

**🕒 10 MIN READ****Emotional Labor****Helping Workers Present a Positive Face**

"Miss, can you bring me a glass of water?"...

"Oh miss, I need some ketchup for my eggs."...

"Oh dear... Miss, my eggs are too runny. I can't possibly eat these. You'll need to send them back, and make sure my order is right this time."...

"Well, now there's a mark on my water glass. Get me a new one!"...

"You expect me to pay full price for this meal? I was served runny eggs and had to go out of my way to ask for water, which was then brought in a dirty glass. I can't believe it. There will certainly be no tip for you, young lady!"

How would you feel if you were the waitress (or waiter) dealing with this customer? Frustrated? Angry? Humiliated? Comments like this from a customer are likely to provoke a negative emotional reaction. However, as a hardworking professional, you would have to hide your personal feelings, and remain calm and positive throughout the exchange.

Does your job require you to manage your emotions, or the way you express those emotions, to meet organizational expectations? This is called 'emotional labor.' People in a service-oriented role – hotel workers, airline flight attendants, tour operators, coaches, counselors – often face the demands of emotional labor.

**What Is Emotional Labor?**

Arlie Hochschild created the term 'emotional labor' in 1983 to describe the things that service workers do that goes beyond physical or mental duties. Showing a genuine concern for customers' needs, smiling, and making positive eye contact are all critical to a customer's perception of service quality. These types of activities, when they're essential to worker performance, are emotional labor.

When you face angry clients, or people who are generally unpleasant, emotional labor can be particularly challenging. A large part of that challenge comes from the need to hide your real emotions, and continue to 'smile and nod your head,' even when receiving negative or critical feedback.

Companies often place a great deal of strategic importance on service orientation, not only to external customers but to colleagues and internal clients as well. While emotional labor is applicable to many areas of business, the consequences are probably greatest in

traditional service roles. However, in an increasingly service-oriented marketplace, it's important to understand how emotional labor affects workers, and what organizations can do to support and manage any issues.

### Implications for Workers

When you engage in emotional labor, you control your feelings to fulfill the goals and expectations of your organization. From a practical standpoint, this means that you either (a) express only your positive feelings, or (b) hide or manage your negative feelings. To deal with negative emotions, people tend to do one of the following:

- Show emotion they don't really feel.
- Hide emotion they really do feel.
- Create an appropriate emotion for the situation.

You can do this using two emotional labor techniques:

- **Surface acting** – You fake, or pretend to have, an emotion by using unnatural and artificial body language and verbal communication. Smiling and using a soft tone of voice help you show emotion that you don't feel, or hide emotion that you do feel.
- **Deep acting** – You control your internal emotions, directing them to believe that you actually are happy, and enjoying the interaction with the other person. Rather than feel like you're pretending, you convince yourself you're not experiencing a negative reaction.

When you continually need to show only those emotions that are appropriate for the job, despite how you really feel, this can often lead to emotional conflict between your real emotions and those you show to others.

Some researchers believe that emotional conflict like this leads to emotional exhaustion and burnout for workers – and that hiding your emotions on a regular basis leads to high levels of stress, and even a disconnection from close personal relationships. However, other studies have not found a connection between emotional conflict and emotional exhaustion.

A popular theory to explain this inconsistency in research findings is that individuals vary in their ability to deal with inauthentic, or 'pretend,' emotional expressions. Some workers may be able to identify with the organization's values of positive emotional communication, making them better prepared to express appropriate emotions. Also, people who are generally more cheerful and pleasant may be able to turn off negative emotions more easily than others.

Another factor may be a person's ability to recognize different social situations, and how to behave appropriately. People with more negative personalities and lower social awareness tend to have the hardest time dealing with emotional conflict – and they probably experience emotional exhaustion more easily.

To get a better understanding of emotional labor, here are some questions to ask yourself and, perhaps, to explore with your team:

- What are the emotional labor requirements of your job?
- How do you deal with these requirements?
- How often do you experience emotional conflict?
- Do you think emotional conflict has led to emotional exhaustion?
- How do you manage stress and other signs of emotional exhaustion?

By regularly examining the role of emotional labor in your work, you can help reduce the potential negative effects – and continue to provide high-quality service to internal and external customers.

### Implications for Organizations

It's important for workers to understand the impact that emotional labor has on their performance. However, it's essential that organizations are also aware of this requirement, so they can find ways to provide support to their workers, and help them deal with the impact of emotional labor.

Service workers typically need to perform in a certain manner if they're going to provide high quality service. This is usually defined by management, then strictly regulated and monitored. For example, customer service rules might be 'The customer is always right,' or 'Always greet customers with a smile.'

Expecting people to work in teams, and show positive team behaviors with their colleagues, adds another element of emotional labor. In fact, many organizations place a growing emphasis on building relationships with a wide variety of stakeholders. This comes with many emotional labor conditions.

It's reasonable to believe that helping people deal with the consequences of emotional labor will improve staff morale and reduce staff turnover. Here are some common strategies that organizations use to help their staff deal with the demands of emotional labor:

- **Use buffering** – Companies may assign front-end personnel to manage the emotional demands and needs of customers. By the time customers reach back-end workers, they

can concentrate on business.

- **Teach 'display' rules** – These are organizationally approved norms or standards that workers learn through observation, instruction, feedback, and reinforcement. Staff are taught how to act, and they may even be given scripts to use when dealing directly with clients. Therapists are taught to act neutrally, retail workers are taught to act positively, and bill collectors are often taught to act aggressive. Combining these display rules with company culture is very important.
- **Offer staff assistance programs** – Organizations invest in the care and development of their workers by providing access to stress management and emotional health services. This strategy recognizes that emotional labor can be hard work.
- **Teach problem-solving techniques** – To move workers beyond using scripts or relying on other display rules, some companies help their staff solve problems more effectively. This helps people build confidence, and reduce their negative reactions to angry or unpredictable situations. The better that workers are able to deal with problems, the more likely they are to resolve interpersonal issues before they lead to negative emotions.
- **Improve emotional intelligence** – The ability to recognize other people's emotions is an effective way to reduce the burden of emotional labor. Building **empathy** and using other **emotional intelligence** tools help reduce the likelihood that emotional conflict will lead to emotional exhaustion.
- **Share knowledge** – One of the most effective ways to help people deal with the realities of emotional labor is to share success stories. Allow staff to learn how others successfully deal with the impact of emotional conflict.
- **Bring emotional labor into the performance evaluation process** – Organizations can recognize the importance of emotional labor by measuring workers' emotional effort factors and commitment to customer service. How well do workers deal with angry people? What type of attitude do they bring to work every day? Do they show tolerance and patience? When workers are rewarded for their emotional labor, it provides an incentive for them to show organizationally accepted emotions more often.

Used appropriately, these strategies can take much of the pain out of emotional labor. Indeed, where problems are addressed appropriately, service workers often report tremendous levels of satisfaction when they're able to help clients resolve their problems.

Many people would say that it's important to be **authentic** in all your communications. Clearly, this conflicts with the organization's need for customer service personnel to leave customers feeling positive and happy about their experience. The approaches described above are also useful for helping individuals reconcile these conflicting requirements.

## Key Points

Emotional labor occurs when workers are paid, in part, to manage and control their emotions. Traditionally, we've seen this in service-oriented professions. But service excellence is now a key driver of success in most organizations, so elements of emotional labor are present in almost all workplaces. It's important to understand the impact of emotional labor, and how it affects workers.

Emotions at work are an important part of company life. Help people understand their reactions to emotional labor, and develop policies and procedures to reduce the negative impact of emotional labor. These are ways to improve overall performance and worker satisfaction.

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Even though I lived through this at last job, I will ensure these upfront strategies are part of organisation. Thank you for this priceless information

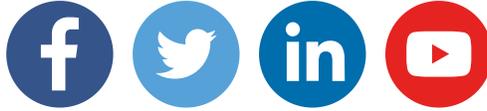
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