

# Lessons from blockbusters to help teams adapt

May 23 2023

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Collage with images of work teams and characters from "Wolf of Wall Street," "Braveheart" and "Remember the Titans." Credit: Created by Deb Berger/Iowa State University.

We all like to think of ourselves as rational human beings. If there's a

drastic change in our lives or at work, we can evaluate our options and make the best choice. But James Summers, an expert in team management and adaptation at Iowa State University, says our ability to process information breaks down when we experience heightened negative emotions.

Fear and anxiety can lead to withdrawal and avoidance, both of which hinder a group's ability to coordinate and overcome challenges. Because of this, many researchers who study [organizational behavior](#), [human resource management](#), applied psychology and communications have viewed [negative emotions](#) as counterproductive.

"Everything in the 'work teams' literature says emotion needs to be managed or regulated. But it gets to the point where you are in a situation where you are not going to be able to do that. So, how can we take something debilitating and switch it to get people to act and be successful," says Summers, associate professor of management and the Max S. Wortman, Jr. Professor.

In a newly published paper, Summers and his co-author, Timothy Munyon, professor of management at the University of Tennessee, argue that negative emotions—if leveraged in the right way—can help teams adapt. They make their case by dissecting scenes from three blockbuster movies, each of which represent a different type of team and threat.

## **'Braveheart' and 'Remember the Titans'**

The 1995 film "Braveheart" portrays William Wallace during the First War of Scottish Independence from England. During a critical plot point, the Scottish forces face a larger, better equipped English army at Stirling. The underdogs are ready to withdraw until Wallace intervenes.

Summers and Wortman point out Wallace first uses humor to gain the

soldiers' attention. He then reinforces a shared identity (sons of Scotland) before legitimizing their fear and appealing to their higher shared values.

"Aye, fight and you may die. Run, and you'll live, at least a while. And dying in your beds, many years from now, would you be willing to trade all the days from this day to that for that one chance, just one chance, to come back here and tell our enemies that they may take our lives, but they'll never take our freedom!"

Through his impassioned speech, Wallace shifts the soldiers' fear to outward anger, which carries the Scottish forces to victory.

"We know anger clouds our ability to cognitively process. We sort of narrow in, but that's not necessarily a bad thing all the time, especially in situations like this," says Summers. "Have you ever been mad and had a great workout?"

He adds that it's easier to move from one "negative" emotion to another.

"You're not going to take someone who's fearful and make them happy. But you can play in the same sandbox of emotions," Summers explains.

"Remember the Titans" also features a team transitioning from negative emotions that are non-functional to functional. The 2000 movie chronicles the story of an American high school football team during desegregation. In one of the scenes, the players argue about who will start and how much time they'll have on the field. Coach Boone steps in with an emphatic argument that they are one team with the same goal. "Perfection" becomes their rallying cry and helps the players move from within-fighting to cooperation.

## **'Wolf of Wall Street'**

The "Wolf of Wall Street" (2013) illustrates how teams can fail to leverage negative emotions. The movie follows the story of Jordan Belfort and his New York-based stock brokerage, which ran a fraudulent pump-and-dump scheme. With mounting pressure from the FBI, Belfort's father and attorney encourage him to step down from the company and make a deal.

Belfort agrees with the plan, but when he sees his distraught team during a farewell speech, he reverses course and says he isn't leaving. He shifts their first emotion (sadness) to another (enthusiasm), which provides temporary relief. But the decision to stay eventually leads to the company's downfall.

The authors write: "Although he rationally understood the necessity of adaptation, we contend that Belfort's emotions led him to self-deception where he persuaded himself to maintain the status quo."

## **Recommendations for teams**

Summers says all teams face disruptions at some point—a critical member leaves, a project loses funding or gets shut down, businesses merge and leadership changes. It's normal to experience fear, anger, anxiety or sadness during a transition.

"For so long, the old adage has been, 'It's just a job' or 'Do your job.' It's only been within the last few years that workplaces are beginning to accept the role of emotions," says Summers. "We all need to understand the full range of emotions that people in the workplace experience."

To help teams adapt to disruptions and find long-term success, Summers says his top recommendation is to pay attention.

"If someone withdraws or is having a bad day, don't ignore it or shrug it off—acknowledge it. Only then can you help them shape that emotion into something that's functional," he adds.

As part of his ongoing research, Summers is studying the effects of speaking up in a team (e.g., how it can make team members feel included or generate conflict.) He's also investigating [risk factors](#) for employee theft and whether tattoos hurt someone's chance of getting hired.

The paper is published in the journal *Academy of Management Review*.

**More information:** Timothy P Munyon et al, EMOTION, PERSUASION, AND TEAM ADAPTATION: ADVANCING THEORY THROUGH CINEMA, *Academy of Management Review* (2023). [DOI: 10.5465/amr.2022.0053](https://doi.org/10.5465/amr.2022.0053)

Provided by Iowa State University

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