IlLUminate Blog Transcript: Liuba Belkin on Supervisor Compassion and Employee Gratitude During the Pandemic

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JACK CROFT: 00:13 Welcome. I'm Jack Croft, host of the ilLUminate podcast for Lehigh University's College of Business. Today is August 13th, 2021. And we're talking with Liuba Belkin about her latest research looking at the relationship between supervisors and their employees during times of crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic. Dr. Belkin is an associate professor of management in Lehigh's College of Business and holds the Axelrod Family Endowed Fellowship. Her primary research interests focus on affect and emotions in organizational settings and the role of emotions in negotiations, trust relationships, and managerial practices. She also studies the influence of electronic communication media on employee relations, decision-making, and performance. Dr. Belkin teaches graduate and undergraduate courses in conflict management, negotiations, organizational behavior, and managing people. Thank you for being with us again today, Dr. Belkin.

LIUBA BELKIN: 01:13 Thank you, Jack. My pleasure to be here.

CROFT: 01:16 One of your main research interests has long been the role of emotions in organizational settings. In recent years, you've been focusing more specifically on feelings and expressions of gratitude in the workplace and beyond. What is it about gratitude that initially attracted your interest and has obviously held it in recent years?

BELKIN: 01:38 Well, I have been studying various emotions throughout the course of my academic career. But since my initial focus was on emotional contagion and effects of emotions in interpersonal exchanges, dyadic exchanges, predominantly through electronic mediums such as email and often in the context of interpersonal negotiations, the strongest impact in the settings are usually produced by negative, rather than positive, emotions such as fear or anger. Which makes sense, since people pay more attention and assign more weight in their judgments and decision-making to negative, rather than positive, emotions. Again, this makes evolutionary sense because evolutionary function of our brains are such that kind of when you're happy, it doesn't help you to survive in adverse conditions. In fact, you can get killed or can be eaten. But being happy relaxes you. So evolutionarily, throughout thousands of years, we are more used to putting heavier weight on negative emotions and not really assigning a lot of weight on positive emotions.

BELKIN: 02:52 So when we did our experiments, my colleagues and I saw that while happiness expressions do produce some effects in interpersonal exchanges, they are often inconsistent, and happiness kind of is a fuzzy emotion, so to speak. And if you look at this body of literature in the last 20 years or so that study the effects of emotions in organizational and negotiation settings, you will see that the majority examined the

effects of anger, fear, anxiety, guilt, or shame on the individual and organizational outcomes. And while it's very important to understand the effects of all these negative emotions, the such strong slant of the field on negative emotions was really emotionally exhausting to me, so to speak, and frankly, pretty upsetting. The other reason that, about five years ago, I turned more towards positive emotions and organizational life, and specifically gratitude, is that in my everyday life, I'm a huge fan of positive emotions. I consider myself a happy and very grateful person. And I'm truly convinced that besides some objective reasons — such as having a wonderful family, an amazing job, great friends — a large part of my happiness comes from deep feelings of gratitude I experience almost daily. Importantly, feeling grateful not only benefits me, making me a happy person, but it also benefits people around me because gratitude has this ability to focus people on the present moment, increasing awareness about the benefits of presence, and inspire positive behaviors toward others. It's not an economic exchange of benefits. So when people feel grateful, research shows that they are more prosocial. They are willing to help others who are not involved in this giving benefits to the focal person. So gratitude has this positive trickle-down effect for the society.

BELKIN: 04:58

And about five years ago, as I said, after presenting my research project on emotions, mostly negative, in negotiations at the annual meeting of the Academy of Management, one of the people who also works in the same field, Tony Kong, and who is the co-author on the paper we're talking about today, we started talking about this session, how we're really tired of and exhausted by studying all these negative emotions. And he also is a huge fan of positive emotions, especially gratitude, and we decided to start several research projects. We started with experimental studies. And what we found was, for example, that expressing thanks not only inspires helping, it's good for building relationships, but also, it gives you more money in the economic exchanges with strangers. It was very inspiring. We had some other work done in this field, and then when COVID hit, it was just a natural extension of our research projects to see how feelings of gratitude played out in the major crisis.

CROFT: 06:04

The study that we're going to be looking at was done between March and May of last year in that first harrowing stage of the pandemic. And in the study, and as you mentioned, you co-authored with Tony Kong of the University of South Florida, you write and I'll quote, "The COVID-19 pandemic is novel, disruptive, and unprecedented and has caused unexpected, involuntary, and swift adjustment of employees across industries." So what are some of the most significant ways it has disrupted people's lives, especially in the workplace, from the research you've been doing in several areas, basically, since the pandemic hit?

BELKIN: 06:47

So we conducted several projects during this time. And while we did not specifically measure in this project or others in terms of how exactly it disrupted the lives of our respondents, we did collect comments at the end. But also from personal collective experience of all of us, from stories in the media, news channel, we know that every aspect of our lives, all of us, personal, social, work, it was just turned upside down. Many companies temporarily closed their doors. Others tried to survive through predominantly remote model work, which also was so novel even to people who had some part-time telework because it was such a different kind of uniform shift to remote model. And organizations and supervisors and managers and organizational leaders were not really ready to deal with it. So we're still learning as we go. Of course, the magnitude of disruption depends on the industry. Right? So with hotels,

sports, entertainment, travel probably will be hit the worst, especially at the beginning. But what we heard from participants in their stories, it's mostly fear, fear of sickness, fear of illness, fear for their loved ones, fear of unknown, that you don't really know how long it will last. So all of this really [inaudible] and perpetuated every time they would answer some questions, leave us comments, and it penetrated everywhere, all aspects of life from, again, family to work to social life, etc.

CROFT: 08:27

All right. Let's turn our attention to your latest study, which has been accepted for publication in the Journal of Positive Psychology. And that was one that was conducted, as I mentioned before, in that early stage of the pandemic between March and May of 2020, which was a time of high anxiety and great uncertainty for almost everyone, if not everyone. And it examines the supervisor-subordinate relationship by looking at how supervisors' expression of a moral emotion known as companionate love affected employees during that time. So let's begin by defining those terms. What constitutes a moral emotion?

BELKIN: 09:14

So moral emotions are those emotions that are linked to the interests or welfare either of society as a whole or at least of persons other than the judge or an agent. So moral emotions can be, by the way, positive or negative. For example, people often experience negative moral emotions, such as righteous anger or contempt, when others break the law or do things that hurt others. And even though you might not be a victim, just a third-party observer, your anger or contempt signals to the perpetrator that this is not acceptable. There will be punishment for their deeds. So that's a moral, but negative, emotion. Similarly, people very often experience compassion or empathy to others who are not related to them and offer help without expecting any gain in return. So again, any emotion that’s kind of other-oriented and concerns the welfare of the society or other people, that's what constitutes moral emotion.

BELKIN: 10:16

So gratitude is this wonderful moral emotion that arises when an individual perceives themselves as a beneficiary of someone's intentional behavior or actions to provide them with benefits and improve their welfare. And it can be another person that you experience gratitude towards or it can be you feel lucky, so kind of fate or God. So whatever it is, it's a very important, positive emotion. And we already know from past research that this positive moral emotion, such as gratitude, it can buffer against and alleviate individuals' negative experiences. They can promote personal well-being, resilience in times of adversity, and improve social relationships. In fact, in the same Journal of Positive Psychology, there's been a recent review of all these emergent studies on how individual well-being fared also, so to speak, during the pandemic. And this study showed that positive moral emotions can help individual well-being. What we did in our research, we kind of extend this line of research by showing that gratitude can not just help well-being, but gratitude can help people adapt more efficiently in early, kind of these acute stages of a novel and disruptive crisis such as a pandemic, COVID-19.

CROFT: 11:42

Which brings us to companionate love, which is likely a term that the majority of our listeners have never heard used regarding supervisors in a work setting. And spoiler alert here, but one of the main findings of your study is that supervisors who were able to express companionate love elicited gratitude from their employees, tying that together with what you were just talking about. So what does the term companionate love mean?

BELKIN: 12:16

So companionate love, as the term says, is not a romantic love. Companionate love is a complex and also other-focused moral emotion, which is associated with interpersonal sensitivity and support, so to speak. So it comprises emotions of compassion, care, and love. So this is the love that you find and have towards neighbors, friends when you help others. So again, it's not a romantic love. It's more about care and helping and about compassion.

CROFT: 12:49

What are some of the ways that supervisors expressed companionate love during this crisis that you found in your study?

BELKIN: 12:59

So besides measuring, there's a scale with several items to measure the magnitude of each of these emotions that comprise companionate love, we actually asked our participants to give us examples if they feel that their supervisors expressed it. And what we saw that there were so many different ways that they described it. It was very enlightening, in a way, to see how people interpret this complex emotion. So some people said, "Well, my supervisor just stopped by and asked how I was doing. How is my family? I have people with certain conditions." And they really authentically-- and again, with any expression of emotions, authenticity is really important. So subordinates felt that their supervisor authentically cared and therefore asked questions. And for them, that was enough to feel grateful.

BELKIN: 13:52

For others, they said, "Well, knowing how tough it is, my supervisor actually brought some supplies that were in deficit during those first months, like toilet paper and some other supplies that disappeared from shelves. And they actually saw it somewhere and bought a couple of things for us." And that person who described this example, she said, "Well, I feel like a part of the family here because I see the supervisor really cares." Others said, "Well, I was crying, and the supervisor asked me how he can help and gave me a hug, and I felt better." And of course, giving a hug can be very efficient, but of course, you should ask people first before attempting it if it's wanted. In that case, it actually helped them to feel better. Again, all of these different examples, they demonstrate that you don't have to spend a lot of money to show that you care. Right? So if you can, for example, buy lunch or bring supplies, just something to make people feel a little bit happier, less stressed, at ease, really helps. But on the other hand, you don't even have to do that, caring, expressing compassion, asking questions genuinely. Or someone actually provided examples, they received a flexible work schedule because they had to take care of their sick kids. So all of these things, and there are many, many things you can do as a supervisor to express this emotion.

CROFT: 15:25

Probably should take a quick step back and in terms of how the study was conducted, it was a four-wave survey study with 111 U.S .working adults during those early months, as we said. So that means you were going back to people, I'm assuming, four times during the course of the study to check in with them to see how their reactions and experiences were changing. Is that correct?

BELKIN: 15:56

Absolutely. So we started with almost 300 people. But because people just have other things, I'm actually very grateful that they continued to participate for this long period of time. They have definitely better things to worry about. So we collected this data from full-time U.S. workers with verified employment and demographic information from a wide variety of industries and positions they were working on. So the first wave was about 300 people. Then two weeks after we conducted another wave and

then two weeks after a third one and then the final one. And we first measured their demographics. We asked about their living situation, their perceptions about uncertainty, about COVID. And then we asked them if during the past three weeks or so, when it was just the beginning of the pandemic, did their supervisor express this companionate love? And when the people who said, "Well, yes," and gave us examples, then we followed up and we measured their gratitude, and then we measured kind of the way they perceived their role.

BELKIN: 17:10

And then finally, at the very end, we measured also their engagement, their behavior, engagement in proactive, risky behaviors such as voice, speaking up, talking about troubles, what's called constructive voice, which is extremely important behavior for organizations to be more resilient and survive because you want your subordinates not to be silent, especially when there's a crisis, actually speak up. On the other hand, it's a very risky behavior. Unlike just helping others, there is no kind of downside to this. You help others. Maybe they will feel grateful, payback, maybe not. But there is no risk. When you speak up, it can backfire. So oftentimes, people stay silent if they don't trust their supervisors or there is no good relationship. So expressions of companionate love actually increased not just feelings of gratitude in their subordinates, but they actually promoted this proactive voice behavior, which in the long run is very beneficial to organizations.

CROFT: 18:16

Now, you had started out with the survey with three hypotheses, and they were confirmed over the course of these surveys that you conducted. So you've talked about a couple of them. But what were the three hypotheses, and what do they tell us about the working relationship?

BELKIN: 18:36

Well, first, we thought that expressing, again, genuinely expressing companionate love should evoke feelings of gratitude in subordinates, so if supervisors express compassion and love. We also thought that this expression should be particularly salient and important for gratitude when employees perceive high uncertainty of a crisis. Because what past research tells us is that when people feel anxious, unsafe, they need some sense of certainty and security, they actually turn to their supervisors for care and compassion and love. And the more employees would feel uncomfortable and uncertain in this crisis, the more important those expressions would be to them and the higher gratitude feelings they would experience, which was the case. Then again, based on past research, we know that such emotions as gratitude, they can actually broaden people's perceptions, what's called action repertoire. So people start to think differently about, let's say, their work. And we thought, "Well, people who feel grateful, they probably will expand, broaden their perspective of what are their responsibilities are, kind of going above and beyond, which in turn should really promote their engagement and voice behaviors," and that's exactly what we found in our study.

CROFT: 20:15

Yeah. And that's interesting because obviously this was a dark time for a lot of people. And the idea of focusing on these positive moral emotions, ones that generate this sense of community, "We're all in this together. What can we do for each other?" actually helped people. Not only is it positive for them and beneficial for them, but it helps the organization as well seems to be one of the core findings you've had.

BELKIN: 20:50

Absolutely.

CROFT: 20:52

As you note in your study, and this is a quote, "It seems easy to listen to subordinates acknowledge their suffering and offer emotional support." And it does indeed. So what are some of the main obstacles that prevent supervisors from doing that? And what are the steps organizations can take to help leaders acquire the skills they need to effectively express companionate love and cultivate gratitude from employees?

BELKIN: 21:20

Well, even though it seems easy to listen to subordinates acknowledge their suffering, offer emotional support, oftentimes, supervisors may not feel either comfortable doing so or they're just not able. They don't know how to do that. So with regards to being uncomfortable to express companionate love, well, we hope that perhaps that the quotes-- we actually have this in the paper, but examples that I shared with you today and the results of our study can serve as an inspiration to supervisors because they illustrate that subordinates not only appreciate supervisors' expression of companionate love, they really value it and reciprocate these kind acts when possible, such as with proactive engagement and voice. Regarding the latter problem, inability to express companionate love — and that's oftentimes the bigger problem — there is a wealth of research, clinical psychology showing that compassion training and coaching with interpersonal and emotional management skills can help those who are unfamiliar or unable to do so. For example, brief compassion training using meditation-based techniques such as love and kindness meditation are proven to be effective means for eliciting compassion towards others. It actually encourages people to express more freely these emotions and encourages prosocial behavior even towards strangers.

BELKIN: 22:58

Importantly, in order to aid their employees in stressful times, organizational leaders need to develop what's called interpersonal emotional management skills. So we all manage our emotions in self. Right? So we regulate our negative emotions. We try to kind of reframe oftentimes to feel better with our emotions, to kind of make them turn negative to positive emotions, so to speak. But we also regulate each other's emotions. And when it's done strategically and skillfully by managers encouraging people to what's called situation modification, right, so encouraging their subordinates to look at the situation from a different angle or encouraging to reappraise and think about positive and benefits that they have, it really produces very beneficial outcomes to organizations. This is a little bit going to the other study we are conducting. It's not published yet. I hope to talk about this sometime in the future. But we see preliminary findings that are very encouraging with respect to these interpersonal management tactics, and these skills can be trained. And finally, we suggest that supervisors, especially amid crisis, try to cultivate subordinates' gratitude more directly, not necessarily just with companionate love expression. There are other ways to do it, and they should probably cultivate it first and foremost in themselves and their subordinates as well.

BELKIN: 24:34

So there are different gratitude interventions that show to work in the workplace, in social settings. Again, there is more and more literature in the management field appearing that shows that these interventions are pretty efficient in the short run and also in the long term. So supervisors' companionate love expression is just one of the ways to elicit gratitude. But other methods such as journal writing, counting one's blessings, or what's called best possible self method, this exercise that promotes the positive view of oneself when someone imagines best possible future after working hard towards it, all these interventions, they're pretty brief in duration, sometimes a couple of weeks. But they have been shown to have very important strong effects on

individual well-being and also behaviors in organizations, and they can effectively elicit subordinates' felt gratitude.

CROFT: 25:33 I'd like to thank you, Dr. Belkin, for being with us again today. It's been fascinating, as always, and a good reminder, I think, for all of us that accentuating the positive, especially during these difficult times, is beneficial for us and for those around us. That's a good message to take home.

BELKIN: 25:53 Thank you, Jack. It's been my pleasure being here talking about my research. But to me, it's especially meaningful that the topic of this research and, indeed, the findings that positive emotions really help people to adapt and survive and resist the adversity are really, really encouraging.

CROFT: 26:17 I'd like to once again thank my guest, Liuba Belkin. Her research has been published over the years in such prestigious academic journals as the Journal of Management, Journal of Applied Psychology, Journal of Experimental Social Psychology, Journal of International Business Studies, and Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes. Her most recent study will be published online sometime in the near future, hopefully, in the Journal of Positive Psychology, and we will add a link to it once it is up there. Her research has also garnered considerable media attention from such leading business and financial news outlets as BusinessWeek, the Financial Times, CNBC, The New York Times, The Boston Globe, The Wall Street Journal, and many others. This podcast is brought to you by ilLUminate, the Lehigh Business blog. To hear more podcasts featuring Lehigh Business thought leaders, please visit us at business.lehigh.edu/news, and don't forget to follow us on Twitter @LehighBusiness. This is Jack Croft, host of the ilLUminate podcast. Thanks for listening.

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