

# 'Let it go,' but not in the boardroom: How facial expressions affect cooperation

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While Disney's Frozen Academy Award-winning diva anthem "Let It Go" has dominated the Billboard 200, sales records and parents' eardrums with its message of all-out emotional display, that approach probably won't always resonate in the boardroom, according to a recent study from Marshall and USC faculty.

"A business person in a [negotiation](#)," said Peter Carnevale, professor of management and organization at USC's Marshall School of Business, "should be careful about managing his or her emotions because the person across the table is making inferences based on facial expressions. For example, a smile at the wrong time can discourage cooperation."

"Reading People's Minds from Emotion Expressions in Interdependent Decision Making," published in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, examines how the interpretation of facial expressions can impact economic decision making such as negotiation. The study—a joint project between Carnevale and Celso M. de Melo, a postdoctoral research associate at Marshall, as well as colleagues at the USC Institute for Creative Technologies (ICT) and the Dornsife College of Letters, Arts and Sciences—illustrates the intricate role emotion plays in business interactions. The study indicates that what you show on your face is as important as what you say in negotiation and what you do with your negotiation offers.

"We all know that negotiation is a core competency of leadership and management," said Carnevale, "and the ability to achieve cooperation is

especially challenging in today's multifaceted workplace. Facial expressions that emphasize different kinds of emotions give meaning to normal conversation. Good negotiators are adept at making offers and talking in negotiation, but also at managing their [facial expressions](#)."

To test the impact that emotional expression can have on negotiations, researchers paired individuals with computer-generated images of an opposing negotiator in five related experiments. Each featured a two-person task in which the payoffs for each player depended on the simultaneous choice of both players. If both players invested—cooperated—both earned money. If neither player invested, neither earned money. And, if one player invested and the other player did not, the non-investor outperformed the investor by taking advantage of the investment without putting in any effort or money. This task represents a classic problem in interdependence and economic decision-making.

In one experiment, the image of the other player either smiled, expressing pleasure after cooperation, or frowned, signaling regret after exploitation. In other cases, it expressed pleasure after exploitation and regret after cooperation. Carnevale and colleagues found that people cooperated significantly more with a computer counterpart that smiled when cooperating and expressing sorrow after exploiting the participant. In other words, the study results indicate that context can determine the meaning ascribed to a counterpart's emotional expression and subsequent reactions.

"If you come to an agreement in a negotiation and you are really happy, it may not be a good idea to show how happy you are because it might lead the other person to think that you did better than they did," said Carnevale. "But in other circumstances, showing strong emotion may be the ticket to success."

Carnevale observed, also, that Disney animators know the importance of what a person shows on their face: "One of the remarkable features of Queen Elsa," he said, "is the emotion displayed in her face; compare it to Snow White, in 1937. Advances in graphics technology, including those developed by my colleagues at the ICT Virtual Humans Group, have tremendous implications not only for entertainment but also for education and training systems, and for remote business via animated images."

**More information:** [psycnet.apa.org/journals/psp/106/1/73](https://psycnet.apa.org/journals/psp/106/1/73)

Provided by USC Marshall School of Business

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