

Sick but Present at Work: A Triangle Relationship among Leader-Member Exchange, Hiding Emotions and Presenteeism

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ABSTRACT:

This study examined the relationship between leader-member exchange (LMX), hiding emotions and presenteeism. In particular, I wanted to investigate to what degree LMX and hiding emotions affected to presenteeism as well as the mediating role of hiding emotion on relationship between LMX and presenteeism. Based on Affective Events Theory (AET) three hypotheses were tested to formalize a triangle relationship. I surveyed 291 Vietnamese subordinates who were working on four industries. Survey results indicated that, high-quality LMX relationship leads to a low probability of hiding emotions and presenteeism, in addition, hiding emotions is a mediator of LMX-presenteeism relationship. Theoretical and practical implications are discussed.

Keywords: Presenteeism, hiding emotions, LMX, Vietnam, Psychological behavior, human resource management

1. INTRODUCTION

Emotion has received considerable attention in organizational behaviors literature. "Emotion is any mental experience with high intensity and high hedonic content" (Cabanac, 2002, p.69), that influences performance in variety of ways. Maybe one of the most well-established findings is that pleasure emotion leads to higher productivity (Oswald *et al.*, 2015). Nevertheless, not everyone expresses feelings obviously, accordingly, hiding emotion results in some unpredicted consequences. This paper attempts to explore the unexpected relationship between the leader-member exchange (LMX) and presenteeism through hiding emotions.

Sickness presenteeism or presenteeism is a phenomenon that an employee goes to work despite of illness or sickness (Bergström *et al.*, 2009; Hemp, 2004). Presenteeism is associated with health or mental problem (e.g. tension headaches, depression, migraines) (Goetzel *et al.*, 2004) that do not force a person to take a sick leave, but diminish their productivity (Caverley *et al.*, 2007; Goetzel *et al.*, 2004; Hemp, 2004).

Aronsson *et al.* (2000) indicated people who work on provide care or welfare services, or teach or instruct may be more liable to presenteeism than other occupations. Based on those results, Ferreira *et al.* (2015) unveiled the LMX as a negative predictor of presenteeism in the financial and health sectors. However, focusing on specific areas (i.e. finance and health) limits the scope of findings (Ferreira *et al.*, 2015). Moreover, Ferreira *et al.* (2015) do not indicate the mediating effect of hiding emotions on the relationship between LMX and presenteeism.

Though there have been a number of empirical researches of presenteeism, in terms of its cause many questions endure. This study aims to assess the individual perceptions of employees in multiple sectors with respect to the existence of presenteeism in their organizations, as well as their opinion about hiding emotion and LMX, accordingly, that shed light on the interrelationship among LMX, hiding emotion and presenteeism. In my view, based on Affective Events Theory (AET), the

current study expands the present literature on presenteeism in several ways: first, by relating the indicator role of hiding emotion and LMX on presenteeism in multiple sectors, and second by showing the mediation of hiding emotions on relationship between LMX and presenteeism. Moreover, this study conducts in Vietnam –“is one of the most dynamic emerging countries in East Asia region” with economic growth of 6.6 percent in 2019 (The World Bank). High economic growth may be in line with pressure for labor force, and boost them to work harder and face presenteeism, however, few papers relate this phenomenon in developing country.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Affective Event Theory

Mood-as-information theory postulates the role of emotion as a source of information on judgments through information processing paradigm (Schwarz, 2011; Schwarz & Clore, 1983). This theory is consistent with AET and extends additional aid for the examination of mood as an antecedent of job attitudes (Carlson *et al.*, 2011; Schwarz & Clore, 1983). AET originally comes from the idea that affective reactions play an important role in forming attitudes and behaviors of employees (Weiss & Beal, 2005). Affective reactions refer to emotional experiences in the workplace due to work settings and people (i.e. work environment and events) (Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996). Hiding emotions are known as a special type of emotion management (Lee, 2016), thus, can relate to a certain form of affective reactions when employees keep their all emotions inside.

Affective events theory (AET) describes the structure of affective reactions that highlights the significance of the psychological experience (Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996). Based on AET, affective states are considered as the proximal causes of affect driven behaviors (Weiss & Beal, 2005). In addition, the heart of AET is premise that work environment and events have a direct influence on affective experiences, and then lead to work attitudes as well as affect-driven-behaviors (Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996) (see Fig. 1). This theory assists to demonstrate the correlation among hiding emotions, LMX, and presenteeism.

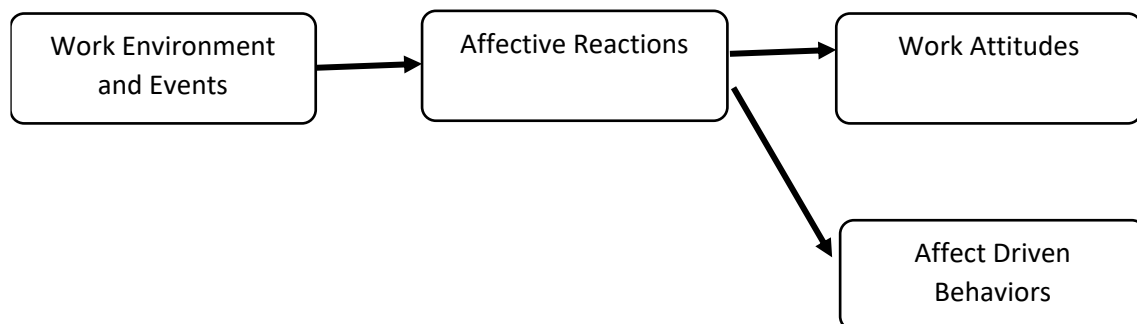


Fig. 1. Short Structure of Affective Events Theory by Weiss and Cropanzano (1996)

Presenteeism

Presenteeism is a concept to label a phenomenon of showing up for work despite feeling unhealthy (Aronsson *et al.*, 2000; Dew *et al.*, 2005). Presenteeism leads to unexpected outcomes, such as productivity decrements (Hemp, 2004; Johns, 2010), depression (Hemp, 2004), depersonalization (Demerouti *et al.*, 2009) as well as extreme health problems (Schultz & Edington, 2007).

Accordingly, Caverley *et al.* (2007) conducted the web-based survey concerning presenteeism in Canadian public service organization. They concluded top five reasons given for presenteeism, including no back-up, workload, deadline, meetings, and feelings of adequate health. Whereas Lovell (2004) demonstrated that a lack of sick leave pay particularly contributes to

presenteeism; Demerouti *et al.* (2009)'s findings argued that job demand is a cause of attending while ill. In addition, Johns (2010) proposed job insecurity is positively related to presenteeism. However, few papers examine a mechanism among hiding emotions, LMX and presenteeism.

Hiding emotions and presenteeism

Taxer and Frenzel (2015) consider hiding emotions on the context of emotional labor, that "may involve enhancing, faking, or suppressing emotions to modify the emotional expression" (Grandey, 2000, p.95). On emotional labor perspective, hiding emotions lead to increased feelings of emotional exhaustion (Näring *et al.*, 2012) as well as escalated subsequent strain in long period (Hülshager *et al.*, 2010).

Therefore, employees who frequently hide their feelings suffer from poor psychological well-being (Lee, 2016). This result makes them feel job insecurity that is a reason for presenteeism (Johns, 2010). A study of Euro found (2012) indicated a total of over 40 percent of both men and women workers in Euro who reported having at least one-day presence at work while ill also rated low well-being. Accordingly, this study found the demand for hiding emotions was associated with presenteeism. This finding is consistent with Lee (2016)'s research. Therefore, I generate the following hypothesis:

H1: The higher level of hiding emotions leads to the higher level of presenteeism.

LMX, hiding emotions and presenteeism

Based on Leader-member exchange (LMX) theory, leaders form different relationships with their subordinates (Gerstner & Day, 1997; Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995, Liden & Graen, 1980), that generate contrasting outcomes. Subordinates with high-quality LMX report greater job performance (Breevaart *et al.*, 2015; Liden & Graen, 1980) and satisfaction (Harris *et al.*, 2009) as well as lower turnover intention (Saeed *et al.*, 2014). In contrast, low-quality LMX is associated with higher levels of stress and bullying (Furnes *et al.*, 2015) as well as lower levels of work outcomes (Epitropaki & Martin, 1999) and well-being (Hill *et al.*, 2016).

Correspondingly, subordinates who frequently suppress their feelings may be uncomfortable with closeness and share, and experience a low level of social support (Gross & John, 2002), which might be an outcome of low LMX. This complies with Affective-Events theory (AET). According to AET, LMX quality is a representative for working environment and events that can influence subordinate's emotions (i.e. affective reactions), and results in affect-driven behavior (e.g. presenteeism). In other words, poor-quality LMX reduces subordinate's well-being and organizational support (Wayne *et al.*, 1997) that leads to higher level of hiding emotions (Smollan & Sayers, 2009), accordingly, results in the unexpected affect-driven behavior – presenteeism based on AET. Thus, I argue the following hypotheses:

H2: The lower quality LMX leads to the higher level of hiding emotions

H3: Hiding emotions mediates the relationship between LMX quality and presenteeism.

3. METHOD

Participants and procedure

The data were collected as part of a research project on social sciences and humanities program of the Youth Union of Ho Chi Minh City. After selecting members of four industries (i.e. agriculture, manufacturing, finance, and service) from Vietnam Association of Small and Medium Enterprises (VINASEM), the proposal was sent out to potential organizations for official research approval. Based on the employee list from accepted firms, the invitation to participate in an online Vietnamese questionnaire was e-mailed to 860 workers. A total of 291 subordinates completed the survey (a 34 percent response rate). The sample consisted of 183 female employees (62.9 percent) and 108 male employees (37.7 percent). The majority of

participants were single (60.8 percent) and 69.1 percent obtained a college or university education.

Measure

Hiding emotions. Hiding emotions were measured with one item developed by Lee (2016): “How often they were required to hide their feelings while working”. Employees responded on a five-point scale ranging from “always” (1) to “never” (5). The lower level of scale indicated the higher level of hiding emotions.

LMX. Seven items developed by Graen and Uhl-Bien (1995) were used to measure LMX on a five-point scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5= strongly agree). An example item is “I have enough confidence in my leader that I would defend and justify his/her decision if he/she were not present to do so”. Two items were deleted in light of the results of principal component analysis; the remaining five items were summed to create variable. The internal consistency of this scale was good ($\alpha = .82$).

Presenteeism. The subordinates rated presenteeism on one item from Aronsson *et al.* (2000): “Has it happened over the previous 12 months that you have gone to work despite feeling that you really should have taken sick leave due to your state of health?” Employees responded on five-point scale with anchors of “No, never” (1) and “Yes, more than 5 times” (5). The lower level of scale represented the lower level of presenteeism.

4. RESULTS

Table I reports the means, standard deviations and correlations among variables. To test the hypotheses, four models were examined. Model 1 reflects the impact of hiding emotions on presenteeism, whereas Model 2 refers to the influence of LMX on hiding emotions. In addition, Model 1, 3 and 4 illuminates the mediating effect of hiding emotions on the relationship between LMX towards presenteeism. The data are summarized in Table II.

In Model 1, there was a significantly negative correlation between hiding emotions and LMX ($b = -.15, p < .05$). It means that subordinates, who regularly hide their emotions, experience more presenteeism in the workplace. Hence, H1 was supported.

The results indicated that LMX was positively related to hiding emotions ($b = .14, p < .05$) (see Model 2). Therefore, it can be concluded that, employees tend to explicit their feelings when they experience a high-quality relationship with supervisors. These findings support H2.

Based on Baron and Kenny (1986), there was the three-step mediated regression in order to test mediation: first, the relationship between mediator and independent variable; second, the influence of independent variable on dependent variable; finally, the impact of mediator and independent variable on dependent variable. In Table II, Model 1 refers to step 1 whereas Model 3 reflects step 2, and then Model 4 belongs to step 3. Providing support for Hypothesis 3, the parameter estimates were significant in three models. In other words, hiding emotions is a mediator in the relationships between LMX and presenteeism. Therefore, H3 was supported.

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The goal of this study was to develop and provide validity evidence for antecedents and mediating mechanism of presenteeism. Accordingly, applying AET, this research aimed to explore the positive influence of LMX on hiding emotions and presenteeism, as well as the mediating role of hiding emotions on the relationship between LMX and presenteeism. The results largely confirm hypotheses by indicating that high-quality LMX relationship leads to a low probability of hiding emotions, whereas the relationship between LMX and presenteeism is mediated by hiding emotions.

This paper contributes to the literature on LMX theory by indicating LMX affects presenteeism through hiding emotions. The higher-quality relationship between supervisor and subordinate and the more explicit feelings among followers in the workplace, the less implicit emotions would reduce presenteeism phenomenon. The findings are consistent with Lee (2016)'s

study regarding direct effect of hiding emotions on presenteeism as well as Ferreira *et al.* (2015)'s research concerning the correlation between LMX and presenteeism.

Presenteeism is associated with higher cost, less productivity, and poor physical and psychological well-being (Hemp, 200; Lee, 2016). Therefore, this study provides the way for managers who attempt to eliminate presenteeism – the unexpected outcome for their subordinates through high-quality LMX. Hung *et al.* (2004) suggest fairness of HRM practices can enhance the high quality of leader-follower relationship. Those close connections help them to easily explicate feelings and take a day-break due to health-related problems in turn. Finally, employers can reach productivity through healthy employees with full energy.

This paper has a few notable limitations. First, the use of self-report and cross-sectional data limits its generalizability. Second, LMX is measured at the subordinate level that perhaps reduces the accuracy of leader-follower relationship. Therefore, future studies should consider using hierarchical linear modeling for analyzing different level. In addition, collecting a longitudinal data in a large set of countries may enhance the generalizability of findings.

Table I. Result of Descriptive statistics and Correlations

Model	M	SD	1	2	3
1. Presenteeism	2.02	.85	-		
2. Hiding emotions	2.76	.81	-.15**	-	
3. LMX	2.67	.73	-.07	.14*	-

Notes: n=291 employees, *p< 0.01

Table II. Result of Regression Analysis

Model	1	2	3	4
	Presenteeism	Hiding emotions	Presenteeism	Presenteeism
Hiding emotions	-.15**			-.14**
LMX		.14**	-.11*	-.12*
R²	.16	.12	.13	.26
Adj.R²	.15	.11	.09	.23
R² change	.02	.02	.02	.05
F value	15.07	16.07	11.93	32.35
P value	.01	.01	.04	.02
F change	15.07	16.07	11.93	32.35
Sig. of F value change	.01	.01	.04	.02
Max VIF	1.000	1.000	1.000	1.217

*p<0.10, **p<0.05

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