that there is a conscious effort to express positivity to drag us along in that positivity."*

DISCUSSION

We empirically explored leader's affect in change processes grounded in Oreg, et al.'s circumplex of change recipients' responses to change. Whereas Oreg et al.'s (2018) model was rooted in a vast amount of theory, in reality, affect seems to be harder to compartmentalize. All four leaders describe how they consciously decide what affect they show to whom, creating misalignment of leaders' 'true' affect and perceived affect as observed by their employees. This conscious decision by leaders seems to be influenced by a two variables: role perception of the leader and the amount of stress the leader experienced. Also leaders' affect seems to influence employees' affect.

Theoretical Implications

Whereas Oreg et al.'s (2018) model was rooted in a vast amount of theory, in reality, affect seems to be harder to compartmentalize. Contrary to earlier research which stated it is *'highly unlikely that one can feel both positive and negative affect at the same time'* (Diener and Emmons, 1985, p. 1112), we found empirical evidence that organizational change processes represent a complex amalgamation of events that could lead to experiencing opposite affects. Although we strive for change processes to be manageable, we need to acknowledge that these processes are inherently 'affectively messy'. This messiness partly originates from the capricious nature of change processes, which is often a source of stress for change recipients (Smollan, 2015). Stress negatively influences regulation of emotions (Gross, 2002). Regulation is the attempt to influence which emotions we have, when we have them, and how these emotions are experienced or expressed (Gross, 1998). Our results seem to imply that what affect a leader feels depends on which role he or she takes on (or which identity is triggered). The social identity theory (Tajfel and Turner, 1986) could explain that the different affects experienced by the leaders in the cases are a result of multiple identities within the same individual, that is, the leader is simultaneously an executor and a recipient of change. As social roles are crucial in shaping perceptions, experiences, and interactions (Kang and Bodenhausen, 2015), the co-existence of these roles might lead to different, sometimes contradictory, affects.

Moreover, our results provide evidence that Oreg et al.'s (2018) affect-based model might be too unidimensional. Integrating our findings with established theory (AET) highlights the importance of acknowledging the constant exchange between the leaders affect and employee affect. This constant exchange is shaped by the Emotional Intelligence of the leader. Literature on emotionality in leadership highlights the importance of emotional intelligence, referred to as *'the ability to monitor one's own and others' feelings and emotions, to discriminate among them, and to use this information to guide one's thinking and actions'* (Salovey and Mayer, 1990, p. 189). There are four components of emotional intelligence:

appraisal and expression of emotion in oneself, appraisal and recognition of emotion in others, regulation of emotion in oneself, and use of emotion to facilitate performance (Davies et al., 1998). In our study, emotional intelligence among leaders is apparent, as they were highly aware of the influence that their affect could have on their employees. We observed how leaders managed to successfully regulate their emotions, either by suppressing negative affect, or by displaying positive affect deemed more effective for change management. Leaders possessed all four components of emotional intelligence, as they leveraged their displayed affect to influence employees positively. They displayed an understanding of their followers' affect, and responded by displaying the affect appropriate for their situation with the followers.

Furthermore, our data indicate a separation between experienced affect from the circumplex and its displayed counterpart. Displaying emotions that differ from what we are actually feeling involves emotional labor. Hence, our results also contribute to theory on emotional labor and emotional intelligence. The finding that leaders' affect and the perceived leaders' affect were not always aligned suggests the presence of emotional labor, where leaders either suppressed felt affect or displayed an affect that they were not feeling. For instance, the leader in Case 3 suppressed their feeling of being stressed (change resistance), as this was not detected by the employees. In Case 4, the leader appeared to have displayed feelings of being calm, relaxed, and content (change acceptance), although that was not the experienced affect. In Case 2, the leader was experiencing helplessness (change disengagement) but was perceived as excited (change proactivity). As we answer our research question, we indeed found the paradoxical tension that leaders face in experiencing a certain type of affect, while finding themselves displaying a different type of affect. Leaders were found to be putting on 'facial masks', where they regulated their emotional expression through a facial 'mask' they presented to others; the facial mask emotion differed from their real emotions (Rafaeli and Sutton, 1989).

Moreover, the results indicating that leaders' affect influences employees' affect fosters our knowledge on the role of emotional contagion. Emotional contagion refers to the process "*in which a person or group influences the emotions or behavior of another person or group through the conscious or unconscious induction of emotion states and behavioral attitudes*" (Schoenewolf, 1990: 50). In change processes, this is critical because the emotions of leaders or key figures often influence the rest of the organization. Our research findings seem to indicate that emotional contagion does not merely 'infect' horizontally in groups, but also vertically between manager and their teams.

Lastly, we contribute to the development of the theory of authentic leadership. Authentic leadership refers to a leadership style that encompasses self-awareness, relational transparency, high ethical standards, and balanced processing (Walumbwa et al., 2008). Self-awareness is key in authentic leadership as a leader is described as authentic if the way they see themselves is aligned with how others perceive them. From our findings, we observed that leaders were highly aware of not only their emotions but also the emotions they displayed to others. Although there was misalignment of certain types of displayed and perceived affect of the leaders, most of the time, leaders were successfully able to display the affect that they truly felt. This is especially important in displaying affect reflective of change proactivity (positive valence, high activation), as three out of four leaders displayed change proactivity in line with their true affect. When leaders are authentic with the way they respond to and manage change, followers are energized to be authentic as well (Shamir and Eilam, 2005), which leads to increased motivation for performance.

Practical Implications

The practical significance of this study lies in highlighting the importance for leaders to acknowledge that their affect influence employees and how they can balance use their true affect in change processes. We recommend organizations to incorporate this topic into leadership training programs to raise awareness and help leaders recognize how their role perceptions and understanding of their multiple identities (executor and recipient) impact their teams during organizational change processes. The pivotal role of middle managers for change successes has been found in earlier studies (e.g. Balogun and Johnson, 2004; Balogun and Rouleau, 2017). Our study adds to these insights by showing that rather than merely using middle management as “conduits” for passing along information to other employees and who help with sensemaking (Kieran et al., 2020), boards should invest time in getting their middle manager to increase their change readiness by both loading them with content as well as by taking the time to listen to their worries and emotions.

Limitations

As in all research, this work is not without limitations. The strength and limitation of case study research lies in the variability of the context, limiting the transferability of the results (Lincoln, 1985). It would therefore be interesting to replicate this study in various organizational contexts in combination with different kinds of organizational changes. Furthermore, employees were invited by their leader to participate in this study. Although we requested the leader to select a diverse group of employees, volunteer bias may have influenced the results.

CONCLUSION

In this paper we empirically explored leader’s affect in change processes grounded in Oreg, et al.’s (2018) circumplex of change recipients’ responses to change. We found that leaders could experience affect of *both* positive and negative valence, and *both* high and low activation. Incongruities between leaders’ experienced affect and affect as observed by employees suggest the presence of emotional labor, highlighting the affective regulations leaders need to engage in while navigating roles of both executor and recipient of change. These affective regulations are influenced by two variables: role perception and stress, and can be perceived from two perspectives: as a strategist or as an anchor.

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