

# **Keep Calm and Smile on: The Influence of Leader Affect Combinations on Employee Attitudes, Intentions, and Behaviors**

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*Inconsistencies exist between how affect looks theoretically and how it has been tested. The purpose of this study is to empirically test the influence of various positive and negative trait affect combinations on employee attitudes, intentions, and behaviors. Additionally, this study examines the differential influence of the source of the affect (from a peer vs. from a leader). A laboratory experiment was utilized in order to test the hypotheses. Results show that a combination of high positive affect and low negative affect for both the leader and the peer is associated with the highest outcomes.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

“A life without emotion would seem to many people scarcely worth living, for it would lack much of the richness and variety of human experience” (Baumeister, Vohs, DeWall, & Zhang, 2007). Emotion, mood, and affect in the workplace are important areas of research in the organizational sciences. Researchers have found affect to have significant impacts on behavioral outcomes, specifically as it relates to workplace relationships such as supervisor-to-subordinate and peer-to-peer. Affective Events Theory describes emotions and moods as “affect” and the employee response to that affect as “attitude” (Carlson, Kacmar, Zivnuska, Ferguson, & Whitten, 2011; Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996). Although affect has been studied widely, inconsistencies exist between how this concept looks theoretically and how it has been tested. The literature in this area has led researchers to argue that negative affect and positive affect are independent dimensions, yet empirical studies consistently test the influence of EITHER positive or negative affect on outcomes of interest (i.e., George, 1991; Wong, Yik, & Kwong, 2006). There is a major gap between what researchers say this construct looks like and how it is tested. A more comprehensive depiction of affect includes both positive and negative affect (Nifadkar et al., 2012). This is especially true if we view emotions as a system theory, instead of in isolation (Baumeister, et al., 2007).

The aim of this paper is to address this discrepancy and empirically test the influence of a variety of different positive and negative affect combinations from both a peer and a leader on important employee outcomes in an attempt to better understand the true human experience. We examined the effect of the combinations of trait positive affect (TPA) and trait negative affect (TNA) on employee attitudes, turnover intentions, and behaviors. TPA refers to those who generally experience strong pleasant feelings. (Cropanzano, Weiss, Hale, & Reb, 2003). TPA ranges from high (enthusiasm and attentiveness) to low (lack of enthusiasm and attentiveness). It is important to clarify that low TPA does not necessarily imply high TNA (Cropanzano et al., 2003). TNA describes those who consistently experience strong unpleasant feelings (Cropanzano et al., 2003). TNA ranges from high (anger and anxiety) to low (lack of anger and anxiety), but low TNA does not imply high TPA.

Utilizing a controlled laboratory environment where the various conditions can be carefully manipulated, this study seeks to empirically explore the combination of affect traits that exist in the complex human condition and the impact these combinations may have on the employee. The basic questions we will answer are:

1. How do combinations of TNA and TPA of others in the workplace influence employee commitment, turnover intentions, and rating of effectiveness?
2. Does the source of TNA and TPA (from a peer vs. from a leader) matter?

## **THEORY AND HYPOTHESES**

### **Affect**

It can be a daunting task to try to understand the complex human affective processes (Cropanzano et al., 2003). TPA characteristics include dimensions of enthusiasm, activity, and alertness (Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988). Those high in TPA are energetic, enthusiastic and pleasurable, while those low in TPA exhibit characteristics of unhappiness and sluggishness (Watson et al., 1988). High TNA individuals exhibit characteristics of anger, guilt, nervousness, and disgust, while low TNA is characterized by calmness and peace (Watson et al., 1988). Although TNA and TPA sound like they should be negatively correlated with one another (i.e., opposites), researchers have argued that they are actually independent dimensions (Watson et al., 1988). In other words, one's level on one dimension does not affect one's level on the other; an individual may be high on TNA and high on TPA, or low in both dimensions, or some other combination such as high TNA/low TPA or high TPA/low TNA. Individuals may be described as generally having very little feelings, while others may be described as high on both positive and negative feelings (Gill, Bos, Wit, & de Jonge, 2017). Researchers have found affect to be related to several organizational outcomes of interest including performance, extra-role behavior, psychological distress, absenteeism, justice perceptions, job satisfaction, stress and escalation of commitment (Barsky & Kaplan, 2007; Blaxton & Bergeman, 2017; Brief, Burke, George, George & Jones, 1997; Liu, Zhenhong, Changjiang, & Tong, 2014; Robinson, & Webster, 1988; Wong et al., 2006). This study focuses on three outcomes of interest: commitment, turnover intentions, and rating of effectiveness.

Given the theoretical research on positive and negative affect as summarized above, we argue that both constructs matter, and a testing of the combination of these constructs is needed in order to more accurately represent the human experience. In other words, these constructs do not exist in isolation; human affect is complex, and in order to best understand it, we need to look at it as a combination of both TNA and TPA, just as previous research has suggested. Generally speaking, most would agree that positive affect (whether state or trait) at work is better than negative affect, and research provides some support for this (i.e., Staw, Sutton, & Pelled, 1994). Positive trait affect can bond leaders and followers or co-workers together or provide vital performance information (i.e., feedback) to the follower from the leader (Joseph, Dhanani, Shen, McHugh, & McCord, 2015). However, the beneficial outcomes of positive affect may depend on the level of negative affect such that the benefits increase in the presence of low TNA and decrease in the presence of high TNA. For example, a highly attentive (high TPA) and peaceful (low TNA) person will influence those around him or her much differently than someone who is highly attentive, but who is also very angry (high TNA). The individual who is high on TPA and low on TNA will have a much more positive influence on employee attitudes, intentions, and behaviors because the anger and hostility exuding from the high TNA person is likely to be met with some negative outcomes. In addition, an individual who is high on TPA and low on TNA will also have a more positive influence on employee attitudes, intentions and behaviors than an individual who is low on both dimensions (low TNA and low TPA) because the former will be more energetic and enthusiastic, which may be seen as very motivational, while the latter will lack these traits. Finally, the individual who is high on TNA and low on TPA will likely not positively influence employee's attitudes, intentions and behaviors as much as the high TPA/low TNA individual because the high TNA/low TPA person will be still be angry and hostile, even if it is in a sluggish manner. As such, we propose the following hypotheses:

H1: The combination of high TPA and low TNA will yield the highest levels of employee commitment relative to all other affect combinations.

H2: The combination of high TPA and low TNA will yield the lowest levels of employee turnover intentions relative to all other affect combinations.

H3: The combination of high TPA and low TNA will yield the highest levels of employee rating of effectiveness relative to all other affect combinations.

### **Source of Affect**

Does the source of affect matter? The success of an employee can be directly tied to their initial perception of the new supervisor (Nifadkar, Tsui, & Ashforth, 2012). The supervisor-to-subordinate (STS) relationship is an important one and can range from unbearable to unified and focused on accomplishing a particular goal. Previous studies have examined the influence of leader affect on important outcomes such as organizational performance, ratings of the leader, follower performance, creativity, absenteeism, and team performance (George, 1989; Newcombe & Ashkanasy, 2002; van Kleef, Homan, Beersma, van Knippenberg, van Knippenberg, & Damen, 2009; Visser, van Knippenberg, van Kleef, & Wisse, 2013; Wang & Seibert, 2015). Findings show that leader positive mood (state affect) can energize the employees and encourage employee confidence, enthusiasm, and determination (George, 1995). Additionally, a recent meta-analysis on leader trait affectivity showed that it is a predictor of leadership effectiveness (Joseph et al., 2015).

In addition to displayed emotion, employees judge the supervisor's emotional sincerity such that perceived sincerity affects employee trust and behavior (Caza, Zhang, Wang, & Bai, 2015). Other researchers have found that negative leader affect during feedback resulted in lower perceptions of leader effectiveness than positive leader affect (Gaddis et al., 2004). Displays of negative affect such as anger from leaders have also been found to hurt the supervisor-to-subordinate relationship and ultimately to decrease employee organizational citizenship behaviors (Koning & Van Kleef, 2015). Dark leader traits such as Machiavellianism and psychopathy have been found to have a negative impact subordinates' career success and well-being (Volmer, Koch, & Goritz, 2016).

Peer affect, however, has been studied much less than leader affect. We argue that peer affect will influence participants in a different way than leader affect because leaders are held to a much higher standard, are stronger representatives of the company, and have a much more influence over subordinates than employees have over their co-workers. Although researchers have found leader negative affect to influence employees negatively, peer negative affect may be interpreted by the employee in a much different manner. Negative affect from a peer can be considered "venting" or sharing concerns and frustrations (a form of social support). The next hypothesis predicts a significant difference between peer and leader impact on variables of interest:

H4: Leader affect (as compared to peer affect) will have a greater influence on:

- a. Employee commitment
- b. Turnover intentions
- c. Rating of effectiveness

## **METHOD**

### **Sample**

Participants in this study were 200 undergraduate students enrolled in an introductory management course at a large southwestern university. Fifty-eight percent of the participants were currently employed with a mean work experience of 3.73 years, 51% were female, 99% were between the ages of 19 and 24, 86% were Caucasian, 7% were Hispanic, 5% were Asian, 1% were African American, and 1% were Native American.

## **Procedure**

Participants came into the laboratory with approximately 20-29 other students. The research design used was a fully-crossed 2 (leader, peer) x 4 (low TNA, high TPA, high TNA, low TPA) factorial experiment. Participants were randomly assigned to one of the eight experimental conditions. The actor in the videos was the actual owner of a small business organization in the service industry in the southwest. The same actor played both the leader and the peer in order to maintain consistency.

The participants were asked to imagine they were an employee of the organization in the video. Each participant read an information sheet with background information on the company and the scenes they would see. Each video was approximately 10 minutes long and depicted the same 4 scenes, with affect and source of affect (leader or peer) manipulated. Scene 1 was the employee's first day on the job, scene 2 was six months later when the employee needed help with one of his/her assignments, scene 3 depicted the employee after working for the company for 1 year. His/her supervisor noticed a mistake on the monthly reports and gave the employee advice on how to improve his/her work. Finally, scene 4 took place 2 years after the first day of employment and the employee was discussing his/her disappointment regarding his/her recent performance evaluation with his/her supervisor. The time frame of 2 years established the affect trait as opposed to state. This leader/peer in the video was not simply in a "mood," but consistently demonstrated one particular affect over an extended period of time.

## **Variables**

Independent variables include the TNA and TPA conditions, as well as the leader and peer source of affect. Dependent variables include affective commitment, turnover intentions, and rating of effectiveness.

## **Manipulation Checks**

In order to ensure that the manipulation worked as intended, the participants were first asked to correctly identify the actor as a leader or a peer. Second, the participants were asked how long they had been working for the company in order to establish the affect trait versus state. In addition, the participants were asked to rate the affect of the character of interest using the PANAS scale in order to ensure that the participant recognized the correct TNA and TPA combination from the leader and/or peer in the video.

## **Measures**

### *Affect*

In order to measure affect of the actor in the video, participants completed the PANAS, with instructions revised to describe how the employee would "generally" describe the leader or peer (Watson et al., 1988).

### *Commitment*

Participants' affective commitment was assessed using Allen and Meyer's (1990) scales. Sample items included, "I do not feel a strong sense of "belonging" to my company" (R). Participants ranked their level of commitment using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly disagree) to 5 (Strongly agree). The coefficient alpha for the scale in this study was .81.

### *Turnover Intentions*

The turnover intentions scale was adopted from Kelloway, Gottlieb and Barham (1999). "I am planning to look for a new job" is a sample item from the scale. Participants answered using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly disagree) to 5 (Strongly agree). The coefficient alpha for the scale in this study was .93.

### *Rating of Effectiveness*

As in Lewis (2000), leader effectiveness was measured by participant rating of the leader on a scale of 1 to 5 on the following items: communication skills, ability to do a good job, leadership ability, likeability, and ability as a supervisor. The scale was found to have a reliability of .92 in this study. The above scale for the leader was modified to measure peer effectiveness.

## **ANALYSES**

### **Affect Manipulation**

The affect manipulation had four conditions: low TNA/high TPA, high TNA/high TPA, low TNA/low TPA, and high TNA/low TPA. Although the actor said the same lines in each video, the body language and the tone of voice varied. In the low TNA/high TPA conditions, the supervisor smiled in a welcoming way, and made good eye contact with camera. In addition, he used a lot of hand gestures and active movement. His voice in this condition was calm, yet attentive. In the high TNA/high TPA condition, the supervisor was annoyed and startled to see the employee. However, he made good eye contact with camera and gave his full attention. He had a lot of erratic hand gestures and active movement. His voice was attentive and angry. In the low TNA/low TPA condition, the supervisor yawned as if bored, did not make good eye contact with camera or give his full attention to the employee; he stayed in his chair and even laid his head on his desk at times. He spoke in a calm and dull voice, almost monotone. Finally, in the high TNA/low TPA condition, the supervisor's body language was annoyed, he did not make good eye contact with camera or give his full attention. The supervisor mostly stayed in his chair, without much movement, and spoke in an angry and dull voice throughout the video.

### **Source of Affect Manipulation**

In order to manipulate the source of affect, we used a supervisor as the "leader" and a co-worker as the "peer". This was manipulated in several ways. First, before watching the video, the participants each read an information sheet explaining that they would be meeting either their supervisor or a co-worker. In addition, during the video, the actor stated that he was their supervisor (or co-worker) on two separate occasions.

## **RESULTS**

### **Manipulation Checks**

We assessed the effectiveness of the manipulations by asking the participants to rate the person they saw in the video using the PANAS scale. We subsequently took the mean of both the negative affect items and the positive affect items. Using these new means, we conducted an Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) to test for differences between the means. The participant ranking of TPA items in the PANAS was significantly different across groups ( $F=76.13$ ,  $df=7$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Additionally, the participants differentially ranked TNA across the groups ( $F=29.60$ ,  $df=7$ ,  $p < .01$ ). In order to compare the high TPA groups to the low TPA groups, we set up contrast coding, whereby we grouped the high TPA conditions (1, 2, 5, 6) and the low TPA conditions (3, 4, 7, 8). Results showed a significant difference between the groups ( $t=19.45$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Next, we compared all the high TNA conditions (2, 4, 6, 8) to all the low TNA conditions (1, 3, 5, 7). The contrast tests were significant ( $t=12.08$ ,  $p < .01$ ).

Finally, the leader/peer manipulation was assessed in the post scenario questionnaire, where the participants were asked if they met with a supervisor or co-worker. One-hundred percent of the participants in the leader condition correctly identified the person in the video as their supervisor and 84% of the people in the peer condition correctly identified a co-worker as the person they saw in the video. Those who did not correctly identify the individual in the video were subsequently dropped from further analyses.

## Test of Hypotheses

The hypotheses were tested using ANOVA and pairwise comparisons. See Tables 1 for intercorrelations, means and standard deviations of the outcome variables and Table 2 for cell means. Also see Table 3 for ANOVA results. All three outcome variables show statistically significant results for TNA, TPA, and the TNA/TPA interaction, providing support for the importance of both.

### *Affective Commitment*

ANOVA results for affective commitment showed a significant difference between the eight conditions ( $F=20.34$ ,  $df=7$ ,  $p < .01$ ). In order to take a closer look at the significant differences, we did pairwise comparisons. We used Gabriel's pairwise test, which was designed to deal with unequal sample sizes (Field, 2005). Gabriel's procedure used a Harmonic Mean Sample Size of 22.53. Results showed that the means of conditions 1 (low TNA/high TPA for the leader) and 5 (low TNA/high TPA for the peer), were significantly different from the other conditions ( $p < .01$ ). This provides support for Hypothesis 1, which stated that combination of high TPA and low TNA would have the highest employee commitment, relative to other affect combinations. In addition, we also found a statistically significant difference between the leader and peer means ( $t=1.94$ ,  $p = .05$ ) for this outcome variable, with the mean of the leader being higher, which supports Hypothesis 4a, that claimed leader affect would have more influence than peer affect on commitment.

### *Turnover Intentions*

ANOVA results for turnover intentions were also significant ( $F=12.74$ ,  $df=7$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Again, we used Gabriel's pairwise test. Results again showed that the means of conditions 1 (low TNA/high TPA for the leader) and 5 (low TNA/high TPA for the peer), were significantly different (lower) from the other conditions ( $p < .01$ ). This provides support for Hypothesis 2, which stated that this combination would be associated with the lowest levels of turnover intentions. Now turning to examine the hypothesis regarding the source, we found that there is not a significant difference between the leader and peer affect means for turnover intentions ( $t=-.66$ ,  $p < .51$ ), which fails to support Hypothesis 4b.

### *Rating of Effectiveness*

An examination of Rating of Effectiveness showed the test of mean differences between the conditions to be significant once again ( $F=54.16$ ,  $df=7$ ,  $p < .01$ ), and conditions 1 and 5 to be significantly different from the other conditions. As with the two outcomes above, Hypothesis 3, stating high TPA and low TNA would yield the highest levels of rating of effectiveness, is supported. Testing Hypothesis 4c, we again found no significant differences between the leader and peer affect means for rating of effectiveness ( $t = .68$ ,  $p < .50$ ).

## DISCUSSION

This study makes several important contributions to the organizational sciences literature. First, it is the initial (that we know of) empirical test of a variety of combinations of TPA and TNA, which researchers have previously argued do not exist in isolation. Previous studies have focused on either TPA or TNA alone and did not look at the combined effect of the various combinations of TPA and TNA that theory clearly suggests reflects the human experience. Second, this study consistently found a relationship between low TNA/high TPA conditions and the outcomes of interest. The low TNA/high TPA condition was found to be related to higher affective commitment, lower turnover intentions and higher rating of effectiveness. The employee who is calm and relaxed, yet attentive and enthusiastic, may be most effective for increasing positive organizational outcomes and decreasing negative ones. Finally, this study found that the source of the affect (from a leader vs. from a peer) made a significant difference in the employee's affective commitment to the organization. While most of the hypotheses were supported, support was not found for Hypotheses 4b and 4c, stating that leader affect would influence turnover intentions and rating of effectiveness more than peer affect. Source was only important for the affective

commitment outcome. Although we were surprised by this finding, in retrospect, it does make sense because we are dealing with emotional characteristics of individuals, which will likely have more impact on the emotional attachment and sense of belonging (i.e., affective commitment) of the employees than their actual behaviors. These findings shed more light on the supervisor-to-subordinate relationship.

There are also some important limitations to note in this study. There is often a concern with external validity when doing a laboratory experiment. While we agree that a field study might be more realistic as employees engage in everyday interactions with their peers and leaders, we felt that a study in the laboratory was the best place to empirically test our hypotheses. In the laboratory, we were able to adequately manipulate all eight conditions and measure their influence on the outcome variables. That being said, we think an important next step is to study these affect combinations in the field; a field study might find more support for a difference between leaders and peers for the more distal outcomes such as turnover intentions and rating of effectiveness.

Another limitation of the study is that the actor in the scenarios was a male. Potential for future research exists in conducting the same experiment with a female to measure outcomes with the same TNA/TPA exhibited by the male actor, since we know gender can be an important workplace variable. Another area for future research is more in-depth analyses of technology-related affect. The increase in workplace social media has injected another aspect into the supervisor-to-subordinate dynamic. E-mails in particular can impact an employee's work performance if it is perceived as uncivil by the recipient (Giumetti et al., 2013). Care must be taken by supervisors and peers alike to ensure the tone they are attempting to convey is unambiguous in order to avoid confusion. E-mails misinterpreted to be uncivil can cause an unintended consequence of decreased work performance (Giumetti et al., 2013). Examining the combination and TPA/TNA over technology would be an interesting area of future research.

### **Implications and Conclusion**

These findings have many important practical implications for the workplace, especially regarding selection and attrition. Positive affect can signal opportunity, while negative affect can signal danger (Nifadkar et al., 2012). It appears that low TNA/high TPA individuals may make good co-workers and good leaders. Practitioners should consider the trait affect of the individuals they are hiring and how it can affect the attitudes, intentions, and behaviors of their employees. Our past affective experiences with individuals teach us how to deal with these individuals in the future; for example, negative experiences with supervisors may lead to a change in employee behavior or attitude, such as avoidance (Nifadkar et al., 2012). Leaders should be aware of how their displays of emotion can affect subordinates' performance (Wang & Seibert, 2015).

In sum, this experiment contributes to the literature in several ways. First, it empirically examined the impact of a variety of combinations of both positive and negative affect on employee commitment, turnover intentions, and ratings of effectiveness, some of which have never to the authors' knowledge been previously studied. Second, this study examined the impact of the source of affect. Many past studies have manipulated leader affect, but this is one of the first to examine the effect that peer (co-worker) affect can have on employees. Finally, this study found that one affect combination in particular (low TNA/high TPA) is related to more beneficial employee outcomes.

**TABLE 1**  
**INTERCORRELATIONS AMONG STUDY VARIABLES**

Variable	Mean	SD	1	2	3
1. Affective Commitment	1.68	.69	--	-.72**	.73**
2. Turnover Intentions	4.22	.96		--	-.66**
3. Rating of Effectiveness	1.87	.94			--

\*\* p<.01

**TABLE 2**  
**CELL MEANS**

		Source of Affect	
		Leader	Peer
<u>Affective Commitment</u>			
High TPA	High TNA	1.44	1.47
	Low TNA	2.63	2.42
Low TPA	High TNA	1.48	1.36
	Low TNA	1.58	1.30
<u>Turnover Intentions</u>			
High TPA	High TNA	4.56	4.66
	Low TNA	3.04	3.38
Low TPA	High TNA	4.57	4.41
	Low TNA	4.47	4.35
<u>Rating of Effectiveness</u>			
High TPA	High TNA	1.51	1.42
	Low TNA	3.34	3.33
Low TPA	High TNA	1.52	1.53
	Low TNA	1.35	1.47



**TABLE 3**  
**ANALYSIS OF VARIANCE (ANOVA)**

*Affective Commitment*

Source	Type III SS	df	MS	F
TNA	13.27	1	13.27	48.08**
TPA	14.05	1	14.05	50.89**
Source	.94	1	.94	3.41
TNA*TPA	12.41	1	12.41	44.95**
TNA*Source	.50	1	.50	1.81
TPA*Source	.15	1	.15	.54
TNA*TPA*Source	.02	1	.02	.06
Error	48.30	175	.28	

\*p< .05, \*\*p< .01

*Turnover Intentions*

Source	Type III SS	df	MS	F
TNA	24.74	1	24.74	39.13**
TPA	13.06	1	13.06	20.65**
Source	.07	1	.07	.11
TNA*TPA	19.65	1	19.65	31.07**
TNA*Source	.21	1	.21	.33
TPA*Source	1.41	1	1.41	2.24
TNA*TPA*Source	.09	1	.09	.14
Error	110.67	175	.63	

\*p< .05, \*\*p< .01

*Rating of Effectiveness*

Source	Type III SS	df	MS	F
TNA	34.78	1	34.78	120.12**
TPA	39.21	1	39.21	135.41**
Source	.00	1	.00	.01
TNA*TPA	44.31	1	44.31	153.02**
TNA*Source	.11	1	.11	.39
TPA*Source	.14	1	.14	.48
TNA*TPA*Source	.00	1	.00	.00
Error	50.67	175	.29	

\*p<.05, \*\*p<.01

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