

# Myth or Science?

## People Can't Accurately Forecast Their Own Emotions

This statement is essentially true. People tend to do a pretty bad job of predicting how they're going to feel when something happens. The research on this topic—called *affective forecasting*—shows that our poor job of affective forecasting takes two forms.

First, we tend to overestimate the pleasure we'll receive from a future positive event. We tend to think we'll be happier with a new car than is actually the case, that owning our own home will feel better than it actually does once we buy it, and even that marriage will make us happier than it will. Research on affective forecasting shows that we overestimate both the intensity (how happy we'll feel) and the duration (how long we'll feel happy) of future positive events. For example, when Joakim Noah was contemplating being a first-round basketball draft pick, a reporter asked him what he'd most look forward to. Noah said he couldn't wait to have "the best bathroom in the NBA." Noah was a first-round pick (by the Chicago Bulls), so chances are he got his world-class bathroom in Chicago, but chances also are that it didn't make him as happy as he thought it would.

A second area where we are not very good at affective forecasting is negative events. Just as positive events tend not to make us feel as good as we think they will, negative events don't make us feel as bad as we think they will.

Many different studies have supported our poor affective forecasting abilities: College students overestimate how happy or unhappy they'll be after being assigned to a good or bad dormitory, people overestimate how unhappy they'll be 2 months after a break-up, untenured college professors overestimate how happy they will be with tenure, and women overestimate the emotional impact of unwanted results for a pregnancy test.<sup>1</sup>

So, there is good news and bad news in this story: It's true that the highs aren't as high as we think, but it's also true that the lows aren't as low as we fear. Odds are, the future isn't as bright as you hope, but neither is it as bleak as you fear.

### Class Exercise

1. Divide the class into groups of three to five students.
2. Have each group discuss situations that one or more of the students will experience in the near future, such as a football game, a basketball game, a play, rock concert, or other event.
3. Have each student in the group anticipating the event describe what his or her hopes are for the event. Be as specific as possible.
4. Have the group write down the expectations.
5. Have the groups reconvene after the event and answer the following questions:
  - a. Was anything less than you expected as described in the before-event paper?
  - b. Would you classify the event as fulfillment or disappointment with what you expected?

# International OB

## Emotional Recognition: Universal or Culture-Specific?

Early researchers studying how we understand emotions based on others' expressions believed all individuals could recognize the same emotion regardless of culture: a frown would indicate sadness no matter where you were from. However, recent research suggests some emotions are more widely recognized than others.

One study found that people from more collectivistic cultures, such as Japan, were more likely to interpret the emotions in a target person's facial expressions by examining the social context—the faces of other individuals in the picture. Subjects from individualistic cultures, such as the United States, interpreted an individual's emotion by focusing on the person.

One study examined how quickly and accurately we can read the facial expressions of people of different cultural backgrounds. Although individuals were at first faster at recognizing the emotional expression of others from their own culture, when living in a different culture they increased their speed and accuracy as they became more familiar with the culture. As Chinese residing in the United States adapted to their surroundings, they were able to recognize the emotions of people native to the United States more quickly.

In fact, foreigners are sometimes better at recognizing emotions among the citizens in their adopted country than its citizens are. Interestingly, these effects begin to occur relatively quickly. Chinese students living in the United States for an average of 2.4 years were better at recognizing the facial expressions of U.S. citizens than the facial expressions of Chinese citizens. Why? The authors of the study suggest that limited language skills force foreigners to rely more on nonverbal communication.

Finally, another study revealed that recognition of some emotions does appear to generalize across cultures. Specifically, prideful facial expressions were accurately recognized in the United States, Italy, and West Africa. Other research provides support for the cross-cultural recognition of additional emotions, including anger, disgust, and surprise.

Taken together, these findings suggest both generality to the recognition of facial expressions but also some cultural differences. A U.S. worker and a Tanzanian in the same organization would likely be able to interpret many emotions similarly, but they might do so in somewhat different ways, and they would probably agree less often than two Americans or two Tanzanians.

Source: Based on J. L. Tracy and R. W. Robins, "The Nonverbal Expression of Pride: Evidence for Cross-cultural Recognition," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 94, no. 3 (2008), pp. 516–530; T. Masuda, P. Ellsworth, B. Mesquita, J. Leu, S. Tanida, and E. Van de Veerdonk, "Placing the Face in Context: Cultural Differences in the Perception of Facial Emotion," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 94, no. 3 (2008), pp. 365–381; and H. A. Elfenbein and N. Ambady, "When Familiarity Breeds Accuracy: Cultural Exposure and Facial Emotion Recognition," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, August 2003, pp. 276–290.

### Class Exercise

1. Divide the class into groups of three to five students.
2. Have students access the YouTube video at [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A\\_XyYxpWIS0](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A_XyYxpWIS0)

3. The students should watch the facial expressions and write down what they believe is expressed.
4. Compare the responses. If there are differences, the students should discuss until they reach a group consensus.
5. Have the groups compare their results to determine if there are any divergent interpretations.

# Ethical Choice

## Workplace Romance

A large percentage of married couples first met in the workplace. A 2006 survey showed 40 percent of all employees have been in an office romance. Given the amount of time people spend at work, this isn't terribly surprising. Yet office romances pose sensitive ethical issues for organizations and employees and, as the OB Poll shows, most of us hesitate to initiate one. Perhaps we realize that many romances fade, and the aftermath can be particularly difficult if the other party remains a co-worker.

Take the case of Julie Roehm, senior VP of marketing at Wal-Mart, who began dating Sean Womack, VP of communications architecture. When Wal-Mart learned of the relationship, it fired both executives, arguing the undisclosed relationship violated its policy against workplace romances. Roehm sued Wal-Mart, claiming the company breached her contract and damaged her reputation. Wal-Mart countersued, alleging Roehm showed favoritism on Womack's behalf. Eventually, Roehm dropped her lawsuit in exchange for Wal-Mart's dropping its countersuit.

This story shows that while workplace romances are personal matters, it's hard to keep them out of the political complexities of organizational life. Here are some recommendations to follow if you're considering a workplace romance:

1. Nearly three-quarters of organizations have no policies governing workplace romances. Before initiating or accepting any romantic contact with a co-worker or supervisor, make sure you know the rules. Your career could depend on it.
2. Be particularly cautious about "dating up" (dating your supervisor) and "dating down" (dating your direct report). These relationships are particularly prone to misunderstandings, resentments, and even lawsuits.
3. If you and your romantic partner work in the same area, avoid the temptation to hide the relationship from your boss. Sooner or later, he or she will find out. It is better to be proactive.
4. If you're single, it may not be wise to rule out office romances altogether. Many individuals report meeting their spouse or significant other at work. Just remember to keep organizational policies in mind.

Sources: K. Gurchiek, "Be Prepared for Cupid's Arrows Among the Cubicles," SHRM Online (March 3, 2008); J. Greenwald, "Employers Are the Losers in the Dating Game," Workforce Week, June 3, 2007, pp. 1-2; and "My Year at Wal-Mart," Business Week, February 12, 2007.

### **Class Discussion**

Ask students to read <http://management.about.com/cs/people/a/OfficeRomance.htm>. Then have the class discuss the positive and negative aspects of office romances. Then ask them to discuss if the same situations occur in in-class romances.

# Point/CounterPoint

## The Costs and Benefits of Organizational Display Rules

### Point

Organizations today realize that good customer service means good business. After all, who wants to end a shopping trip at the grocery store with a surly checker? Research clearly shows that organizations that provide good customer service have higher profits.<sup>2</sup> An integral part of customer service training is to set forth display rules to teach employees to interact with customers in a friendly, helpful, professional way.

As one Starbucks manager says, “What makes Starbucks different is our passion for what we do. We’re trying to provide a great experience for people, with a great product. That’s what we all care about.”<sup>3</sup> Starbucks may have good coffee, but a big part of the company’s growth has been the customer experience. For instance, the cashiers are friendly and will get to know you by name if you are a repeat customer.

Asking employees to act friendly is good for them, too. “Forced” smiles can actually make people feel better.<sup>4</sup> And, if someone feels that being asked to smile is bad for him, he doesn’t belong in the service industry in the first place.

### CounterPoint

Companies should not be “thought police” and force employees to feel and act in ways that serve only organizational needs. Service employees should be professional and courteous, yes, but many companies expect them to take abuse and refrain from defending themselves. That’s wrong. As the philosopher Jean Paul Sartre proposed, we have a responsibility to be authentic—true to ourselves—and within reasonable limits organizations have no right to ask us to be otherwise.

Customers might even prefer that employees be themselves rather than smiling punching bags. Employees shouldn’t be openly nasty or hostile, of course, but who appreciates a fake smile? Think about trying on an outfit in a store where the clerk automatically says it looks “wonderful” when you know it doesn’t and you sense the clerk is lying. Furthermore, if an employee doesn’t feel like slapping on an artificial smile, then it’s only going to create dissonance between her and her employer.

Finally, forcing display rules on employees takes a heavy emotional toll. It’s unnatural to smile all the time or passively take abuse from customers, clients, or fellow employees. Organizations can improve employees’ psychological health by encouraging them to be themselves, within reasonable limits.

**Class Exercise**

1. Divide the class into two groups—one group to take on the issues raised in Point, the other group to take on the issues raised in Counterpoint. You may want to divide each half into smaller groups to enable all class members to participate in the group's discussions.
2. Ask the class to act as an organization's management team. Their job is to make a recommendation as to what criteria they might use in their organization when selecting employees for hire or promotion using the issues assigned by the Point/Counterpoint arguments.
3. Have students present their recommendations to the class and make a decision as to what the best arguments are and why. What gains do they expect as a result of the criteria that they used?
4. Have them list the recommendations and benefits on the board for the class to evaluate during the discussion.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> T. D. Wilson and D. T. Gilbert, "Affective Forecasting: Knowing What to Want," *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, June 2005, pp. 131–134.

<sup>2</sup> H. Liao and A. Chuang, "A Multilevel Investigation of Factors Influencing Employee Service Performance and Customer Outcomes," *Academy of Management Journal* 47, no. 1 (2004), pp. 41–58.

<sup>3</sup>Quote from Starbucks.com Web site, May 16, 2005.

<sup>4</sup> F. Strack, L. L. Stepper, and S. Martin, "Inhibiting and Facilitating Conditions of the Human Smile: A Nonobtrusive Test of the Facial-Feedback Hypothesis," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 54 (1988), pp. 768–77.