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Organizing for the ‘good atmosphere’: Collegial emotional work for collective coping in high-performance environments

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Abstract

Coping is often considered an individual, cognitive phenomenon, leaving the individual employee responsible, often ignoring organizational structures and -processes that are beyond the individual employee’s influence sphere. Drawing on an ethnographic study of a high-performance engineering organization, we present a collective emotional perspective on coping. Our analysis reveals how a group of employees, we call them the Tuning Forks, creates, and maintains the ‘good atmosphere’ by imposing certain feelings on their colleagues and adjusting their behaviour. Interestingly, Tuning Forks consider this engagement to be a core part of their job and identity, but it comes at a cost for both Tuning Forks and colleagues who are being ‘tuned’.

Introduction

Coping has traditionally been approached as an individual phenomenon (Muhonen & Torkelson, 2008), defined as the individual efforts to prevent or diminish threat, harm, and loss, or to reduce associated distress” (Carver & Connor-smith, 2009, p. 685). However, in recent years, scholars have begun examining collective dimensions of coping. Collective coping is defined as referring to “actions carried out by the whole organization, or by some of its members on behalf of it, aimed at preventing, eliminating, or reducing the stressor, re-interpreting it, or relieving its harmful effects” (Rodríguez et al., 2019: 88). The distinction between problem-focused and emotion-focused coping, which launched modern examination of coping (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984) and is widely used in the coping literature (Baker & Berenbaum, 2007), has also been picked up in the literature on collective coping.

Collective problem-focused coping is when colleagues help each other reduce distress through planning and joint problem solving to eliminate and handle stressors (Rodríguez et al., 2019). In general, problem-focused coping is considered the most effective because it is directed at the stressor itself, trying to remove it or diminishing its impact if it cannot be removed (Xie & Zheng, 2022). However, employees can find themselves in situations where organizational structures and -processes producing the stressor are given or at best difficult to change. In these situations, employees may resort to emotion-focused coping, which is aimed at minimizing the distress that is triggered by stressors and includes a wide range of responses, ranging from avoidance and denial to expressing negative emotion, and/or seeking emotional support (Carver et al., 1989).

Collective emotion-focused coping is typically described as the result of certain organisational culture characteristics (Xie & Zheng, 2022), socially constructed group processes (Torkelson et al., 2007), or communities of coping (Korczynski, 2003b). Common for these descriptions is that they describe emotion-focused coping as something that spontaneously appear in a group of employees. However, emotion-focused coping can also emerge through deliberate acts of emotion work between colleagues. Traditionally, the emotion work perspective has been used to describe the work of frontline service workers engaging with customers and clients that require them to perform feelings and create emotion in others while managing their own emotions (Hochschild, 2012). The perspective has recently broadened to also include collegial emotion work (Monrad, 2016) where colleagues manage each other's potentially negative behaviour and promote positive interpersonal interactions to maintain a convivial work environment and effective work performance (Delgado et al., 2017). Given that emotion-focused coping is often deemed less effective than problem-focused coping, dynamics of collegial emotion work in organizations are often overlooked, making this sort of work virtually invisible. To render visible the less visible

dimension of emotion-focused coping, we address the following research questions: How does collegial emotional work shape collective coping in a high-performance environment, and when is this helpful or harmful to employee well-being?

To address these questions, we conducted an ethnographic study comprising fieldwork and interviews with employees and managers in Front-Edge (pseudonym), a high-performance engineering company. While Front-Edge is characterized by a masculine organizational culture and an aggressive leadership style with a clear preference for rationality and emotion suppression, it is praised by employees for possessing a very good atmosphere with attendant low absenteeism. Through the case study of Front-Edge, we will show how a good atmosphere is achieved by employees through their deliberate collegial emotion work and how these efforts constitute collective emotion-focused coping with stressful environments. The paper is submitted to EGOS sub-theme 22: Bridging the Space between Us: Exploring Connection and Disconnection in Workplace Relationships, because it explores the notion of collegial emotional work as a critical means of collective coping in a high-performance organisation.

Theory

Collective coping

The meaning of collective coping is contested, and several definitions have developed over the years. Three overall understandings of collective coping have been found (Kirkegaard & Brinkmann, 2022): it can refer to 1) how cultural practices forms specific coping practices (Lansialmi et al., 2000), 2) a specific way of coping such as the degree to which one includes others in the choice of coping (Kuo, 2013), the degree to which one seeks social support, an empathetic consideration of others in the coping efforts, or seeking to enhance the well-being of others (Monnier et al., 1998), and 3) a group of people collaborating in the coping effort by collectively initiating actions that prevent, eliminate, or reduce stressful situations or interpreting

them in a more positive way, or alleviating their negative effects (Peiro, 2008). Even when individual costs of such collective coping activities exist, group members are still directed at achieving them. What unites these research approaches, however, is that they focus primarily on the cognitive aspects of collective coping. Despite the different focus of these collective coping understandings, they all share the onset in Lazarus (1984) cognitive approach to coping. Likewise, most emotion-oriented research on collective coping stems from Lazarus distinction between problem-focus coping and emotion-focused coping (Baker & Berenbaum, 2007; Liang et al., 2019; Wlodarczyk et al., 2016; Xie & Zheng, 2022; Zhang et al., 2023) or a combination of his appraisal/coping framework with e.g., emotional contagion (Rodríguez et al., 2019), symbolic interaction (Lansisalmi et al., 2000), or emotional labour (Mann, 2004; Shankar & Kumar, 2014). What is interesting about the above-mentioned research on collective coping from an emotional perspective is that none of it incorporate the emotional culture of the organisation, even though literature on resilience point to a connection between e.g. an positive emotional culture and team resilience capacity (Hartmann et al., 2021) or an emotional culture and an resilient organisation (Chen et al., 2015). An emotional culture is “the shared affective values, norms, artifacts, and assumptions that govern which emotions people have and express at work, and which ones they are better off suppressing” (Barsade & O’Neill, 2016: 60). The emotional culture is typically maintained through emotional conventions, i.e., shared emotional norms and feeling rules (Fineman, 2003), which dictate how employees can feel about work-related issues and how they cope with them at both individual and collective level. Research on collective emotion-focused coping shows that colleagues may help regulate each other’s feelings by employing positive reinterpretations, acceptance, or denial of organizational stressors, but the result of this coping effort differs. For example, a study of firefighters showed that joviality (humor) and companionate love (care) acted as collective emotion-focused coping (O’Neill and Rothbard, 2017) in an environment

where stressors were a core part of the job. In another study of working men and women, Xie & Zheng (2022) showed that emotion-focused positively predicted turnover intentions. What is common in the research on collective emotion-focused coping, we have reviewed is that it is described as something that occurs in groups spontaneously. However, we argue that it can also emerge through deliberate acts of emotion work between colleagues. To understand this emotional side of collective coping more in depth, we turn to the literature on emotion work.

Collegial emotion work

Emotion work is the work that employees do when they produce certain emotional states in others by actively inducing or suppressing their own feelings so that they feel appropriately for the given situation and live up to formal job requirement (Hochschild, 2012). Emotion work often takes place at a pre-conscious level, but can also involve a more conscious efforts (Bloch, 2007). Emotion work becomes emotional labour when “the management of feeling to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display [...] is sold for a wage and therefore has exchange value” (Grandey & Gabriel, 2015, p. 324) and when formal job requirements entail specific and narrow display rules for emotion regulation (Lopez, 2006). Hochschild (1979, 2012) distinguishes between ‘surface acting’, in which one is just putting on the emotional mask that is expected, and ‘deep acting’, in which one tries to create the feelings that be outwardly expressed, arguing that especially surface acting can lead to alienation, unauthenticity, and burnout.

Most research on emotion work has focused on individual frontline service employees and how they manage emotions when interacting with customers and clients. The emotion work perspective has, however, recently been broadened to also include collegial emotion work, which is the work that is performed between colleagues to regulate each other’s emotions through demands and sanctions to obtain the goal of providing the best care possible (Monrad, (2016). Theodosius et

al. (2008; 2021), Haycock-Stuart et al. (2010), and Delgado et al. (2017) have examined what they call collegial emotional labour among nurses defined as “...the management of emotions to produce effective communication and team collaboration” (Theodosius et al., 2021). Nurses engage in collegial emotional labour to navigate expectations (internal and external in relation to nursing standards) and maintain order (avoid conflict and maintain positive cooperation) (Delgado et al., 2017). Furthermore, the studies show that collegial emotional labour can have negative outcomes such as stress, burn-out, and intention to leave current job due to emotional dissonance (Delgado et al., 2017) and surface acting (Haycock-Stuart et al., 2010; Theodosius et al., 2021).

What is interesting about the above research is that it clearly states how collegial emotion work can both benefit the work collective (level expectations, improve collaboration, reduce conflict etc.) and how it can harm individuals performing collegial emotion work. However, analyses of how collegial emotion work may constitute collective coping and when it is helpful or harmful to employee well-being and diminish work-related stress, and at what cost, are relatively absent in the literature. To add a richer understanding of this, we present an ethnographic study of how collegial emotion work shape collective coping.

Method

We conducted fieldwork in a private, international engineering company specialized in building production facilities. The company counts 500+ employees worldwide, and their gender distribution is 70% men and 30% women, which is very typical for the business.

Sources of data

The ethnographic data was collected between August 2021 and December 2022 by the first author.

We began our study by collecting and reviewing relevant documentation to get a feeling for the

corporate narratives that were promoted at Front-Edge. These data consisted of texts from the company webpages, org. charts, work environment policies, e-mails circulated in the departments and project teams, intranet articles and postings, project descriptions, and company value propositions. The data collection was continued by the first author's engagement in ethnographic fieldwork in the autumn of 2021, where she conducted observations of everyday work and life at four different units at Front-Edge: Department A (HR unit), Department B (project managers responsible for early-stage projects), Project team C (early-stage project), and Project team D (late-stage project). Observations were conducted simultaneously in Department B and the two project based units to compare how emotional cultures at Front-Edge translated into different forms of collegial emotion work (Barsade & O'Neill, 2016) in relation to coping. Observation conducted at Department A served mainly as background information. Observations were augmented by 30 individual interviews and 2 focus group interviews with staff and managers from the four organisational units. We interviewed team leaders, project managers, specialists, and HR representatives. The main themes of the interviews were about coping, stress and emotions at work.

Data analysis

Analysing the data, we have pursued an interpretive research process, where we moved between our emerging understandings of the data and theoretical ideas from the literature about coping, stress and emotion work. We also shared our analyses with our research participants at Front-Edge and included their assessments of preliminary findings in the data analysis. We began by conducting a thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006) of field note data and interview transcripts to search for patterns and identify themes regarding how staff and managers at Front-Edge used their emotions to cope. Themes that emerged were about the emotional culture, feelings that were either legitimate or illegitimate, appropriate behaviour, identity, and stress. These themes coalesced as features of the

broader second-order categories collegial emotion work, the good atmosphere, Tuning Forks, and consequences of “tuning”. As co-authors we tried to maintain a reflexive distance by continuously interrogating the translation of data into theoretical explanations.

Findings: Organizing for the ‘good atmosphere’ as collective coping

In the following, we will present how collegial emotion work shapes collective coping in a high-performance organizational environment, and when it is helpful or harmful to employee well-being. We begin describing the emotional culture that fosters the collegial emotion work characteristic for Front-Edge.

The emotional culture of Front-Edge

Feelings that were expressed openly in the Great Hall were happiness, companionate love, respect, and professional irritation, whereas anger, sadness, and anxiety were not tolerated. Although many of the research participants mentioned the fear of losing their jobs after the last two rounds of layoffs, fear and frustration were not particularly visible. Fear, however, appeared to be central in relation to coping because it seemed to trigger both an extreme focus on customer satisfaction, forthcomingness and performance in relation to work, and risk aversion, conflict shyness, and loyalty towards your colleagues. At Front-Edge, it was essential that colleagues had each other’s backs because of the ever-looming fear of customer complaints and wrath of management, which both would lead to termination; the ultimate threat for professionals who place a lot of their identity in their work. Lilly from Department B said:

There’s a lot of anger going around, but I don’t think we experience it, and I don’t think that those from HR, who come around, experience it particularly often, because I think it

gets packed away when others drop by. But there is plenty of anxiety all around. I really think its present in the projects. There are stories that if you perform poorly, you are sacked.

The emotional culture at Front-Edge impacts how employees talk about and cope with the pressure. Stress is perceived as a personal thing and being stressed is as a weakness and as the employee's own problem. Liselotte from Project team D said:

Stress at Front-Edge has kind of been swept under the carpet, if I may say so, in that way it is very invisible. It is such a slightly dangerous area. We either have too few hands, or there is something wrong and the person feels so pressured in the situation, cannot speak up themselves.

Employees under pressure primarily make use of individual coping strategies such as restitution at home, micromanagement of assignments, performing sports, denial/repression, put in more hours at work, or they feel cynicism or disengaged which they only show to their closest colleagues.

Breaking down from the pressure is to be shameful. As Maja from Project team D explained:

During the Covid-19 lockdown, we had to home school the kids and work from home and I was just about to die from the pressure. I went to my boss, Kenneth, and he wanted put me on sick leave. But I didn't want that, - I didn't want to come back afterwards and be the one who had been sick because then you are weak. I was concerned whether people would

communicate with me honestly, and whether I would get the same assignments. I also worried that I would fail the projects I worked on because there wasn't anyone to take over.

Additionally, employees emphasised the 'good atmosphere' as the greatest contributor to their well-tired, muted frustrations during conflict-ridden collaborations, and gave them a feeling of care and closeness like a family. It was described as consisting of joviality (humour), both in daily talk and artefacts, but also companionate love in the sense that colleagues talked problems through (in private) and helped each other. However, certain individuals, we call them the Tuning Forks, stood out because they played a very active role in creating the good atmosphere by boosting humour and energy, removing or absorbing conflict, and ensuring constructive communication. We identified sixteen Tuning Forks in the data, ten women and six men.

Tuning Forks

The Tuning Forks' behaviour resembles what Fortuin et al (2021) has called 'team-boosting behaviour'. They created the good atmosphere by using humour, but also by containing their colleagues, absorbing their sadness, frustration, or anger, and giving them room to balance their nervous system. What was particularly surprising, was the intentionality behind the effort to maintain the good atmosphere and how it played a crucial role in the collective coping. Tuning Forks saw it as their job to help their colleagues feeling positive emotions at work and they did this by utilizing three strategies: 1) Reading their colleagues feelings, 2) imposing appropriate feelings on their colleagues and 3) adjusting their behaviour if it violated the emotional conventions of the emotional culture.

Read colleagues and imposing feelings on them: Tuning Forks often explained that they spent a lot of time sensing their surroundings by listening and showing calmness and control, which in turn often resulted in a feeling of calmness and security in their surrounding colleagues. Likewise, by engaging in up-beat, energetic behaviour, joking, and telling funny stories and commenting on activity in the surroundings, they hoped to induce happiness and engagement. Tuning Fork Jasper said: “I try to read people the best I can. And then I shout a lot, and right now I've decided that I am going to be the one who shouts the loudest so that the others don't feel stupid for sitting and feeling like hell”. In this way, Jasper tried to be the voice of his colleagues that he sensed could not how pressured they felt. At the same time, he did it in a humoristic/sarcastic way in order not to violate the good atmosphere. Tuning Forks read their colleagues' physical appearances, tone of voice and behavioural patterns to understand them and impose feelings appropriate for maintaining the good atmosphere.

Adjust colleagues' behaviour: The Tuning Forks did not only impose specific feelings on colleagues, they also actively adjusted their colleagues' behaviour so that it aligned with the conventions of Front-Edge's emotional culture. There are numerous examples in the data that show how Tuning Forks adjusted their colleagues' behaviour, so they appeared more exuberant, less loud, and happier. Tuning Fork Maja explains:

There are some colleagues who get a little angry. They might use abusive language to say things, but I'm sure they do not mean it like that. So I try to say, ‘Well, we have to remember that such and such. But if someone says, ‘no I really think that he's a huge idiot’, then I leave it. But I find that people often agree with me.

Maja adjust her colleagues' behaviour in order to maintain order and this seemed to be the primary reason to engage in collegial emotion work together with the development narrative about helping colleagues to become better versions of themselves. As Tuning Fork Liselotte said: "That's why I get up in the morning".

Organizational demand for collegial emotion work

On the one hand, creating a good atmosphere was an extra-role behavior of the Tuning Forks, who considered it a core element of the job. On the other, Tuning Forks were not the only ones working to maintain the good atmosphere at Front-Edge. The emotional culture was embedded in a specific employee ideal that was upheld by management and by colleague-preferences. Tuning Fork Carsten explained how during the last two mass layoffs, it was those who were "not positive" who got fired, because a job in Front-Edge was about handling people. Tuning Fork Liselotte described how her friend was recruited back to Front-Edge, because she created a lot of good energy. Several of the research participants additionally described how they were attracted to places in the Great Hall, where there is a good atmosphere. They would place themselves in proximity to other people who are laughing and described how they seek colleagues who are in a good mood and leave the mellow ones alone, because the good atmosphere cancels out the pressure.

The preference for maintaining a good atmosphere, thus, appeared to be a collective priority, which the following observation of a team meeting in Project team C shows:

Pernille starts the meeting. She goes through the agenda and says, 'We have only been allowed to do this project if we can take some learning back to Front-Egde'. The purpose of the Profession Groups is to get input from the project and therefore there are now three participants in the room representing these Profession Groups. Pernille speaks very fast and

seems frantic as she asks everyone to go to Menti and answer the following question ‘how is your mood today?’ You can choose between ‘Energized and Happy’, ‘Low on energy’ or ‘Too busy to be here’. People start voting. When they see that there is someone who has marked themselves as ‘Too busy to be here’, one from the groups says ‘well, let’s not try to spread the good vibes here’ [*the comment is ironic*]. No one says anything afterwards and no one takes responsibility for the ‘Too busy to be here’. Pernille asks if everyone has voted, and no one says anything. Pernille says that the time has passed and gives the floor to Mads.

The observation demonstrates how the pressure to conform to the emotional conventions is a collective priority. The preference for the ‘Energized and Happy’ option in the test supports the efforts of the Tuning Forks to maintain the good atmosphere.

During fieldwork, we observed that when employees tried to voice their concerns about the work pressure at Front-Edge, they often experienced being sanctioned by colleagues and Tuning Forks for threatening the good atmosphere. This is showed in the first author’s following observation of a team working close to a project deadline:

At 12:26 pm: Coming back from lunch, we suddenly hear sounds of paper being torn on the other side of the computer screens. Camilla is jumping on some papers. Liselotte looks upset but sends a worried smile. Camilla says it is her boxing ball. Camilla collects her papers and moves on and the group dissolves. At 3:30 pm: ‘That can’t be right’, says Jokum. Camilla says, ‘I’m the one who’s been mad all day’. Liselotte says, ‘yes, you’ve had such an off day’. Camilla says ‘I’m not here today’, Liselotte: ‘no, actually you’re not’, she

laughs. *I sense that Camilla is being sanctioned because she has spread a bad atmosphere.*

Camilla packs up and says goodbye to the others.

The reason why threats against the good atmosphere are not tolerated is because a job at Front-Edge is hard for everyone. Vibeke explained:

Everyone here is fighting the same battle and I can't even imagine how you would work in the projects if we didn't have a little fun with each other. It makes a hell of a difference.

Sometimes I feel like 'Oh, I simply can't go back to work', but then the atmosphere, it help you get through a lot. And good moods, it helps me that I can sit and laugh a little.

It seems the only collectively acceptable coping strategy and collective solution to the pressure is joviality (humour). That means that even though the Tuning Forks sets the emotional tone, their colleagues maintain the emphasis on the good atmosphere by actively reinforcing its significance. According to some of the research participants, this is also necessary, because several things including lack of emotional intelligence in the majority of Front-Edge employees, extreme work pressure and online communication threatens the good atmosphere.

The cost of organizing the good atmosphere

It is evident that the good atmosphere is an imperative that help employees to cope with the pressure at Front-Edge. However, it is also evident that the collegial emotion work of the Tuning Forks comes with different costs such as distraction, fear of stigmatization, and emotional drainage.

Distraction: In line with Hochschild's (1983) thoughts on deep acting, many Tuning Forks described how their responsibilities are as much a part of their work role as of their identity. Tuning Fork Hans says: "I see my role as, well 'try to relax a bit', right, and 'please calm down'. People do the best they can. So, I try to be the buffer or the translator. I get energized when people see me and get happy. It fills me up, because then I make sense." Hans describes that his job is to uphold the good atmosphere in his group. During times of pressure and complications, he feels spread thin and unable to coordinate with colleagues in other parts of the project because "when I put on my superman costume and then jump around the project and try to fix everything [conflicts among colleagues, frustrations with clients and management], it means that I don't concentrate on what I actually have to do." (Hans)

Fear of stigmatization: Other Tuning Forks describe how they feel side-tracked by their engagement in collegial emotion work, which they must hide because is it not career promoting to be "a nice auntie", as Maja said. Maj continued: "I would also like to be recognized for my professionalism. I don't want to be known as the woman who brings cake to all the meetings". Even though collegial emotion work is essential to maintain the good atmosphere and through this cope with the pressure, collegial emotion work is not a recognized part of the Tuning Forks' work. This is interesting because management at the same time seem to hire and fire based on abilities to perform collegial emotion work.

Emotional drainage: Lastly, many of the Tuning Forks described how conducting collegial emotion work and securing the good atmosphere drained them emotionally which is in line with previous research on collegial emotional labour (Delgado et al., 2017; Haycock-Stuart et al., 2010; Theodosius et al., 2021). The Tuning Forks own explanation for this is that they take over their

colleagues' emotions, which first author experienced herself one day close to Project team D's deadline:

At 11:12 am: I ask if the others are coming to lunch. Jakob says it won't open until 3 minutes and I say I just wanted to know if they would skip lunch. Jasper says, 'Do I look like someone who skips lunch'. We laugh a little and I say that I am hungry and that there is cake in the canteen. Anders turns around and says, 'oh no, it's fish day'. Vibeke says 'it's cod' and Anders says 'it's ok'. Jasper says, 'yes, if it is made correctly. But it's usually not in a canteen'. I say that I am most concerned with the cake and Jokum says that 'you can also be badly disappointed there'. *The mood is heavy, and I can feel that I myself am really working to lift it. Apparently, I am now also in the process of doing collegial emotional work to make the others feel good and stay in a good mood. We go back to our PCs and I'm flat inside. I actually don't want to go to lunch with them and am considering finding some from Department B that I can hook up with.*

Apart from getting emotionally drained, many Tuning Forks are also aware that they set the tone of the good atmosphere and that their colleagues expect this of them. To several of the Tuning Forks, this feels like a great responsibility - especially in periods where they themselves are under a lot of work pressure. Tuning Fork Maja explains:

There are also days when, you know, I'm tired myself and I'm too busy. But I still have the antennae out and I still think if there is someone snarling, then I still prioritize to go over there and say, 'are you okay?', 'so what, how should we?' And it's draining. On the good

days, I think, 'Hey I made a difference for X' and on the bad days, I think, 'Phuu, I have to take care of X on top of my work.

In this way, Maja's behaviour echoes Theodosius et al.'s description of collegial emotional labour where employees "modified their practices to suit colleagues' preferences and ways of working, accommodate their demands, and/or not openly challenge unprofessional behaviour. In this way, [employees] maintained collaborative and comfortable relationships" (Theodosius et al., 2021, p. 84). Some of the Tuning Forks cope with this pressure by taking grief and frustration out on the family at home or they have no energy left to deal with family and friends outside work. Others suppress their own emotions by parking them. One Tuning Fork describes that if he cannot park the bad emotions, he stays home and four of the Tuning Forks starts to cry asked how they are feeling during interviews.

It is however not only the Tuning Forks who paid a price for the collegial emotion work. The remaining employees who were being 'tuned' also experienced different downsides to collegial emotion work, for example hyper-forthcomingness, lack of voice, and emotional alienation.

Hyper-forthcomingness: Generally, the emotional conventions prohibit employees from saying no to anything – especially related to customers – because it, according to a Tuning Fork, will create a 'bad atmosphere'. For example, during a workshop an introduction game was played called Superhero. In this game, the participants had to present themselves as super heroes and explain their strengths and kryptonite (what they hate) in a project:

The workshop starts by Mads ignoring the agenda and Pernille presenting her own superhero sign, where her kryptonite is when people say no in one of her workshops. She just can't have that.

Not saying no was an intense emotional convention.

Lack of voice: This kind of hyper-forthcomingness resulted in a near prohibition of the word 'no'. One research participant explained that she was ignored, when she tried to say no and another explained that when she finally worked up the courage to say no, because she was overloaded, she was scolded very abusively by a superior and began crying. After this incident, the research participant collapses with stress and was put on sick leave. Finally, several of the research participants described that employees who complain are sanctioned negatively by colleagues, which makes it hard to voice concerns if something goes wrong.

Emotional alienation: Some research participants experienced that being 'tuned' by a Tuning Fork resembled "surface acting" (Hochschild, 2012). They felt that the emotional demand to comply with the emotional conventions were taxing and led to emotional exhaustion or to a feeling of unauthenticity. One research participant said that she felt forced not to show her emotions but had to and wear a "yes-hat", but she secretly complained in the corners or to friends and family. Likewise, another research participant described how being 'tuned' led her to what felt like inauthentic behaviour, for instance extreme service mindedness, that made her feel she was overstepping her own boundaries to comply with the emotional conventions.

Discussion

This study focused on how collegial emotional work shape collective coping in a high-performance environment, and when it is helpful or harmful to employee well-being. The findings reveal that working towards creating and maintaining the good atmosphere was the primarily legitimate collective coping strategy available to the employees at Front-Edge. Collegial emotion work is the tool through which the good atmosphere was created, amplified, and maintained by the Tuning Forks and took the form of sensing colleagues' emotions and adjusting emotions and behaviour if they threatened the good atmosphere. The good atmosphere was helpful to employees' well-being in the sense that it functioned as a distraction from the stressful environment through humour and gave them emotional release through companionate love. In addition, our findings revealed that collegial emotion work was part of the Tuning Forks' job, and often served as the basis of their identity. However, it came at a cost in the form of distraction from official role tasks, fear of stigmatization, and emotional drainage. In this way it was harmful to the Tuning Forks' wellbeing. The data suggest that the cost of being 'tuned' for the work collective is the development of a form of 'hyper-forthcomingness', emotional alienation, and lack of voice that also took a toll on employee wellbeing.

The invisibility of collegial emotion work

Throughout this paper, we have shown that the Tuning Forks' collegial emotion work effort is a form of invisible work (Daniels, 1987; Devault, 2014; Star, 1990), because work-related stress is considered a personal problem and, in this way, is out of sight as an organisational phenomenon worthy of attention and effort to dismantle. Invisible work is here understood as "...practices outside the formal job definition performed in the workplace without pay" (kaplan, 2022, p. 852). Most studies of invisible work have a gender angle and focus on work within the private sphere or volunteer work. Emotional labour among colleagues or "office housework" (kaplan, 2022) is often

not perceived of as work, because to be recognized and socially validated as work, it need to be financially compensated (Daniels, 1987, p. 404). This would explain why Tuning Forks consider collegial emotion work as distracting and fear being stigmatized because of it. Unfortunately, they also experience being emotionally drained by it. However, the fact that these Tuning Forks appear to doubt their own legitimacy, should not prohibit us from seeing their effort as skilled and something that in many instances makes a difference.

In our case the work of the Tuning Forks is invisible through the cultural ideology of gender, meaning that collegial emotion work is considered a “natural skill” of women and thus economically devaluated when such skills and abilities are constructed as their natural way of being and not as a product of their hard work and expertise (Hatton, 2017). Thus, because it is perceived as a natural part of women’s’ nurture instinct, it becomes excluded from legal definitions of ‘work’. Furthermore, because collegial emotion work is often performed at the Great Hall’s kitchenette, in the canteen during lunch, or in the improvised use of meeting rooms as ”crying” space, the off-site characteristics devaluates it further.

So why does it matter?

Our findings point to two theoretical contributions. First, we wish to extend the knowledge about collective coping by combing it with theory on emotion work to explain how deliberate emotional processes of collegial emotion work go beyond simple emotional contagion. For example, our findings suggests that collective coping in communities do not emerge spontaneously as previous studies would suggest (Korczynski, 2003b; Raz, 2007), but can be a result of carefully crafted collegial emotion work.

Secondly, through the above analysis, we show the cost of collective coping on employees’ well-being – both for the Tuning Forks, and the colleagues being “tuned”. Previous research on

emotion work have identified potential costs of emotion work performers as emotional dissonance and burnout (Zapf, 2002), negative emotional contagion and self-regulatory depletion (Grandey & Gabriel, 2015). Our research nuances these findings by both pointing to the emotional drainage (on par with emotional dissonance), but also the elements of distraction and fear of stigmatization that has previously mostly been illuminated in research on invisible work and gender research. We contribute to the research on emotional culture by highlighting the cost of being “tuned”. So far the majority of research on the cost of engaging in an emotional culture has focused on e.g. lack of commitment, -creativity, and bad retention rates (Barsade & O’Neill, 2016), groupthink, fear and stress (Marquet, 2015), emotional alienation cf. surface acting (Hochschild, 2012), and exclusion cf. the “killjoys” (Guschke et al., 2022). By emphasising the idea of “hyper-forthcomingness” as an effect of collegial emotion work, we show how personal boundaries and resource conservation are triumphed by emotional conventions leading to resource drainage that potentially can result in employee burnout.

Pathways for future research

We acknowledge that we identified both female and male Tuning Forks and in light of this, new questions could be asked such as: is it gender or characteristics of collegial emotion work that renders it invisible? How is the performing of collegial emotion work for the “good atmosphere” perceived differently by women and men? And, when and how can the individual efforts of the Tuning Forks become visible or invisible, since it is interesting how the ‘good atmosphere’ is collectively maintained, but individually initiated through the Tuning Forks.

References