EMOTIONAL CONTAGION AND WORKPLACE SAFETY

Jordan Sannito, National Safety Council

EMOTIONAL CONTAGION AND WORKPLACE SAFETY

Research and observation will show that people mirror each other's dispositions – things such as vocal tone, posture, inflection, and so on. It may be surprising, but more than just dispositions, people share and absorb each other's emotions, too (Petitta et al., 2021). The process where people send emotions back and forth to each other is called emotional contagion in the research literature.

Emotional contagion in the workplace is the process of passing and absorbing emotional content and its relative intensity from and to colleagues. We might think of emotional contagion as something like tossing a ball. The ball is the emotion, and anyone who catches it then holds that emotion but can also pass it to someone else.

Further, emotions can be contagious regardless of how someone experiences them (e.g., pleasantly/unpleasantly) – people can pass on feelings with a different emotional valence such as anger or joy. When it comes to the workplace, emotions themselves aren't always directly connected to a safety incident but play an indirect role. As for safety leaders, understanding that emotions can prime or help prevent a safety incident is another key to strengthening safety culture.

Research

In a set of papers released over the past few years, researchers from Italy and the United States, using data from both countries, explored emotional contagion and its effects on workplace safety as mediated by sleep, health, cognitive failure, moral disengagement, economic stressors and others.

The authors found anger contagion can increase rates of cognitive failures. Cognitive failure can then play a role in creating higher rates of workplace incidents (Pettit et al., 2019). Emotional tensions can also create environments where people violate safety rules and use moral justifications for such, which can lead to higher rates of workplace incidents (Petitta et al., 2021).

In another study, the authors found perceptions of job-related financial stress change depending on the type of contagion in the workplace. They examined anger and joy and found anger contagion amplifies one's financial stress. On the other hand, the emotion of joy reduces individual perceptions of financial stress (Petitta et al., 2020). Anger contagion at work predicts higher levels of sleep disturbance and ultimately increases the number of safety incidents. Additionally, production pressure affects rates of safety incidents even more (Petitta et al., 2021).

This research shows emotional effects carry a residue that transcends particular contexts. Because of this, the emotion itself being passed on and absorbed serves as a job resource or job demand. Joy as a resource can act to prevent incidents through things like social bonding, whereas anger can increase stress, among other things, and ultimately prove hazardous (Petitta et al., 2020). In this sense, joy enhances and empowers where anger detracts and impairs.

What Safety Leaders Can Do

Emotional contagion works through implicit and explicit cognitive processes (Tee, 2015). People can pass or absorb emotions deliberately or without conscious awareness. Further, both anger and joy tend to be more contagious when their source is a supervisor (Petitta et al., 2020). Leaders can use

knowledge of emotional contagion to observe members of their team for emotional cues, determine the sources of a particular emotional contagion, generate and share emotions and help implement focused training. Research also suggests implementing technologies (e.g., apps) that track sleep (Petitta et al., 2020).

Emotions can change quickly, so being attuned to the micro-shifts in the emotional state of team members can reveal just how vulnerable even a strong safety culture is. These vulnerabilities can also point toward methods for leadership adaptation to employee needs and can help an organization enhance employee physical and psychological safety.

Written by: Jordan Sannito, Research Associate – National Safety Council

---

References

Petitta L, Probst TM, Ghezzi V, Barbaranelli C. (2020). Economic stress, emotional contagion and safety outcomes: A cross-country study. *Work.* 66(2):421-435.

Petitta, L., Probst, T. M., Ghezzi, V., & Barbaranelli, C. (2021). The impact of emotional contagion on workplace safety: Investigating the roles of sleep, health, and production pressure. *Current psychology (New Brunswick, N.J.)*, 1–15. Advance online publication.

Petitta L, Probst TM, Ghezzi V, Barbaranelli C. (2021). Emotional contagion as a trigger for moral disengagement: Their effects on workplace injuries. *Safety Science*. Volume 140.

Petitta L, Probst TM, Ghezzi V, Barbaranelli C. (2019). Cognitive failures in response to emotional contagion: Their effects on workplace accidents. *Accident Analysis & Prevention*. Volume 125, 165-173.

E. Y.J. Tee. (2015). The emotional link: Leadership and the role of implicit and explicit emotional contagion processes across multiple organizational levels. *The Leadership Quarterly*. Volume 26, Issue 4. 654-670.