

Emotionally ambivalent workers are more creative, innovative

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People who experience emotional ambivalence -- simultaneously feeling positive and negative emotions -- are more creative than those who feel just happy or sad, or lack emotion at all, according to a new study.

That's because people who feel mixed emotions interpret the experience as a signal that they are in an unusual environment and thus respond to it by drawing upon their creative thinking abilities, said Christina Ting Fong, an assistant professor at the University of Washington Business School. This increased sensitivity for recognizing unusual associations, which happy or sad workers probably couldn't detect, is what leads to creativity in the workplace, she added.

"Due to the complexity of many organizations, workplace experiences often elicit mixed emotions from employees, and it's often assumed that mixed emotions are bad for workers and companies," said Fong, whose study appears in the October issue of the *Academy of Management Journal*. "Rather than assuming ambivalence will lead to negative results for the organization, managers should recognize that emotional ambivalence can have positive consequences that can be leveraged for organizational success."

For her research, Fong conducted two studies. In the first, she asked 102 college students to write about certain emotional experiences in their lives with the goal of invoking in them feelings of happiness, sadness, neutrality or ambivalence. She then had them complete a commonly used measure of creativity called the Remote Associates Test that explored

their ability to recognize common themes among seemingly unrelated words. The results demonstrated that while there were no differences among happy, sad and neutral individuals, people who were feeling emotionally ambivalent performed significantly better on this creativity task.

For the second study, she showed the 138 students either a film clip of the comedy "Father of the Bride" or a dull screen saver. In the film clip, a young woman, on the eve of her wedding day, discussed with her father the joy associated with her upcoming wedding and the sadness involved with growing up and entering adulthood. The screensaver and the clip were chosen to make people feel either neutral or ambivalent, respectively. Then the students took the Remote Associates Test.

She found that the emotionally ambivalent people who saw the clip showed increased creativity in comparison to those who watched the screensaver, but only when they believed their emotional ambivalence was unusual. Surprisingly, she said, no relationship was found between positive emotions and creativity or negative emotions and creativity.

According to Fong, one implication of this research is that when people feel mixed emotions, they see this as a signal that they are in a situation that might contain lots of unusual associations, and thus will need to respond by using more creative thinking.

"Managers who want to increase the creative output of their employees might benefit from following in the footsteps of companies like design firm IDEO or Walt Disney, which pride themselves on maintaining odd working environments. On some level, the bicycles that hang from the ceiling at IDEO and the colorful, casual environment at Disney probably help their employees sharpen their abilities to come up with novel and innovative ideas."

Fong said that in previous studies she found women who are in supervisory positions are more likely to be emotionally ambivalent than women in lower status positions. Combining her previous research with this study, Fong said, suggests that women in high-status positions will be more creative managers.

Source: University of Washington

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