

Emotional Tyranny at Work

Suppressing the Moral Emotions

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I felt angry—humiliated and betrayed. [I] felt like I had been stabbed in the back, with no way to defend myself or explain my position. Because of the audience, I probably would not have confronted the senior management person in this meeting, even if time permitted He forever damaged my credibility. (Adapted from Waldron, 2000, p. 67)

Raul,¹ a middle manager at a large American banking firm, was criticized by his boss pointedly, unexpectedly, and most bothersome to him, very publicly. Indeed, this incident occurred during Raul's presentation before a monthly gathering of senior managers and Raul's own staff. His recollection bristles with an emotional intensity seldom associated with the workplace. Nonetheless, Raul's report is surprisingly typical of those I have collected from employees working in a wide variety of organizational settings. As Raul sees it, the disrespectful treatment he received from his boss was *designed* to embarrass him, to "put me in my place," to send a forceful message to an up-and-coming subordinate about who was really in charge. Undeniably, many veteran employees readily recall similar instances of what I have come to call *emotional tyranny*—the use of emotion by powerful organization members in a manner that is perceived to be destructive, controlling, unjust, and even cruel.

Emotional tyranny is sometimes a strategic ploy of an individual bent on acquiring or maintaining power. At other times it is a collective exercise, perpetrated by a cast of cooperating organization members. But emotional tyranny also emerges as an *unintended* consequence of organizational structures, values, and practices. It is by no means commonplace, but it often yields harmful and lasting effects on individuals, relationships, and organizations. Even years later, Raul feels a certain bitterness, and he has learned to be "careful about whom to trust." This highly emotional event was a negative turning point in what was already a strained supervisory relationship. Dispirited by this and similar instances of emotional abuse, Raul began searching for an organization with a more supportive culture.

When he finally left the bank, Raul took with him expertise developed through several years of apprenticeship and an intercultural savvy developed as one of the bank's few Hispanic managers.

In this chapter I explore the *communicative* aspects of emotional tyranny. In doing so, I draw the reader's attention to verbal and nonverbal tactics, interactive processes, and the discourse of workplace emotion. As with any brand of tyranny, communication is simply one element, albeit an important one, of a larger destructive process. But by necessity I spend relatively less of this limited space on the important political, occupational, and economic factors that can encourage powerful people to wreak emotional havoc. I also note that some emotions are undeniably intrasy-chic, biologically-grounded experiences (e.g., a fearful reaction to heights). Nevertheless, my work is concerned with the decidedly *social* aspects of emotion. Those taking a social constructionist view of emotion call our attention to the intersection of emotion, language, and normative behavior (Averill, 1983). From this perspective, emotional experiences such as embarrassment or shame or anger are reactions to violations of moral codes, by ourselves or by those who share our communities. The language of affect is also of interest to social constructionists because we frequently use emotion words and phrases to communicate our moral sensibilities. Consider such phrases as these, reported by various employees: "I couldn't be proud of the hurtful things I said that day," or "I was so angry at the way I was disrespected by the new employees," and "He got to work closely with the boss, and I was incredibly jealous of him."

This chapter is grounded in workers' experiences of emotional tyranny—anger, pride, indignation, and other "moral emotions"—collected through surveys, interviews, and the author's observations (Waldron, 1994, 1999, 2000, 2003; Waldron & Kelley, 2008; Waldron & Krone, 1991). They were shared by probation officers, factory workers located in a rural southern community, data entry and supervisory staff at a large urban bank, a large sample of service workers, state employees from three agencies, and members of human service organizations serving unemployed persons and those living with AIDS. Where illustrative (and prudent), I also draw from my own experiences working at a large state university where rapid change, limited oversight, and the centralization of power have created conditions ripe for emotional tyranny. Because of the focus of this volume, I address most extensively those emotional experiences that involve encounters with more powerful employees (one of the most common of emotional experiences reported in my own studies).

After a brief review of how theorists have conceptualized emotion at work, this chapter examines work relationships as sites of emotional abuse. The "moral" emotions are described and the practices of emotional tyrants are examined, with particular emphasis on their emotional

weaponry, communicative tactics, and efforts to manipulate the cultural values that shape the emotional dimensions of work. Finally, drawing from Weiner (2006), I argue that emotional tyranny can be fruitfully conceptualized as an effort to control the moral infraction–cognitive assessment–emotional communication cycle.

Emotion at Work: A Brief Introduction

Historically, emotion was considered by management theorists to be a relatively blunt force—the fear by which workers might be motivated or the subjective sense of satisfaction reported by the happy employees of well-run companies. So, for early organizational theorists, the study of emotion was subjugated to larger concerns for employee motivation or job satisfaction, what Miller and colleagues classified as “emotion toward work” (Miller, Considine, & Garner, 2007). But in recent decades, the study of emotion at work has become nuanced and rich. A turning point was Arlie Hochschild’s (1983) publication of *The Managed Heart*, a seminal analysis of the labor performed by airline attendants and other service employees. Drawing from earlier fieldwork (Hochschild, 1979), her book described in vivid detail the performance of what she called *emotional labor*. Hochschild observed that for many service workers, emotion is not simply a reaction to work, it *is* the work. When emotion *is* work, emotional performances are dictated by management, taught through training, and enforced through surveillance techniques, such as customer satisfaction surveys (“*Was your server cheerful at all times?*”) and “secret shopper” programs.

For these reasons, emotional labor often produces inauthentic emotion. Hochschild’s (1983) airline attendants were expected to *fabricate* such emotions as cheerfulness, to *repress* their anger at obnoxious customers, and to *transmute* one emotion, such as fear, into another, more acceptable one, such as sympathy. As such, emotional laborers learn *feeling rules*. Some of these regulate how emotion is communicated. “*Never get angry with a customer,*” is a familiar example. Other rules guide *interpretation*. They help employees know what counts as organizationally-legitimate emotional experiences. Statements like, “*Wipe that smile off your face,*” and “*That is nothing to be proud of,*” instruct employees (and children) in the emotion rules of working life (Waldron, 1994). Interestingly, these kinds of directives are doubly communicative in that they are also messages about the rules of emotional communication. More interesting still, they often draw their force from their emotional tone. As will be discussed, lower-power workers are sometimes intimidated or shamed into compliance with community codes of behavior, including those concerning the expression of emotion.

Building on Hochschild’s contributions, researchers extended the study of emotional displays to convenience store clerks (Sutton & Rafaeli, 1988)

and Disneyland employees (Van Maanen & Kunda, 1989). It quickly became evident that some work was authentically emotional by its very nature, including that performed by criminal investigators and detectives (Rafaeli & Sutton, 1991; Stenross & Kleinman, 1989), 911 operators (Tracy & Tracy, 1998), and corrections officers (Tracy, 2005). As this literature developed theorists argued that unremitting emotional labor and the dissonance workers experienced between *felt* emotion and role-required *expressed* emotion could have harmful consequences, including identity loss, stress, and burnout (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1993; Morris & Feldman, 1996). Some feminist scholars argued that simplistic conceptions of workplace emotion are a legacy of patriarchal assumptions that dichotomize emotion and reason (Myerson, 2000). More recent reviews of the emotion-related scholarship (Briner, 2004; Fineman, 2000) broaden and deepen our understanding of organizational emotion as a cultural and relational phenomenon. For example, the notion of *bounded emotionality* (Mumby & Putnam, 1992) describes the balancing of individual needs for authentic and spontaneous emotional expression, with relational requirements and organizational control (Martin, Knopoff, & Beckman, 2000). Workplace emotion is now understood as a phenomenon that flows across organizational boundaries—one deeply connected to domestic life and the practices of the larger popular culture (Waldron, 2000).

One theme that has emerged in my more recent work (Waldron, 2000; Waldron & Kelley, 2008) and that of others (e.g., Harlos & Pinder, 2000) involves its connection to issues of relational morality and justice. The narratives workers tell about intensely emotional events are often relational morality tales (Miller et al., 2007). Even those workers who perform emotionally daunting roles (probation officers, social workers, prison guards) rarely cite their tasks in these narratives. Instead they describe disloyal coworkers, disrespectful supervisors, cold-hearted peers, inequitable relationships, and other relational threats. Abuses of relational power are the subject of some of the most alarming, emotionally painful, sometimes chilling, accounts.

Organizational Relationships as Sites for Emotional Abuse

Organizational relationships are, for at least four reasons, unique contexts for the study of emotional communication. First, power differences abound in workplace relationships. Leaders are empowered to make evaluations, bolstering or threatening a member's work identity through recognition or criticism. Interactions with leaders can be risky; success or failure is linked with economic risk and career consequences. For that reason, it is not surprising that certain kinds of work interactions are tinged with the emotion of fear. As just one example, the traditional reluctance of

employees to be the bearers of bad news can be attributed in part to fear of the consequences (Wagoner & Waldron, 1999). But supervisors too may approach these interactions with trepidation, sometimes hesitating to deliver negative feedback for fear of the emotional toll it may take on the worker or the relational harm it may cause (Larson, 1989). Fear, frustration, and rage often appear in narratives about supervisory abuses of power. Hopeless despair or burning indignation may be the emotional reaction to repeated and persistent misuses of power.

Second, workplace encounters can be excruciatingly public, as they are frequently witnessed by an audience of peers, customers, or supervisors. The quote beginning this chapter is testimony to the feelings of embarrassment that compound difficult work interactions. Raul's feelings will only be intensified as he contemplates the working of his organization's informal communication network. Witnesses will share his fate in whispers as they gather around the office water cooler. Indeed, who has not been tempted to pass along rumors of a coworker's humiliation at the hands of an emotionally-insensitive boss, the coworker who "lost it" during a tense meeting, or perhaps, the unsettling sight of an employee brought to tears by a nasty coworker or customer? Workplace emotion buzzes along the communicative corridors of nearly every organization, changing in intensity and form as it goes, sometimes building a collective feeling of outrage, excitement, despair, or confidence. This kind of *second-order* emotional reaction, linked only tenuously to the original encounter, tells us that organizational emotion is not only witnessed by a public, it is also created *through* a public's interactions.

A third unique feature of organizational emotion is its enmeshment in work roles. The performance of emotion is simply *expected* from the occupants of many work roles. Inspiring teachers are expected to produce emotionally arresting lectures; police officers must project a sense of emotional calm under the most stressful of circumstances; competitive athletes work themselves into a frenzy of excitement; on cue, campaigning politicians display their feelings of compassion, moral outrage, and patriotic pride, hoping to make a connection with emotionally-perceptive voters. These emotional performances are familiar and well-documented (Ashforth, Kreiner, & Fugate, 2000), but less appreciated are the more subtle emotional performances that sustain typical work relationships. Success in this arena is evaluated frequently, both formally and informally. Team members who fail to appear sufficiently enthusiastic may be subtly sanctioned by coworkers who question their commitment. A newly promoted manager may be "brought down to earth" by the biting comments of less favored employees, especially if he or she appears *excessively proud* at this good fortune. Those who flatter the new boss with obsequious emotional displays may themselves be subject to unflattering labels—"brownnoser" and "pet poodle" are among those reported in surveys.

Finally, a unique thing about emotion at work is, interestingly enough, its failure to be bounded by the workplace. The joys and disappointments of our larger lives come to work with us, and emotions we experience at work follow us home. Although “a professional” may be encouraged to check these boundary-crossing emotions at the office door, this is sometimes impossible. In fact, emotional behavior is more likely to be overlooked if coworkers know, for example, that an employee is in the midst of an “emotionally-messy” divorce. However, recognizing that any type of communal arrangement requires some degree of emotional constraint, workers strive to “keep things under control,” to “put a lid on it,” even on the most trying days. Unedited venting and emotional exhaustion can be the unattractive alternatives to this collective attempt at emotional censorship. Emotions repressed at work, however, are sometimes displaced. At home, family members may become the unwitting targets of suppressed anger. Other emotions may be displaced as well. Family members are usually safer audiences for expressions of envy at coworkers, fear of abusive supervisors, and indignation over unjust practices. However, habitual displacement may lead to emotional fatigue among family members and supportive friends. They may learn to carefully edit work-related discussions to avoid another round of emotional dumping. In this way, emotional tyranny in the workplace indirectly controls our private conversations and personal relationships.

All of this is to say that the emotional landscape of workplace relationships is a complicated but interesting terrain. One reason emotional work experiences resonate so soundly is that they mark the dimensions of work about which we care the most. In particular, they draw attention to the relational practices that we consider right and those we consider wrong.

The Moral Emotions

In his model of social motivation and justice, the motivational psychologist Bernard Weiner (2006) envisions a prominent place for what he calls the “moral emotions.” The model is helpful in understanding how emotions and communication are linked to relational justice (or injustice) at work. With Averill (1983; see also Waldron, 1994), Weiner sees anger and similar emotions as reactions to moral transgressions. “Anger is an accusation or a value judgment following from the belief that another could and should have done otherwise” (p. 35). For example, the obligation to do one’s fair share is an integral part of the moral code for most workers in most organizations. The perception that a coworker is consistently failing to perform his or her share of the work on a group project may yield a rising sense of *anger* in coworkers. As anger builds, coworkers may be motivated to take such corrective actions as asking for more help, recruiting peers to pressure the “lazy” worker, and ultimately, complaining to the

boss. On the other hand, if colleagues perceive that the coworker's poor performance is due to uncontrollable external factors (an overwhelming workload) they may feel *sympathy* rather than anger. As a moral emotion, sympathy may lead them to redress injustice by looking beyond the coworker's personal moral failure to the larger context. They might ask the boss to reassign some of their coworker's tasks or simply accept the injustice for a longer period of time.

A Typology of Moral Emotions

In work settings, the list of moral emotions is extensive. Most are other-directed, but some are primarily self-oriented (e.g., shame), and others are chiefly directed toward larger social systems (e.g., indignation). Table 1.1 lists selected emotions and the social actions or conditions to which they refer. A quick perusal gives a sense of how clearly these emotions mark violations of personal and relational morality, although they clearly serve other functions as well, and how they might motivate corrective responses. For example, the experiences of emotional *shock* or *outrage* often arise when an organization member blatantly violates taken-for-granted moral codes. We are shocked when a trusted colleague is caught stealing from the company or when a loyal peer engages in "backstabbing" political behavior.

Table 1.1 Moral Emotions and their Social Referents

Emotion	Social Referents
Admiration	Success of deserving others
Anger	Hurtful or immoral behavior committed by others
Embarrassment	Acts that reveal moral failures or create an appearance of moral failure
Envy	Desire for the qualities, possessions, or accolades possessed by others
Guilt	Responsibility for wrong doing
Humiliation	Threats to dignity; dehumanizing behaviors
Humility	Exposure to transcendent moral forces
Indignation	Ire at the unfairness of a social situation or system
Jealousy	One's rightful role in relationships is threatened by rivals
Outrage	Fury aroused by the offensive acts of others
Pride	Personal or group accomplishments; recognition by valued others
Regret	Having hurt others or made a serious mistake
Resentment	Sustained or acute ill-treatment of others
Scorn	Someone or something held in contempt
Schadenfreude	Shame experienced by another brings joy to the self
Shame	Disgraceful, unworthy, or dishonorable behavior
Shock/Surprise	Unexpected moral violations by others
Sympathy	Pain or distress of another brings feelings of pity or sorrow

In addition to simply marking moral violations, emotions may stimulate change. When employees feel *shame* after flouting legitimate organizational rules, they may be motivated to pledge improved behavior in the future. Expressing shame is an acknowledgement of the work community's existing moral codes and possibly a precondition if one hopes to rejoin it. Relational obligations are enforced by emotions like *guilt*, *jealousy*, *scorn*, and *embarrassment*. Organizations often cultivate extreme identification in members by involving them in closely-knit work teams, encouraging workplace "bonding" through social activities, and using relationship metaphors ("We are all just one big family here"). It is an easy matter then to elicit guilt from those who "let down the team" or "share the family secrets." Loyal members may feel scorn for those who violate the relational code.

Jealousy arises from perceptions that one's rightful place in a valued relationship is threatened. Coworkers who are the recipients of special attention from the boss or inequitable rewards may be the subject of this emotion. Alternatively, eliciting embarrassment can be a way of exerting power in work relationships or "leveling the field." For example, factory workers in the mid-south reported that newly promoted shop foremen sometimes took advantage of workers, embarrassing them on the shop floor by mimicking their accents and taunting them (Waldron et al., 1993). Convinced that these former peers had gotten "too big for their breeches," workers conspired to "humble" them through embarrassing practical jokes or by intentionally slowing production. In other contexts, workers sometimes experience *humility* as a positive experience wrought by the existence of larger moral forces. For instance, a social worker reported that she was "humbled by the goodness" of colleagues who worked long hours at low pay to care for extremely ill AIDS patients. In the case of the shop foremen, however, humility was an emotional experience reluctantly acquired.

Communicating the Moral Emotions

Figure 1.1 depicts relationships between organizational morality, emotion, and communication as a cycle. Emotion is triggered (Step 1) by a perceived infraction—a behavior that potentially threatens the moral codes governing relationships in a particular organization. For current purposes, we will assume the act is one of sharp criticism, that the actor is a supervisor, and that the observer/recipient is a member acting under the supervisor's direction. According to the model, the member assesses the act's morality (Step 2) before experiencing emotion (Step 3). The employee may think criticism is morally justified in the context of this supervisory relationship (e.g., perhaps he or she violated a well-known safety policy). If so, the felt-emotion may be a negative and self-oriented one like shame or

remorse. In deciding whether to express the emotion (Step 5), the member makes an assessment of risk (Step 4). Will expressing shame cause harm to the self or put a valued relationship at risk? Or would it have potentially beneficial effects? Expressing shame *could be* beneficial, as it assures the supervisor that the employee understands the prevailing moral codes and feels disappointment at failing to conform to them. This expression may lead the supervisor to modify the original act (“Well, I may have been a bit too harsh. I just wanted to make sure you stay safe at work”). This act may trigger a new round of moral assessment, felt-emotion, and so on.

In contrast, the employee may conclude that the act of criticism violated codes of relational morality because it was unduly harsh, delivered in public, or unfairly directed at a single violator of the rules. In such cases, the felt-emotion may be other-directed anger or perhaps system-directed indignation. The expression of these emotions to the supervisor will, most likely, be edited to comply with prevailing norms of relational respect. The emotion may be suppressed, directed elsewhere (for similar thoughts on “displacement,” see Kassing, 2007), or transmuted into a more acceptable linguistic form (“I am *proud* of my record in the past, and I am sure this won’t happen again”).

Practicing Emotional Tyranny

The practice of emotional tyranny involves the use of power to intervene in the cycle presented in Figure 1.1. I first consider the various communicative tools used by powerful people for manipulating the moral emotions.

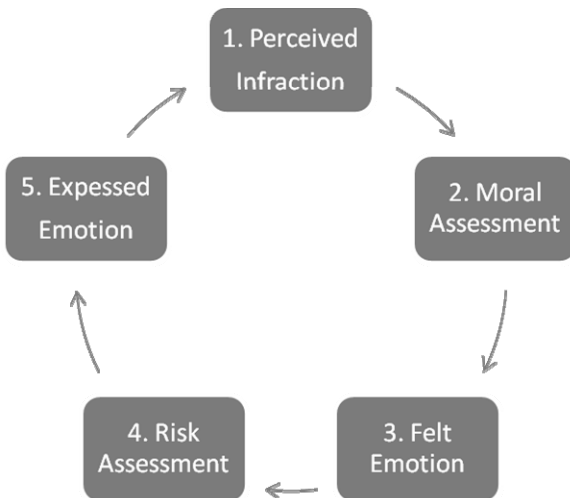


Figure 1.1 Communication of the moral emotions.

A Short Course on Emotional Weaponry

Emotion is subject to manipulation at several levels of communication. At the level of *nonverbal display*, powerful people utilize the intensity, duration, and intermittence of emotional displays. For instance, an emotionally-abusive boss may express emotions at high volume, for unusually long periods of time, in unpredictable bursts, and ever-changing hues. These behaviors are violations of normal emotional conduct, but power differences may prevent the censoring of such behavior. In fact, these displays may consolidate power by making others feel intimidated, confused, or humiliated. Sharon, a staff assistant at a university, describes an emotionally tyrannical boss:

My boss would rant and rave, like a nutcase, really. Then he would be nice as can be for a few days. Then, out of the blue he would be embarrassing me or saying hurtful things. I never knew what to expect, so I would come to work on pins and needles. Everyone else was that way too—never quite sure of what to say or do.

At the level of *emotional language*, powerful people can use emotion words or phrases in ways that are harmful in a work context. Some emotional language is often *appropriated*, taken from contexts in which it might be benign or even positive, and used to cast dispersions on the character of employees. In my studies, workers have been described as “too eager and excited,” “shameless,” “emotionally under-carbonated,” “grumpy,” “wimpy,” “fearless,” “lacking personal pride,” “explosive,” and as having a “chip on her shoulder.” In some cases, these emotional labels are used to discredit those who have good reason to be emotional. The “grumpy” employee was one who was deeply concerned that his government agency was failing to perform its designated function (safety inspections) under a new political administration. His boss (a political appointee) used the label to discount these concerns while finding fault with the emotional make-up of the employee. In many cases, emotional language is used to suggest perceived shortcomings in the moral character of workers or to “motivate” desired behavioral responses. “We don’t need any *emotional train wrecks* here at [auto manufacturer],” a highly dedicated engineer/team leader complained to me. “The work is tough, the hours are long, and tired people get mean and nasty. But you don’t let it get to you, and you sure don’t *cry* about it to management.”

Tactics of Emotional Tyrannists

At the level of emotional *tactics*, powerful people design communication that elicits or changes emotional responses (see Table 1.2). These include

Table 1.2 Tactics of Emotional Tyrannists with Discourse Examples

<i>Tactic</i>	<i>Exemplar</i>
Betrayal	"I put my heart into the job because my boss liked me and believed in me. But after he got promoted I got nothing but coldness. He stabbed me in the heart."
Blackmail	"I (stupidly) told my boss about a crush I had on a coworker. He threatened to tell if I didn't show a good attitude. Maybe joking...but he enjoyed the threat."
Deflecting	"He basically told us it was not his fault [that people haven't been paid on time]. We all should be mad at the contractor. He dodged responsibility."
Discounting	"[The Dean asked], 'Why did you care so much about the staff evaluations? All I care about is the faculty. We really don't need to be so emotional.'"
Embarrassing	"She criticized me right on the floor, in front of my customers (two were my friends)! My face went red, and I ran for the bathroom."
Faking	"The HR person could really pretend like she was sincere when we brought up a grievance—like she cared and was all worried. But it was an act, a joke really."
Grinding	"After a while I got tired of the everyday anger control issues. She snipped and yelled and wore me down over time. I finally left (which is what she wanted)."
Guiltig	"Because I was super-dedicated back then, they could guilt me into anything. I'd stay late because they would make me feel disloyal or selfish for going home."
Intimidating	"I was told I would pay a huge price if I went public with the problem. Basically, they scared me into conformity."
Exhorting	"[My boss] was like a preacher at church, getting us all whooped up and excited about the company and our sales. But we found out it was all BS. The company didn't care about us, and the bosses made all of the money. We were used."
Orchestrating	"This guy [team leader] was threatened by me. So he went around spreading rumors that I wasn't working hard and thought I was too good to work. Before I knew it people resented me."
Reframing	"You think poor sales are no big deal? This is an embarrassment to me."
Ridiculing	"When I see my servers cry, I know they aren't ready for prime time. Crying doesn't make customers happy and babies don't get tips. I say, buck-up!"
Shaming	"After I complained, they made me feel like I was being selfish, like I was more important than everybody. Just because I wanted them to follow the [curriculum development] process rather than just rush it through."
Silencing	[A college told me] "Sure I am disgusted ... and I think the policy is stupid. But keep my name out of it. I have already had my head chewed off in too many meetings (by university administrators)."
Vanquishing	"Wipe that smile off your face and don't let me see it again!"

such varied activities as emotional *blackmail*, false concern (*faking*), using emotion to wear down resistance (*grinding*), redefining the emotional experience of others (*reframing*), and simply *vanquishing* emotions from the work place. Of course, there exist many others. At my university, the implementation of a complicated new computer system was by all accounts badly bungled. One unfortunate result was that some (largely low-level) employees received reduced paychecks, or none at all, for several pay cycles. Employees expressed concern, then alarm, then frustration, then anger, and finally burning resentment as their plight went unacknowledged by leaders. After remaining mute about the problem for weeks (i.e., dismissing the emotional urgency expressed by employees and many of their supervisors), the President's office finally responded by blaming the contractor and the Human Resources Department (*deflecting*), claiming that the administration had been highly concerned all along (*appropriation* of employee emotion), and arguing that the administration had "no choice" but to implement the computer change because the old system was defunct and essentially in danger of self-destructing. This last tactic seemed designed to cultivate *sympathy* for the beleaguered administration. At the same time, administrative rhetoric implied that employees were selfish to complain about their personal losses in light of the organization's eminent destruction at the hands of a decrepit computer. Not surprisingly, this *shaming* tactic was met by considerable indignation at what appeared to be emotional manipulation.

Emotional Tyrannist's Shaping of Processes and Culture

At the level of communication *processes*, powerful actors manipulate procedures, structures, and behavior sequences to manipulate emotions. Familiar examples are the sales rallies designed to "whoop up" enthusiasm for new products and initiation rites that humiliate new members and cultivate their emotional connection to senior leaders (one purpose of military basic training). In other examples, management trainees may be subjected to a variety emotionally-demanding exercises and simulations (e.g., mock interviews; working in teams on a time-limited tasks) to "test their mettle," "toughen their hides," and assess their performance "under fire." I have noted previously that organizational actors sometimes work collectively to "pull off" emotional performances that benefit themselves at the cost of others (Waldron, 2000). In one courtroom, I observed a defense attorney and prosecutor collaborating to create the appearance of "elaborate concern" for a teenage defendant and his family, only minutes after belittling him in an "offstage" conversation.

Finally, at the level of *culture*, powerful members communicate organizational and occupational values, prescriptions, and understandings that give meaning to emotional experiences of members. At this level, leaders

indicate the emotions they expect from members (e.g., enthusiasm for innovation), the emotional connections they condone or prohibit (e.g., rules on employee romance), and the emotional tenor pervading whole spheres of organizational life (e.g., “get serious about safety” or “we work hard and play hard”). This culture-shaping capacity facilitates emotional tyranny in indirect but powerful ways. Members who are deeply socialized into a culture may experience strong and negative emotions when they detect hints of deviance or change. For instance, Rita described her early experiences working as a probation officer in a male-dominated organizational culture. As she described it, her coworkers were angry and disdainful, convinced that a female had no place in their field. They made her life an “emotional hell,” not because she was a poor performer but because a *female* probation officer simply did not conform with cultural expectations. She reported:

My coworkers harassed me because they did not want to work with a woman. They criticized and demeaned me [in front of clients and peers]—anything to make me feel bad. This went on for eighteen months. I should have told them to get off my back and filed a grievance. I felt humiliated and angry. I wanted to strike out and hurt them; instead, I attempted suicide.

Rita’s case is obviously extreme, but it does suggest the smothering effect of emotional norms as enforced by veteran coworkers. Rita’s harassment was due, in part, to a cultural belief that women were too emotionally “soft” to handle hardened parolees. Ironically, her presence elicited highly-emotional responses from coworkers. But, she did not directly express her negative emotional experiences to managers, probably because she believed her emotional distress was not culturally “legitimate.” Rita’s emotional experiences could have been valued as warning signs of a dysfunctional culture and indicators of relational wrongdoing. Unfortunately, within this cultural context her coworkers (and perhaps Rita) interpreted these as signs of personal weakness.

Manipulating the Moral Infraction–Assessment–Communication Cycle

As I have argued, emotions can serve important moral functions in organizational settings. Emotional tyranny involves, in large part, the use of power to distort the process of moral evaluation presented in Figure 1.1. I have already illustrated that powerful people enjoy considerable liberty in producing and demanding emotional behavior. In some cases, as when a boss unloads a venomous emotional attack on an employee, the display itself is an unjust act (Step 1). As Weiner (2006) and so many others have

noted, the emotions we feel when confronted by a potentially immoral action, whether or not it is an emotional one, are dependent on the attributions we make. Was it intentional? Was the actor aware of the relevant moral standards? Was the behavior under his or her control? Emotional tyranny is practiced through the manipulation of these attributional assessments. For example, supervisors may impose “special” emotional standards, which deem their emotional outbursts to be acceptable after all, citing perhaps the emotional rigors of leadership. The actor is relieved of the need to feel guilty for violating the standards of emotional decency, and observers are compelled to accept this explanation. Alternatively, a leader can manipulate the kinds of accomplishments that “justify” feelings of pride or admiration, indicating, for example, that workers who generate large revenues have “more to be proud of” than those who follow ethical practices or safety standards.

Employees’ moral assessments shape their felt emotions. If the staff assistant mentioned above believes the boss was intentionally abusive, the felt emotion (Step 3) is likely to be anger or indignation. If the abuse is attributable to external circumstances, or if an employee has been convinced that leaders have a “right” to such behavior, the felt emotion may be less negative or even sympathetic. However, as I have suggested earlier, tyranny at this stage can be exercised more directly through tactics designed to elicit fear, jealousy, shame, and other feelings.

The decision to express emotion can involve a calculated risk. What are the potential positive and negative consequences of expressing emotion in this work relationship within this work culture? Emotional tyranny figures here as well, as informal (and sometimes formal) company procedures discourage employees from expressing felt emotions like indignation (even when it is justified by moral failure), conveying emotional distress (even when it is produced by unreasonable work conditions), or sharing fears (in the form of bad news or moral reservations). Emotional tyrants discount such expressions, shame those who use them, deflect them elsewhere, or simply repress them. As indicated in Figure 1.1, these acts of emotional abuse are also evaluated as potential moral infractions, and the cycle starts again. As power is exerted through repeated cycles, employees can become emotionally exhausted, numb, mute, or alienated. Their moral sensibilities may become dulled. Emotions may be directed outside the organization, internalized as stress, or (in extreme cases) expressed dysfunctionally in physical violence.

Conclusions

Although I do not want to be overly dramatic, or should I say, *too emotional* about it, the practices of emotional tyrants are undeniably harmful. Power brings with it the capacity to manipulate the emotional resources of

individuals, relationships, and whole organizations, and even family members and friends who are only indirectly connected to the workplace. This harm comes to individuals in the form of psychic and physical distress, burnout, and even damaged careers. When emotional manipulation is the norm, relationships with powerful others can become less authentic, more guarded, ethically-compromised, and anxiety ridden. I have suggested too that emotions are a kind of moral barometer in the workplace. Their suppression can sometimes dull the moral sensibilities of leaders and members alike. Finally, the failure to create legitimate channels for the expression of strongly felt negative emotion can encourage certain employees to choose physical violence and other dehumanizing means of expression.

Powerful people should feel a heightened responsibility to engage in responsible emotional behavior. They simply enjoy more opportunities for abuse, and their communication “carries more weight.” But I hurry to add that emotional abuse can be practiced by the less powerful and those who aspire to power. I also caution that practices perceived to be emotionally abusive are not always so. The following narrative was shared by Garth, a 24-year-old telecommunications employee who, upon reflection, seems to recognize the themes of emotional immaturity, misperception, envy, and dehumanization of his supervisor.

I had worked at a telecom company for several years and considered myself one of the best telemarketers in the company. I thought that I had earned an interview to reach a higher position in management, by way of example. All of my coworkers considered me a gentleman, hard worker, and talented salesman. I was eager to go to work every day, perform well, and listen to my managers on a daily basis. When I did finally get the interview, I thought I had delivered a good speech to get the job. A week later I was devastated to hear that another employee, who was inferior to my skills, got the job! I got jealous and depressed, and it reflected on my behavior. I started to disrespect my managers by mouthing off rather than just going along with things. I felt betrayed by the company and cared less about getting fired. I started showing up late to work with a bad attitude about everything until I eventually just quit. Later I heard (from a coworker) that the company had me next in line for any manager job that would be available. I realized that my stupidity got me nowhere and made me lose an opportunity.

When faced with emotional tyranny, employees may have any number of constructive responses (also see Lutgen-Sandvik, 2006; Tracy, 2005). For example, they can develop emotionally-supportive relationships with peers, seek authentic emotional experiences outside of work, and use therapy as a means of expressing and recovering authentic feelings. In cases

where moral infractions are acknowledged by a transgressor, the releasing of negative emotion through a process of forgiveness may be appropriate. Many workers describe a positive process of “emotional toughening,” which allows them to withstand occasional acts of abuse. More important than thick-skinned workers, are organizational leaders who choose to avoid the tactics of emotional manipulation. If emotions are important indicators of the moral state of an organization, our most successful leaders may be those who monitor them most carefully.

Notes

- 1 Raul is a fictional name, as are all of those presented in this chapter. To further protect informants, identifying details have been omitted or modified. Quotes have been edited to preserve continuity, eliminate redundancy, and improve readability. In all cases, I have labored to preserve the meaning intended by the speaker.

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