Conceptualising Passion: problematising ‘positive’ emotions

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Abstract:
Until recently it has been routinely assumed that passion is a positive emotion. As a consequence calls for people to be more passionate about their work and lives have had a moral imperative – it is something that people ‘should’ be interested in pursuing. This research problematises this construction of passion by examining the relationship between organisational and individual passion as constructed in the popular management literature. The frame analysis of 30 books and 39 articles in business journals highlights some of the dilemmas of constructing passion as a positive emotion. The analysis identifies four types of passionate worker-organisation relationship, and while it is evident that mutual passion can indeed be advantageous, there also exists the potential for exploitation, burnout and chaos. The research finds that in conceptualising passion we need new tools for appreciating the ‘positives’ and ‘negatives’ associated with this way of being in an organisation.

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The popular management literature (PML) is a medium in which management ‘truths’ are constructed and reconstructed. Passion, along with spirituality and emotional intelligence, is one of the latest concepts to be used to generate such ‘truths’ about work and management. The PML actively pursues the promise of passion: ‘gurus create new images, use new languages and reshape the thinking of managers by formulating their ideas in accessible and very persuasive language’ (Hatcher 2003: 394). In this sense passion is being constructed as a moral imperative, something that should be sought and utilised. The question this research seeks to examine is whether the assumption that passion is overwhelmingly positive stands up to analysis.
Certainly, passion holds out the promise of working with dignity, of a way of ‘being’ in an organisation that is more respectful of our humanity, that does not negate the emotional side of our lives, and does not separate out the emotions from reason or the mind from the body. Invoking passion as a particular kind of emotional dynamic within an organisation disrupts the rationalist view of the relationship between an enterprise and its members (Hatcher 2003). It anticipates going beyond the superficiality of generating connections with others (and the organisation) based on necessity and instrumental reasoning, to connecting on the basis of desire (Bruch and Ghoshal 2003) and of recognition of our own and others’ subjectivity (Mumby and Putnam 1992). From this perspective, there are good reasons to think that incorporating passion into organisations might be beneficial for both the organisation and its members.

Before entering further discussion of the positive aspects of passion, it is first necessary to consider ‘what is meant by passion’? It is important to differentiate passion from the passions, which are synonymous with the expression of particular emotions. In analysing the academic and popular management literature (eg Allenbaugh 2002; Bruch and Ghoshal 2003; Hamel 2000; Inamori 1995; King 1999; Wallman and Flower 2003), this paper defines passion as a superordinate concept that constitutes its meaning from four characteristics:

1. **Emotionality.** Although not an emotion in itself, passion provides the context for the expression of particular emotions; the ways in which emotions are combined and prioritised, and for the intensity of their expression.

2. **Energy.** Passion is embodied through the way it generates, uses and shapes physical and mental energy. In the literature (eg Inamori 1995, Gubman 2004), energy is often used interchangeably with passion in discussions of ‘drive’ and motivation.

3. **Object of meaning.** The object of meaning provides passion with its direction and focus. The object has to have subjective meaning, although there is ambivalence about whether such an object has to be uncovered (from within the self) or discovered (from interaction with the world).
4. **Attachments.** In addition to being attached to a particular object of meaning, passion also leads to attachments to other people and social groups interested in this same object. These attachments help to generate a shared vision, a sense of belonging, and stronger commitment.

In this paper I draw on concepts relating to emotions in organisations to explicate ways of conceptualising passion. Two such theories are particularly relevant to the data analysis – those relating to emotional management and those relating to emotional intelligence. Mumby and Putnam (1992), distinguish between ‘emotional labour’ (Hochschild 1983) and ‘work feelings’ in theories of emotional management. They argue that emotional labour occurs in organisations structured according to rational principles (albeit in a bounded form of rationality). Emotionality in these organisations is therefore treated as a means to serve organisational ends such as efficiency, profit and productivity (1992: 471) where the emotions are co-opted and alienated.

In contrast, Mumby and Putnam’s notion of ‘work feelings’ provides an approach to thinking about emotional management and emotions as central to individual wellbeing, motivation and job satisfaction. Work feelings take place within a relational framework (which Mumby and Putnam call bounded emotionality), and given that much of the literature on passion is about creating stronger attachments to various aspects of an organisation, it could provide a more positive framework for conceptualising passion.

The literature on emotion management introduced the idea that there were not only ‘rules’ associated with the display and feeling of emotions, but that particular skills were required if emotions were to be used effectively. Goleman built on this idea to develop the concept of emotional intelligence, or the ‘capacity for recognising our own feelings and those of others, for motivating ourselves, and for managing emotions well in ourselves and our relationships’ (1998: 317). This involves five competencies: self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy and social skills.

While it is apparent that passion might be a form of emotional intelligence, emotional labour or work feelings, these do not – in themselves – explain whether or not passion could promise a more human way of being in an organisation. I argue that while they are useful for providing insights into the use of passion by organisations and individuals, it is
also necessary to take account of the ways in which passion is being framed as either intrinsic or extrinsic, the relationship between individual and organisational passion, the level of convergence in the object of passion and whether the performance of passion is simulated (from the head) or sincere (from the heart).

**The Framing of Passion**

This research involved conducting a discourse analysis of the popular management literature (PML) published between 1995 and 2004 (inclusive). The final data set incorporated 30 books and 39 articles in business journals drawn from an internet search of databases (Factiva and ABI/INFORM) and business book publishers (Abebooks and Wiley). In analysing the discourse of passion in the PML, a methodology called ‘frame analysis’ (Snow et al 1986; Creed et al 2002) was implemented. Frame analysis is used in social movement, marketing and media research to examine the discursive strategies used to persuade audiences toward a particular point of view. The initial research examined passion in relation to the three core framing activities: diagnosis of the problem, the prognosis and the motivation for taking action (Snow et al 1986).

The analysis found that passion was framed in two ways (for a more detailed discussion of this stage of analysis, see King 2005). On the one hand, it was discussed as being an extrinsic characteristic or a means to an end, with the end being increased success by being more competitive, creative and flexible. Passion enables these to occur through the construction of emotional attachments between members and the organisation for which they work. The goal here is for leaders to generate and advocate passion amongst their subordinates, although their own passion may be either simulated or sincere.

On the other hand, passion was also discussed as being an intrinsic characteristic, an end in itself. The issue that passion addresses within this frame is the perceived hollowness of hyper-materialism and the need for meaning in people’s lives. The answer is to find and be driven by passion, so that work becomes more intrinsically fulfilling and meaningful. Success, within this frame, is measured more in psychic, than material, terms. In both of these framings of passion, it was evident that passion was being constructed as a form of emotional intelligence.
In addition to the two macro frames used to discuss passion in the PML, there were two types of entities for which passion could make a difference: organisations and individuals.

**The Relationship between Individual and Organisational Frames**

Two questions arose from the initial frame analysis of the PML: what are the implications – for individuals and organisations – of subscribing to these framings of passion? And is being passionate necessarily ‘positive’ for people working within organisations? Saliency theory (Stryker 2000) suggests that passion is most likely to have positive results if there is a level of convergence between the frames of individuals and that of the organisation. Using the different framings of passion and the relationship to those framings by individuals and organisations (see Table 1) it is evident that such convergence does not always take place.

The framing of passion is not, however, the only factor in determining convergence. There also exists the possibility of individuals and organisations having different objects of passion. An environmentalist, with a passion for improving environmental objectives might, for example, work for a mining company in order to achieve change from the ‘inside’. Nevertheless, mining companies, despite rhetoric to the contrary, necessarily place environmental objectives below that of others for which they might express passion (safety, quality product, efficiency, profitability).

This analysis contradicts the literature where there is an implicit assumption that there will be convergence between individual and organisational passion in relation to the objects of passion, the expenditure of energy and the construction of attachments (see for example Bruch and Ghoshal 2003). Consequently, passion is inevitably constructed as a win-win situation and hence its construction as a positive emotion. It is in questioning this convergence that the issues relating to theorising passion as a positive emotion become more evident.

**Table 1: The relationship between the framing of individual and organisational passion**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Intrinsic (Organisation)</th>
<th>Extrinsic (Organisation)</th>
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<tr>
<td>Passion Driven</td>
<td>Passion Advocating</td>
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<tr>
<td>Intrinsic (Individuals) Meaningfulness</td>
<td>Passion as <em>creative</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>Extrinsic (Individuals) Competitive Advantage</td>
<td>Passion as a <em>conduit</em></td>
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Convergent frames - Passion as creative

Where both the organisation and individuals have an intrinsic framing of passion, they seek to construct identities that are meaningful. There is no simulated passion in this frame; passion is discovered or uncovered and intricately related to identity. As Chang argues, within this frame the concept of psychic income – or feeling good about what we do within an organisation – is the key (2000: xxv). Organisations put their members first, creating a culture and work environment that is driven by collective passion and, therefore, delivers this psychic income. It is within this organisational context that members can take risks, be creative and really engage in what Hamel (2000: 24) calls being an ‘activist in the workplace.’ This encouragement of emotional investment in and engagement with an organisation has the potential to be quite radical and at the very least be conducive to generating change.

Where the objects of passion also converge, it is possible to conceptualise this mode of being in an organisation within the framework of work feelings – spontaneous, emergent and meaning centred. In this sense the emotional competencies associated with passion can be supported by the organisation and encouraged to develop in the knowledge that they will be used to enhance the mutually desirable objects of meaning. In contrast, where the objects of meaning differ, there is a risk of chaos, or at least dissension, ensuing. Certainly this appeared to occur in the Body Shop when they employed managers who were more passionate about profit than they were about the political commitments or gender sensitivities that the organisation was renowned for (Martin et al 1998).
Passion is likely to be at its most creative when it occurs within a context of bounded emotionality – the provision of organisational support for mutually constructed objects of passion. Where the objects of passion differ, the meaningfulness of the work and extent of psychic income gained will decrease and it could create an environment that is more emotionally frustrating than emotionally expressive.

**Convergent frames - Passion as a skill**

Where both individuals and organisations adopt an extrinsic approach to passion, with a view to using passion to mutually improve their competitive advantage, passion becomes a skill that is used to generate and advocate a passionate commitment (from members) to the organisation. This may require leaders to be passionate but, more importantly, it requires them to be *seen* to be passionate. The skills associated with this emotional performance can be learned or developed (Hackett and Spurgeon 1998: 70) and involve both emotional competencies and high levels of energy focused on a shared goal or collective purpose related to corporate success. In this sense, passion is a form of emotional intelligence (Goleman 1998) that is encouraged and valued by the organisation.

In critically analysing this mode of convergence, it is evident that although the objects of passion are likely to be similar – given their overall objective of competitive advantage, leaders are likely to seek alternative organisations if the objects diverge to any great extent – the performance of passion as either simulated or sincere does make a difference. In particular, where passion is simulated it might be more appropriate to conceptualise it as a form of emotional labour with the potential for dissonance and emotional exhaustion. However, Hatcher argues that the instrumentalization of the emotional performance of passion (whether simulated or sincere) has itself created ‘a new technique for managing managers, by requiring them to manage themselves’ (2003: 407). This form of governance, under the guise of self-development and self expression, enables managers to ‘glamorize’ their routinized work and help them to ‘ease the burden of hard decisions.’ From this perspective, it is evident that passion as a form of emotional intelligence is not always positive, and that rather than being viewed as an asset, emotional intelligence can
also be conceptualised as a form of emotional labour with subsequent costs for individuals and organisations.

**Divergent frames - Passion as co-opted**

Conceptualising passion as a form of emotional labour is perhaps most evident where individuals with an intrinsic framing of passion belong to organisations which have an extrinsic, instrumental approach. In this case, individual passion is co-opted for organisational purposes. Where the objects of passion are similar, the level and consequences of emotional labour may not be detrimental to individuals and, in some cases, the capacity to work at something meaningful within a context that values the added commitment this may bring, can result in levels of psychic income similar to that where passion is conceptualised as being ‘creative’. Difficulties are likely to arise, however, if the co-opted passion is used by organisations but not regenerated. That is, the instrumental organisation framing of passion perceives it as a characteristic of individuals (and therefore their responsibility to develop and reproduce) rather than that of the organisation. Where this happens, individual passion can be exploited and members could find themselves rapidly ‘burning out’. Burn out is also likely to occur where the objects of passion differ, as the lack of a shared vision combined with strong commitment to their own object of passion would lead to situations in which individuals feel high levels of emotional dissonance.

**Divergent frames - Passion as a conduit**

In some instances, however, it is the individuals who can be instrumental in using organisational passion to meet their own goals for success and competitive advantage. In this sense, passion becomes the conduit through which personal (and organisational) goals are achieved. Where the organisation is committed to an intrinsic framing of passion, individuals who might otherwise simulate passion will be required to learn particular emotional competencies around uncovering or discovering their own passion as well as that of the organisation.

In developing these emotional competencies, individuals could ‘discover’ sincere passion which may or may not converge with that of the organisation; alternatively, they might find it too difficult to maintain a simulated level of passion and begin to undermine the
organisational passion (e.g., Body Shop). Where passion is a conduit it might be conceptualised as either a form of bounded emotionality – in cases where there is an alignment of objects and a sincere expression of passion by individuals; or a form of emotional labour, where individuals are willing to perform passion in order to meet their own goals for success within an organisational context that prescribes it as a modus operandi; or as a form of emotional intelligence in which the skills required to achieve and manage the required goals are developed.

Conclusion

The preceding frame analysis of the popular management literature reveals that whether passion is likely to be ‘positive’ depends upon several factors. Firstly, there is the way that passion is framed as either intrinsic, in which there is a strong relationship between passion and identity through the construction of meaning; or extrinsic, in which passion is used instrumentally to achieve external goals such as success. Secondly, there is the way in which the framing of passion for individuals relates to the framing of passion by organisations. This relationship between the framing of individual and organisational passion needs to take into account the level of convergence regarding the objects of passion, and whether the approach to passion is simulated or sincere. Each of these factors affects the experience and consequences of being passionate in an organisation.

In exploring the relationship between organisational and individual passion, this research sought to use current theories about emotions in organisations to try to find a means of conceptualising passion as a way of being in an organisation. While none of the theories could, in themselves, provide an adequate framework for conceptualising passion, together it was possible to build a picture of the emotional dimensions of passion in work. To conceptualise this, however, we may need to look beyond our current toolkit and consider developing new concepts (perhaps the emergent idea of emotional capital might be relevant) to fully appreciate the promise and the pain of being a passionate member of an enterprise.
References


