



When timing changes how leaders' emotions land with project teams

RESEARCH BRIEF

New research shows that leaders' emotional expressions matter not only in content, but also in timing. Positive emotional expressions early in a team's life are especially powerful, and when they are followed by stronger negative emotional expressions at the midpoint, individual performance can improve even more.

What researchers found

- ▶ **Positive** emotional expressions from leaders *during the early phase* of a project team's lifecycle had stronger positive effects on individual performance than the same positive expressions delivered at the midpoint.
- ▶ **Early** positive leader emotional expressions were more strongly related to end-of-year performance than midpoint positive expressions, and early negative emotional expressions were harmful to performance.
- ▶ The strongest performance gains appeared when *early positive expressions* were **followed by above-average critical feedback** at the midpoint. In that sequence, the early positivity seemed to make midpoint criticism feel more constructive and less disrespectful — but the effect held only when the criticism was warranted, not negativity for its own sake.
- ▶ Two mechanisms helped explain the pattern: **early positive expressions built respect**, and the **combination of early positivity plus midpoint negativity** also boosted status-related motivation to improve.

Why it matters

Leaders shape performance not just through goals and feedback, but also through emotional signals. Organizations often train leaders on what emotions to express, but this research shows that when those emotions are expressed can matter just as much.

How we know

The researchers used 2 longitudinal field studies. One drew on four waves of archival data from 9,968 team members across 234 teams at a professional services firm over one year, using Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count to measure the emotional tone of leaders' written feedback. The second followed 245 student-athletes and 86 coaches across 20 NCAA Division 1 varsity teams over a season, combining survey measures of leader emotional expressions with coach ratings and archival sports statistics.

What this means

- ▶ **For HR and L&D teams:** Training should cover both emotions and timing of expression.
- ▶ **For managers and team leads:** Positive emotional expressions early in a team's life builds a foundation of respect, making later corrective feedback more effective.

Now what?

- ▶ **Prioritize** positive emotional expressions during the early phase of a team's life.
- ▶ Build **timing and sequencing** into emotional intelligence training, so leaders understand that the order of their emotional expressions shapes how those messages are received later.
- ▶ **Use midpoint feedback carefully.** When it follows an early positive foundation, it is more likely to be experienced as constructive rather than discouraging.

LINK TO THE STUDY

