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# The role of the emotional climate in learning organisations

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## Abstract

This paper describes the research directed at the study of the role of the emotional climate in learning organisations. It becomes increasingly obvious that an emotional climate pervades every level of human interaction inside organisations. Emotionality and rationality coexist in organisational settings. This research examines how an emotional climate arises, how it evolves, how it is maintained, and what are the consequences of a given type of emotional climate. We suggest that it may deeply affect organisational dynamics such as idea-generation, creativity, adaptability to change, and facilitation or inhibition of learning processes. Hence, it ultimately influences performance. We are in the process of developing an instrument to measure the emotional climate in a learning organisation.

## Introduction

Historically, emotion has been a difficult topic for researchers. At the end of the last century and at the beginning of this one, psychology had been dominated by irrationalists and instinctivists, therefore making emotion somehow repellent for empirical and objective research, owing probably to a semantic overabundance in the description of the phenomena (Scherer, 1984a; 1984b).

In the 1960s came the cognitive era, where emotion got rejected anyway. The human being was under the siege of very rational and logical decision making, and emotion could only be some kind of imperfection in this well-rounded mechanism.

Since the 1980s, emotion has gained some popularity again across disciplines (anthropology, psychology, sociology). However, one of the major obstacles to progress in this area has been the problem of arriving at a definition and a concept of emotion acceptable to most psychologists (Scherer, 1984b, p. 294).

Most of the theories in the field recognise that “emotion” and “cognition” are intertwined. But emotion is not simply a cognitive process (Frijda, 1988). It is actually recognised as being:

a psychological construction consisting of several aspects of components:

- the component of cognitive appraisal or evaluation of stimuli and situations;
- the physiological component of activation or arousal;
- the component of motor expression;
- the motivational component, including behaviour intentions or behavioural readiness; and
- the component of subjective feeling state.

Judging from a number of recent surveys of emotion in the literature, there seems to be a fair amount of agreement that the concept of emotion should encompass all of these components, rather than just some of them (see Averill, 1980; Izard, 1977; Lazarus *et al.*, 1970; Leventhal, 1979; Plutchnik, 1980)

(Scherer, 1984, p. 294).

Nevertheless, organisational literature has still ignored emotions or kept it to a very narrow range.

Emotions were first referred to in organisations when early group dynamics theorists introduced the concept of human relations in the workplace; for example Mayo in his study on the morale of workers and its impact on performance, and Lewin, who worked on social change. In order to lower resistance to

change, part of the strategy is to eliminate prejudices heavily loaded with affectivity. One has to trigger an emotional upheaval that will play the role of a catharsis, in breaking prejudices and unfreezing habits (Anzieu and Martin, 1994).

Otherwise, emotions were considered rather inappropriate in organisational settings (Putnam and Mumby, 1993) because they are rather linked to the expressive arenas of life, as opposed to the instrumental goal orientation of the business world.

And Flam (1994) reinforces:

Organisations are usually studied from either rationalistic or normative perspectives, suggesting that they are immune to emotion. Similarly, in studies of work and organisational life, emotions are usually either completely ignored or very narrowly conceived. Studies that do deal with emotions tend to focus on work satisfaction, work enthusiasm, or self-actualisation. The negative emotions, such as fear, guilt or embarrassment, do not receive the attention they deserve although they play a key role in the shaping of the organisational order (1994).

### The pendulum of history swings

Things are evolving. It becomes increasingly obvious that an emotional climate pervades every level of human interaction inside any organisation. Emotionality and rationality coexist in organisational settings. Authors such as Hochschild, Van Maanen, Kunda, Sutton, Rafaeli, Fineman have worked already on these issues, starting in the 1980s.

Arlie Hochschild (1979; 1983) has drawn something very interesting to our attention, namely the concept of “emotional work” (which is the effort put into ensuring that our private feelings are in tune with socially accepted norms) and “emotional labour” (the commercial exploitation of this principle):

All in all, we can think of emotion as a covert resource, like money, or knowledge, or physical labour, where companies need to get the job done. Real-time emotions are a large part of what managers manage and emotional labour is no small part of what trainers train and supervisors supervise. It is a big part of white-collar “work”. This is true for manufacturing firms, but it is far more true in the rapidly expanding service sector – in department stores, airports, hotels, leisure worlds, hospitals, welfare offices and schools (1990, p. xii).

Interesting work has been done on emotional display at work and the strong links with the prevailing organisational culture in place (Van Maanen and Kunda, 1989). It is shown how

ritualised expression of emotion can be part of this culture.

Expression of emotion in organisational life can have important consequences for the person displaying the emotion as well as for the person who is the target of this display, especially when the one displaying does it for professional purposes: there is a forced apprenticeship of distinguishing between emotions one feels, and emotions one learns to express (Rafaeli and Sutton, 1989).

We can no longer ignore in today’s organisational life the fact that emotions are just part of the picture and that a lot of decisions, although one pretends they are scientifically balanced (e.g. we look at balance sheets, complex financial reports, marketing reports, etc.), are due to a final “emotional” hint from the decision-maker. Fineman says:

Emotions are within the texture of organising. They are intrinsic to social order and disorder, working structures, conflict, influence, conformity, posturing, gender, sexuality and politics. They are products of socialisation and manipulation. They work mistily within the human psyche, as well as obviously in the daily ephemera of organisational life (1994, p. 1).

and:

Organisational order depends on feelings of togetherness and apartness, while organisational control would be hard to conceive without the ability to feel shame, anxiety, fear, joy or embarrassment (1994, p. 2).

As we look deeper into the subject, we look at some of the specific emotions encountered in organisations, for example, fear. As Flam states:

Fear and anxiety have been underworked in organisational theorising; obscured, perhaps, by the positive thinking and feeling expected for man’s work transactions. The fear of loss of face, prestige, position, favour, fortune or job focuses the corporate actor’s mind and sharpens his or her political vision and skills. Such anxieties are readily transformed into a socially acceptable work enthusiasm or drive, which ambitious organisational members soon learn to display (1994, p. 4).

Fear means hiding away, occupying yourself with your professional work. The fear of separateness, fear of being identified, fear stemming from hesitation, from a lack of decision, fear of one’s own self, of self-defining oneself. Fear of being crossed, of being defined (1994, p. 66).

### A few practical insights

If one takes a closer look at the business press (see Figure 1), one can actually find a lot of

emotional words, which just reinforces our hypothesis that emotions are part of organisational life.

For example: When Welch (Jack Welch, CEO of General Electric) dedicated his shareholders' letter in GE's 1991 Annual Report to the theme of building GE's future on mutual trust and respect, he was met with considerable surprise and scepticism. But Welch was describing how GE is going to become a knowledge organisation. For example, even if a manager delivers according to the numbers but shows failure in a conflict over character and values, he will be dismissed. The logic of such a choice is clear: getting ideas to flow means thawing out those parts of the company still frozen by fear. (Webber, 1992).

Or: Inside and outside the company, trust creates the invisible ties that bind people and companies together and convert mere transactions into personal relationships.

### A quick glance at learning organisations

By reviewing the literature on the learning organisation, it seems that we can see a pattern emerging. The concept of organisational learning appears to be probably the only competitive advantage for firms (Stata, 1989) in a very fast changing and tough world.

Some of the key ideas attached to the learning organisation are: team work and team learning, free vertical and horizontal flow of information, training of the workforce, learning reward systems, continuous improvement of work, flexibility of company strategy, decentralised hierarchies and participative management, constant experimentation at work, supportive corporate culture (Rosengarten, 1995).

Figure 1 Emotional words in the business press

#### A glance in the business press gives us some very practical evidences

- u Apple is going through severe job cuts and loss in profit, hurt by feeble consumer confidence and fears of market saturation (*Financial Times*)
- u Cable & Wireless: the Chairman and the CEO left the company after failing to resolve a rancorous power struggle (*Financial Times*)
- u Air Inter's pilots are deeply depressed (*Capital*)
- u KLM and Northwest: there was personal animosity between the 2 CEOs (*Business Week*)



We also know that:

Measurements must be taken to assess the current culture, learning attitudes and learning disabilities in an organisation, in order to determine which actions to take to manage the progression towards a learning culture. Once a learning organisation is established it can progress to a leading organisation which is capable of achieving and sustaining competitive advantage (Campbell and Cairns, 1994).

### One step further

Yet, no major breakthrough in the understanding of the role of emotions in organisations has occurred. It seems obvious that one needs to take emotional reactions into account in organisations, for example, in planning and implementing a change programme. Furthermore, emotions are critical in the motivation of employees. Yet, it is unclear whether managers are conscious that emotions have a dynamic of their own and they can therefore shape the organisation's emotional climate. That is, individuals have emotions; collectively, these individual emotions create an emotional climate, which in turn will affect individual emotions, etc.

The emotional climate is the central key element of organisational life. As we already mentioned, it is where everything gets played out: power games, contempt, envy, despair, but also joy, pleasure, interest, enthusiasm. As David Goleman (*Emotional Intelligence*, 1995) says: "the destructive effects of miserable morale, intimidated workers, or arrogant bosses – or any of the dozens of other permutations of emotional deficiencies in the workplace – can go largely unnoticed by those outside the immediate scene. But the costs can be read in signs such as decreased productivity, an increase in missed deadlines, mistakes and mishaps, and exodus of employees to more congenial settings. There is inevitably, a cost to the bottom line from low levels of emotional intelligence on the job. When it is rampant, companies can crash and burn".

Our research focuses on how an emotional climate arises, how it evolves, how it is maintained, and what are the consequences of a given type of emotional climate on an organisation's functioning. We suggest that the emotional climate deeply affects organisational dynamics such as idea-generation and creativity, readiness and adaptability to change, and facilitation of learning processes

(see Figure 2). Hence, it influences performance, both individual and organisational.

We suggest the following development applied to an emotional climate in organisations.

As an overall framework, there are some generating conditions, which could be seen as the dispositions to react a certain way. In other words, members of an organisation would share a certain emotionality, which is based on three factors: shared values, shared motivations (goals and needs), and shared beliefs and attitudes. The structural reality and the social environment should also be taken into consideration, as they are shared as well by all members, i.e. the type of leadership in place, the networks, and the physical working conditions.

On the ground of a certain type of emotional disposition, certain internal or external events occur. They elicit either emotional episodes, for a short period of time, affecting everyone in the organisation; or some mood states, for a longer period of time, both phenomena affecting everyone in the organisation in a convergent manner, i.e. affective states of each member having a comparable nature.

The reactions of the group(s) to the emotional episodes or moods are influenced by a group dynamics phenomenon, such as conformity (or non-conformity), influence, emotional contagion, and emotional modulation. Therefore, the emotional climate becomes qualitatively and quantitatively different, precisely because it is the result of shared emotional episodes, moods, values, beliefs, and goals. From a qualitative point of view, there are different action tendencies triggered. From a quantitative point of view, there is a different intensity developed.

Furthermore, we propose that the emotional climate must have an impact on learning, positive or negative. Therefore, as we measure the learning organisation, we suggest measuring the emotional climate in order to identify its potential to inhibit learning or enhance learning.

When emotionally upset, people cannot remember, attend, learn, or make decisions clearly. There are strong signs that suggest the future of all corporate life, a tomorrow where the basic skills of emotional intelligence will be ever more important, in teamwork, in cooperation, in helping people learn together how to work more effectively. As knowledge-based services and intellectual capital become more central to corporations, improving the way people work together will be a major way to leverage intellectual capital, making a critical competitive difference. To thrive, if not survive, corporations would do well to boost their collective emotional intelligence (Goleman, 1995).

We are in the process of developing an instrument to measure the emotional climate in an organisation, or a company, or a group. The main instrument is represented as an emotional map, composed of 16 main emotions represented by circles, scaled with increasing intensity (see Figure 3). The goal is to be able to diagnose an emotional climate by identifying which of these emotions are predominant in an organisation, at a given time. This diagnostic will be made possible by the use of different other instruments and tools: for example, interviews, questionnaires, or video-taping of group sessions. These different levels of information will feed into each emotional bubble.

Figure 2 Emotional climate versus organisational dynamics

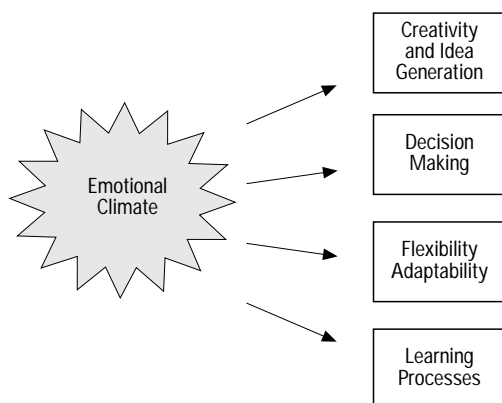
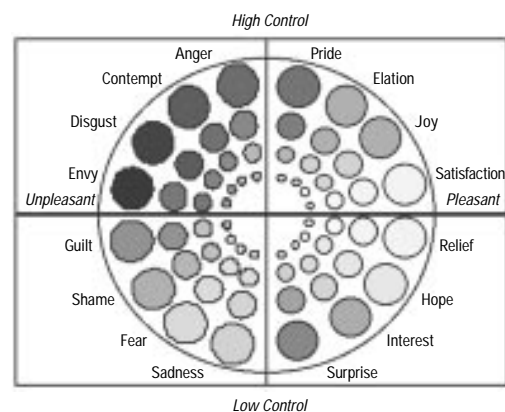


Figure 3 The emotional map



## Conclusion

We hope to be able to demonstrate the impact that the emotional climate has on the organisation's functioning, on its decision-making processes and its learning ability. It could be possible to identify whether the emotional climate is an inhibitor or enhancer of learning and how the situation could be either improved or reinforced depending on the results obtained. If organisations recognise the importance of the emotional climate and manage it in a proper way, it could lead to major improvements in the overall management process and to organisational success.

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