

# To be more creative, teams must feel free to show emotions, study finds

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Companies are always looking for ways to get teams to innovate more and find creative answers to problems. New research co-authored by Myeong-Gu Seo at the University of Maryland's Robert H. Smith School of Business finds one way to do so is to encourage employees to bare their feelings—both positive and negative—to team members.

Seo collaborated with Maryland Smith Ph.D.s Michael R. Parke (now at the Wharton School of Business) and Sirkwoo Jin (now at Merrimack College), and Xiaoran Hu of the London School of Economics on the study featured by *Organization Science* as "The Creative and Cross-Functional Benefits of Wearing Hearts on Sleeves." They decided to study the link between emotions and creativity after Seo visited a global tech company lagging its competitors in innovation.

"I immediately noticed that it was about the [emotional climate](#)," Seo says.

Seo has extensively studied emotions in the workplace. "There are a lot of organizational level consequences to bringing your emotions to work," he says. "In this study, we focus on team-level outcomes when emotions are displayed in the workplace. We see whether 'affect climates' – especially whether a team really allows for authentic expression of emotion versus not—can really predict team creativity."

Seo explains that affect climate is established by [team members'](#) shared expectations about what emotions are appropriate and expected to share, and whether showing those emotions is rewarded or punished. There are many expectations that naturally form in different teams, based on the climate. And just because a team seems to get along well, doesn't mean the climate is ideal, Seo says. "There could be a very positive climate—but even if you don't like an idea, you feel like you have to nod and smile. You can laugh, but you cannot disagree."

In this study, Seo and his co-authors focused on authenticity. "It didn't matter whether teams were positively or negatively oriented. We only focused on whether the team members felt they could express their true emotions. Or not, if they felt they had to suppress emotions or pretend."

Through two field studies and two lab-based experiments, the

researchers show that the level of authenticity in a team's climate is the key to having an innovative, creative team.

When people feel they can open up, it creates room for more [free expression](#) and more exploration of ideas, says Seo.

"That [emotional](#) space actually opens up a lot of information elaboration and sharing in teams," Seo says. "Particularly in the early stage of the creative process, where ideas are generally intuitive and crude in nature and lack clear logic and precise articulation, people rely more on feelings and emotions than logical explanations in generating, communicating and evaluating those ideas. Thus, by encouraging free expression and exploration of their emotional reactions, team members can generate and use more and richer information for generating, exploring, evaluating and elaborating creative ideas. But when you kill emotional expression altogether, you kill all other information processing. That's why it suppresses the creative process and outcomes."

And positive and negative emotions both are important in the creative process for teams, he says.

"This is kind of contrary to a lot of teams and leaders, who think only positive emotions are good, which is not true. Sometimes negative emotions play a very important role. They help teams evaluate options and help other people to deeply think about the drawbacks of any ideas. Consistently, we find it doesn't matter—positive, negative—all emotions are important."

Interestingly, Seo and his co-authors found the effect strongest in cross-functional teams, where team members often have very different knowledge backgrounds, world views and cultural norms, and may not be able to clearly communicate with each other. "Emotions can allow them to communicate with each other, in spite of other barriers, more

efficiently and easily in a rich manner," Seo says.

## Using the research

Organizations and managers should take note, says Seo, because teams are often formed specifically to come up with creative and innovative solutions. With some big tech companies' amenity-heavy corporate campuses, and now the rise of remote and flexible work, organizations have become more strategic about developing their workplace environments to maximize productivity. For organizations that want to boost creativity and innovation, Seo says part of the strategy should focus on cultivating more authenticity in teams' emotional climates.

His advice to managers: "One thing that I can strongly recommend to managers and team leaders, or even a team member on a leaderless team: How they behave sets the tone. They should freely express their emotions and invite others to do so. Show empathic responses and encourage more exploration of ideas. That kind of behavior can start to create a more authentic affect climate and has very important and good team outcomes that they can cultivate later."

When you're on a team, you can model behavior for a more authentic affect climate, says Seo, but realize change won't happen overnight. "You can work on strengthening your relationships with team members so you feel more comfortable working to change the climate. It might take more time, and it's not that easy and automatic, but it is doable for teams to develop a more healthy, functional affect climate in [teams](#) even if you're not a team leader."

The biggest thing, says Seo, is to make sure all team members are on the same page.

"It's like team emotional intelligence. They collectively may express and

regulate emotions together—not just one person regulating their emotions. We really can see now that this makes for an authentic affect [climate](#), which makes people more empathetic and more responsive to team emotions. When that happens, there is more motivation, more creativity and innovation."

**More information:** Michael R. Parke et al, The Creative and Cross-Functional Benefits of Wearing Hearts on Sleeves: Authentic Affect Climate, Information Elaboration, and Team Creativity, *Organization Science* (2021). [DOI: 10.1287/orsc.2021.1448](https://doi.org/10.1287/orsc.2021.1448)

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