Your emotions are showing — and you can't fake it

What the research on emotional contagion means for leaders

Think about the last time you walked into a meeting carrying something difficult. Maybe you'd just had a frustrating conversation. Maybe you were anxious about a decision. Maybe you were simply exhausted. You probably told yourself you would leave all that at the door. Put on your happy face. Focus on the agenda. Here's what the research tells us: it didn't work. Not because you weren't trying, but because it can't work. Your emotional state was already in the room before you finished the sentence.

Emotions are contagious — and faster than you think

We tend to think of emotions as private, internal experiences. Something we manage inside ourselves before deciding what to show others. But neuroscience tells a different story.

Through our mirror neurons, we are wired to pick up and absorb the emotional states of those around us. This process happens in milliseconds, below the level of conscious awareness. We don't decide to catch someone else's emotion — it happens to us before we've had a chance to think about it.

As a leader, this means your team is continuously reading and responding to your emotional state — not just your words, your tone, or your body language, but the underlying state those things are expressing. They are not doing it deliberately. They can't help it. And neither can you.

The asymmetry you need to know about

Research confirms that both positive and negative emotions spread through groups — but they don't have equal impact, and they don't behave in the same way once they land.

Negative emotions, once absorbed by a group, tend to persist longer than positive ones. While positive emotional states rise quickly, they also fade faster. Negative states accumulate more gradually but linger — sometimes well beyond the conversation or meeting that triggered them. A leader's frustration or anxiety in a Monday morning meeting can still be shaping the emotional climate of the team by Wednesday afternoon.

This is compounded by what psychologists call the negativity bias — a well-established phenomenon across the research literature. Negative emotional signals are noticed, processed, and weighted more heavily than equivalent positive ones. We are, quite literally, wired to pay more attention to negative information. This has deep evolutionary roots: in a world of physical threats, it was more important to register danger quickly than to savour good news. In a modern leadership context, however, it means that a single moment of visible frustration, impatience, or anxiety can outweigh multiple moments of calm and warmth in terms of its impact on those around you.

The implications for leaders are significant. It doesn't mean you need to display relentless positivity — that has its own problems (a topic for another day). But it does mean that the emotional states you bring into high-stakes

conversations carry more consequence than you might assume, particularly when those states are negative. Your team is not just picking up your mood. They are weighting it, holding onto it, and responding to it in ways that shape their thinking, their behaviour, and their performance — often without any of you realising it's happening.

You can't fake it and trying makes it worse

Here's where it gets interesting. When they recognise that they in a difficult emotional state before an important conversation or meeting, most leaders try to suppress it. Compose themselves. Project calm or enthusiasm they don't feel.

The research on what's called "surface acting" — presenting an emotion you don't genuinely feel — consistently shows two things. First, it doesn't work as well as we think. The underlying emotional state leaks, through micro-expressions, vocal tone, and the subtle signals our bodies send that others read unconsciously. Second, it's exhausting, and sustained surface acting is strongly linked to burnout.

But there's a more immediate problem. When your words and your emotional state are out of sync, it creates dissonance for the people around you. They hear what you're saying, but they believe what they're feeling. Consciously or not, they're registering the gap — and that gap erodes trust.

There is a better approach, and it's simpler than you might expect. Before a meeting where you know you're not at your best, name it. Not in detail, not with explanation — just briefly and honestly:

> *"I want to flag that I'm not quite at my best right now — give me a moment to become fully present."*

What this does is remarkable. It removes the dissonance. The group no longer has to reconcile what they're hearing with what they're feeling, because you have closed the gap. And in doing so, you model the kind of self-awareness that makes others feel safe to do the same.

Why we are so often in the wrong state

Before exploring how to shift your emotional state, it helps to understand why leaders so frequently find themselves in an unhelpful one.

Research identifies four conditions that reliably trigger a stress response — even before a meeting has begun:

- The outcome matters to you
- The outcome is uncertain
- You're being observed or evaluated
- Something has recently angered or upset you

Look at that list through a leadership lens. Most significant meetings tick at least two of these boxes. Which means most leaders are arriving at their most important conversations already physiologically primed for a stress response — whether they feel stressed or not.

Add to this, the structure of most leadership days: back-to-back meetings, problem-solving conversations, data reviews, performance discussions. Each of these activities tends to engage what neuroscientists call the Task Positive Network — the analytical, problem-solving mode of the brain. This network is essential for getting things done. But it comes with a cost: narrowed attention, reduced peripheral vision, less cognitive flexibility, and a tendency to focus on gaps, threats, and what needs to be fixed.

In other words, the default setting for most leadership activity actively works against the emotional state that creates the best conditions for others to perform.

Two states, one leader

Boyatzis and colleagues at Case Western Reserve University describe two distinct psychophysiological states that shape how we experience the world and how others experience us.

The **Positive Emotional Attractor (PEA)** — sometimes called the Green Zone — is characterised by openness, creativity, curiosity, and a focus on possibilities. In this state, we perceive others positively, are receptive to feedback, think more broadly, and are oriented toward growth and learning.

The **Negative Emotional Attractor (NEA)** — the Red Zone — is characterised by defensiveness, narrow focus, threat perception, and a preoccupation with fixing problems. Cognitive capacity is reduced. We see fewer options and are less open to input from others.

A helpful way to think about these is as two nearby planets, each with its own gravitational field. We are constantly being pulled toward one or the other. And critically — we cannot be in both states at the same time. It takes a tipping point to move from one to the other.

We need both states. The NEA is necessary for focused execution and managing real threats. But the research is clear: we need a ratio of at least 3:1 in favour of the PEA in our working lives to sustain wellbeing, creativity, and performance. Most leadership environments, left unmanaged, produce the opposite.

> *Almost all sustained, desired behavioural change starts in the PEA.*

If you want your team to think differently, take risks, give honest input, or embrace a new direction — they need to be in a state of openness, not defence. And that state is largely shaped by you.

What you can do about it

Prime yourself before you engage others

The most effective leaders don't leave their emotional state to chance. They develop an understanding of what keeps them in equilibrium and what knocks them off balance — and they create intentional practices to prepare before high-stakes interactions.

Visualising yourself performing at your best before a meeting is not wishful thinking — it activates the same neural networks as actually performing well. The preparation is real.

Shift the group state through the questions you ask

One of the most underutilised words in business is *imagine*.

When a meeting opens with data, problems, and what needs to be fixed, it drives the group into the Task Positive Network — narrowing thinking and reducing the creative, collaborative capacity you need. A single question that invites imagination can shift this:

> *"Before we get into the numbers, imagine this project has gone way better than we hoped — what does that look like and how does it feel?"*

This isn't naïve optimism. It's a deliberate and research-supported way of activating the PEA in a group — creating the conditions in which people think more broadly, contribute more freely, and are more open to challenge and change.

Hope, compassion, mindfulness and playfulness have the same effect. A coaching orientation (asking rather than telling, exploring rather than directing) activates very different neural circuitry than advice-giving or problem identification. When you coach with compassion, you don't just help the other person think better. Through emotional contagion, you go there too.

Watch the advice-giving habit

When leaders give advice — telling people what they should do and how they should change — it often activates the NEA in the recipient. They become neurologically less open to new ideas, more likely to discount the input, and may disengage entirely. Any behaviour change that results tends to be compliance-based and short-lived.

When leaders take a coaching approach — staying curious, asking questions, helping others find their own answers — they activate the PEA. The person being coached is physiologically and psychologically more open to considering new possibilities and more intrinsically motivated to act on them.

The difference isn't just philosophical. It's biological.

A FINAL THOUGHT

Your emotional state is not a private matter. As a leader, it is one of the most powerful forces shaping the performance, wellbeing, and culture of the people around you — and it is operating whether you are aware of it or not.

The goal isn't to relentlessly display positivity or suppress what you're genuinely feeling. It's to develop the self-awareness to know your state, the practices to shift it when it matters, and the honesty to name it when you can't.

Because the alternative — walking into the room carrying something unacknowledged and hoping no one notices — is the one strategy the research tells us consistently doesn't work.

If you would like to explore these ideas further, or discuss how they apply to your leadership or your team, please contact Liane Kemp at LKemp@kempstreetpartners.com.au or for further resources, visit the Insights page on www.kempstreetpartners.com.au

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