

**The way you make me feel: An episodic perspective on how leader-follower emotional entrainment shapes daily interaction quality**

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## **Abstract**

Leader-follower interactions are a cornerstone of leadership research, and recent developments point to leader emotional expressions as key determinants of interaction quality. However, scholars have yet to pay attention to the episodic interplay of leader emotional expressions and follower emotional reactions for the emergence of high-quality interactions. We develop an episodic emotional entrainment perspective stating that leaders' expressions of positive (joy, calmness) and negative (fear, sadness) emotions serve as affective events influencing corresponding follower emotional reactions. Over the course of a day, this manifests in emotional entrainment patterns whereby leader and follower emotions fluctuate in a common rhythm and shape the follower's perceived interaction quality with their leader. We provide additional insights into the entrainment process by examining follower attachment styles as a contingency factor. A within-day experience sampling study supports our emotional entrainment perspective. We also find that within-day changes in followers' felt high-activated emotions (i.e., joy, fear) predicted perceived end-of-day interaction quality, whereas changes in low-activated emotions (i.e., calmness, sadness) did not. Furthermore, the relationship between leaders' expressions of joy (fear) and corresponding follower felt emotions was weaker (stronger) for followers with high attachment avoidance (attachment anxiety), which in turn was positively (negatively) associated with end-of-day interaction quality.

**Keywords:** Episodic emotional entrainment, leader-follower interaction quality, diary study, attachment styles, within-day latent growth modeling

## EPISODIC EMOTIONAL ENTRAINMENT IN LEADER-FOLLOWER RELATIONS

In this research, we posit that episodic changes in leader emotional expressions and follower emotional reactions play a role in followers' evaluations of their interaction quality. We specifically suggest that an interpersonal phenomenon of synchronized affective changes, termed emotional entrainment (i.e., a process where two interacting oscillating systems assume the same emotional pattern over time; Chartrand & Bargh, 1999) is responsible for leader-follower relationship development, thus offering an episodic lens for the study of the empathic bond between leaders and followers as well as their interaction quality. For the purposes of our research, we define an interaction episode as a time-bound, interpersonal exchange process in which events can trigger relationship change (Schurr et al., 2008).

Theoretically, by integrating Leader-Member Affective Events Theory (Cropanzano et al., 2017) with Event System Theory (Morgeson et al., 2015), we establish episodic leader-follower emotional entrainment as a meaningful predictor of followers' interaction quality. While prior theorizing (Cropanzano et al., 2017; Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996) and research (Bartels et al., 2022; Dimotakis et al., 2022) on affect in leader-follower relationships has begun to describe within-day processes that unfold during interaction episodes, the methodology employed in past studies does not allow for a direct test of our new theoretical propositions. That is, an episodic lens entails a different, more nuanced look at the interplay of leader and follower emotions for relationship development in contrast to prior work that either considered the static link between general mood and the leader-follower relationship (Gooty et al., 2019) or used a single measure of emotions per day (Bartels et al., 2021).

Our research also differentiates between discrete emotions with different valence (positive vs. negative) and arousal levels (high- vs. low-activated) when testing the link between within-day changes in leaders' emotional expressions and changes in followers' felt emotions. This is important because prior research on affect and leader-follower relationship quality appears to implicitly assume that the effects of high arousal (e.g., joy) or low arousal

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emotions (e.g., calmness) are equivalent (Gooty et al., 2019). Yet, emotion scholars have suggested that different discrete emotions involve distinct cognitions and associated action tendencies (Warr et al., 2014; Yik et al., 2011). Accordingly, we offer a comprehensive examination of within-day entrainment of emotions theoretically considered relevant for leader-follower relationship development (i.e., joy, calmness, fear, sadness; Silard & Dasborough, 2021) that is also practically relevant for leaders who want to know whether the type of expressed emotion impacts the interaction quality with followers.

Finally, we study the role of follower attachment in relation to episodic emotional entrainment processes and offer a conceptual extension concerning factors that influence followers' receptiveness to leader emotions. This extension has not only been called for in research because relational dispositions such as attachment have been traditionally avoided by organizational scholars (Harms, 2011; Thomas et al., 2013) but also because it bears relevant practical implications by specifying for whom certain leader emotional expressions may leave a lasting emotional mark on their relationship. Our research model is illustrated in Figure 1 below.

**Figure 1**

*Conceptual Model.*

