

The Cost of Emotional Labor and What Can Hotel's Do to Minimize It

By Dr. Sheetal Singh, Alliance Partner, HVS Executive Search

and

Mr. Court Williams, CEO, HVS Executive Search

Abstract

This article highlights the challenges and costs of hotel employees managing their emotions for work or emotional labor. Drawing from last three decades of research on this topic, we also share some practical advice on what hotel managers and others who are leading teams can do to reduce the emotional exhaustion and burnout resulting from emotional labor.



Introduction

We have all at some point had to either hide the true emotion we are feeling or manage it, in order to create memorable experiences for our guests. While most hospitality professionals are particularly friendly people, we have all had that one difficult day when we had to put on a mask, go out there and fake being all welcoming and cheerful. We have also come to expect it as part of the job and with time we have become extremely proficient at it. That is probably the reason we do not hear hoteliers discuss “emotional labor” (the need to manage our emotions for our jobs with specific display rules). Even though, it is a common expectation for most service jobs, the need to manage emotions for work extends beyond customer service roles.

While we have come to accept emotional labor as a critical aspect of being a good hotelier, both hotels and hoteliers struggle with the outcomes associated with engaging in emotional labor constantly. Burnout, stress and emotional exhaustion are terms we are all but too familiar with.

Why is There a Cost to Emotional Labor?

Over three decades ago Arlie Hochschild (1983) introduced the concept of emotional labor that extended our understanding of work related challenges beyond physical labor. A majority of her work focused on understanding its impact on airline personnel and how they coped with it. She found that they either faked it or convinced themselves that they were feeling positive. Hochschild's initial work (1983) and hundreds of studies following that have confirmed that there is a cost associated with emotional management. For example, a 2011 study involving over 27,000 participants found that emotional labor was directly linked to emotional exhaustion and strain (Hülshager & Schewe, 2011).

Faking one's true emotion or surface acting for extended periods can make an individual feel drained of limited cognitive resources that are constantly stretched in customer facing work environments. Surface acting involves constant monitoring of how you display your emotion, while at the same time you continue to feel the emotion (anger, despair, sadness, anxiety etc.) you are trying to hide. This also makes an individual experience emotional dissonance, which is the disconnect felt by individuals because of feeling and emoting different emotions.

Some of us are better at emotional labor than others since we can convince ourselves that we are feeling the emotion that we are displaying or by deep acting. We do so either by shifting our focus, or changing our perspective about the situation. For example, when an airline personnel was asked about how she prevented herself from feeling anger towards an unreasonable customer she said, "I try to remember that he's drinking too much, he's probably scared of flying, or I think to myself that he is like a little child...and when I see him that way, I don't get mad that he is yelling at me" (pg.55, Hochschild, 1983). This way we can display positive emotions more authentically, however, we are able to achieve this at the expense of the same limited cognitive resources.

Constant draw of resources by engaging in emotional labor therefore, leads to emotional exhaustion, reduced sense of personal accomplishment, a disconnect from our true emotions (depersonalization), eventually leading to burnout. Needless to say, that the related cost of burnout is reduced performance efficiency, absenteeism, and in some cases unwanted turnover. A survey of 614 HR professionals in U.S. found that 95% of the HR leaders were concerned that workplace burnout was causing increased employee turnover. Another large-scale survey by Gallup® found that more than 40% of the workers in U.S. were burnt out. This translates into millions of dollars in wasted resources towards hiring cost, training cost, health related cost and additional labor cost due to absenteeism and reduced performance. However, these costs do not account for additional cost associated with increased mistakes, and errors made by employees because of elevated levels of emotional exhaustion. The customer service incidents that we have read about more recently in reference to certain airlines are particularly

indicative of employees who are emotionally exhausted and disconnected both from their own feelings as well as the customer's.

How do You Minimize the Cost of Emotional Labor?

We have come to accept emotional exhaustion, burnout and other related costs of managing our emotions for work. Yet so many of us have thrived in these customer-facing work environments for decades. What separates the ones who thrive from ones who get burnt out? The answer lies in whether we can replenish the resources we draw from constantly. We have spent last decade studying this question and working with hospitality firms trying to understand the answer as well as solutions that have greater likelihood of helping us minimize the cost of emotional labor. We bring you solutions drawn from our work as well as last three decades of research on the subject that help us understand how organizations and leaders can reduce the cost of emotional labor.

What Should Organizations Do?

Firstly, it is critical that organizations regularly assess emotional exhaustion and burnout as part of their regular employee assessments. The key to overcoming a challenge is objectively assessing how big the challenge is. Secondly, it is important to seek expert advice as you deal with the consequences of emotional labor in your organization. We share below advice based on our experience with dealing with these challenges within organizations.

Build Supportive Culture

Open and supportive cultures allow individuals who are constantly juggling multiple demands from customers to know that they are taken care of. A study of 334 participants in a service firm found that organizational support reduced the negative impact of emotional labor on employee satisfaction and performance (Duke, Goodman, Treadway, & Breland, 2009). While there can be several aspects of a culture that could be positive, having a culture that encourages individuals to do the following can be particularly helpful:

- Reach out if they need support.
- Speak honestly without any fear.
- Have friends they can rely on at the place of work.
- Have access to training that can help them get better at their customer facing jobs.
- Participate in decision making so they have some sense of control.

Building a supportive culture not only requires time but also resources and leadership that upholds the cultural values. Since it's the people who truly build the culture, hiring individuals that are not only skilled but also good fit culturally is essential. This requires a deeper understanding of the critical cultural values that form the foundation of the organization. Several behavioral assessment tools as well as psychological interviews can ascertain the cultural fit of a candidate with high levels of accuracy. ExecView is one such tool that we have

built at HVS Executive Search that allows us to ascertain cultural fit for new hires. It is particularly reassuring to have the data to support decisions that can have far reaching financial and cultural impact.

As the new employees try to learn how to adjust to the environment, they are constantly looking for information. Organizations can provide several cues to the new employee through symbols or cultural artefacts, rituals or processes and practices that help these individuals become part of this supportive culture.

Provide Training Resources

Hospitality industry spends millions of dollars every year on skill based and other role specific training programs. Yet, most employees learn to cope with their emotions and manage them on their own through trial and error. Some of us prevail, picking up the right skills, conserving our resources and excelling at what we do and, yet others struggle as they are unable to cope with the resulting emotional exhaustion.

Appropriate training might be the key to ensuring individuals do not reach that point of emotional exhaustion or burnout that starts reflecting in their performance. The training should include:

- Leadership training that equips the leaders with the toolbox of leadership skills. A relatively recent study conducted by the Center for Creative Leadership that surveyed 2200 leaders across 15 organizations and multiple countries found that leadership skills in today's organizations are insufficient to meet current or future needs of an organization. The biggest gap was identified in the areas of Leading people, employee development, resourcefulness, change management and inspiring commitment. Closing these gaps is essential for better leadership performance and for more effective work force that can respond to the challenges of changing work environments.

While most individuals have a natural leadership style they are most comfortable with, having additional skills in the leadership toolbox can go a long way towards providing the necessary support and development that can be effective and inspirational to the employees. Through our work in leadership development we have identified several skills that should be part of this leadership tool kit apart from the situational leadership styles. These skills include decision-making, conflict management, team development and ability to leverage emotion and empathy. Having studied the participants of our leadership development workshops, we have found that training leaders in these leadership skills not only leads to an improved leadership experience for the employees but also has a trickle-down effect of an overall stronger leadership culture within the organization.

- Training individuals in emotional intelligence that enhances their ability to perceive, decipher, use and manage not only their own emotion but also the emotion of others

they interact with. Improved emotional intelligence not only results in a work force that is better able to handle their own emotions but also able to manage the customer's emotions in their quest to create memorable experiences for them. Although, some of us are born with high emotional intelligence, through our experience with training hospitality professionals we have found that it is a skill that can be learnt and taught with relative ease. We have taught emotional intelligence skills in a workshop or a one-on-one coaching setting and found them both to be equally effective.

What Should Leaders Do?

Provide Coaching

When leaders engage in coaching behaviors, subordinates feel supported and appreciated by the leader, and by extension, the organization which the leader represents. The coaching mentoring and support further improves their ability to deal with emotional management in customer service roles. This is especially true for new employees who are still learning the customer service skills and related behaviors. While most strong leaders have been found to be good coaches, it may not come naturally to all. Considering most coaching behaviors may be learnt with ease through practice, it would help for leaders to consider evaluating their leadership behaviors to take stock. We encourage leaders to get more well-rounded feedback through a 360^o review for much deeper insight. Leaders who participate in our 360^o reviews find the information they gather particularly valuable in closing any gaps they might have due to blind spots.

Create a Culture of Psychological Safety

Individuals who feel psychologically safe at their workplace do not fear rejection from coworkers and feel valued. Individuals working in customer service environments encounter a great deal of uncertainty in terms of the situations they experience. Working in an environment where individuals feel comfortable being themselves can help reduce the level of uncertainty involved in these customer interaction situations and the resulting strain or emotional exhaustion. A 2014 study of nearly 178 participants who were part of 27 service management teams in a restaurant setting found that higher levels of psychological safety was linked to higher levels of team cohesion and team performance (Guchait, Tews, & Simons, 2014).

Specifically, work environments that allow individuals to be more open and comfortable with emotion expression and make individuals feel appreciated may result in less emotional exhaustion for employees because employees may be able not only to share bottled up emotions with colleagues and leaders but also feel more comfortable doing so.

There are several ways leaders can create a culture of psychological safety. Some suggestions are:

- Create open forums where employees can share their concerns without fear.
- Include team members while making decisions that affect their work experience or how they serve the customers, providing them more control.
- Create a space where employees can be themselves and relax.

- Be a good listener when subordinates need to share their challenges.
- Show empathy.

Provide Support

Constructive support and recognition provided by a leader directly influences the level of stress a subordinate feels by replenishing emotional resources and providing physical resources that allow subordinates to recover from a challenging situation. The level of support provided by a leader may also, as a result, influence the amount of effort an employee invests in improving their performance and customer experience.

It is important to note that the kind of support that might be needed by the subordinate may be individual and situation specific. For example, following a stressful situation some employees may just need a short break, while others might need coaching or even training. Either ways it is important that a leader keep the employee needs in mind while being supportive.

What should Individuals (who manage emotions) Do?

Display Authentic Positive Emotion

Remember that we don't always have to manage our emotions at work. We can be genuinely happy, positive and enthusiastic. This would completely take away the need to deal with either stress, emotional exhaustion or burnout. It may not be feasible for everyone to be at the peak of their energy always, however, building more mindful practices can help keep us calm, balanced and neutral at most times. We talk about some of these practices below.

Use Humor

Humor or the ability to look at a situation with a much lighter perspective allows individuals who are engaging in emotional labor to view the situation in a new light which, not only gives them a sense of control, but also helps release any negative emotion resulting from a serious or tense situation. Use of humor and laughter allows individuals to experience positive emotion and thus ensures that there is no further expense of resources towards managing the negative emotion.

Have Friends at Work

Research has confirmed that individuals who have friends at work are more likely to be satisfied with their work life. However, individuals who have friends at work also have someone who understands them, that they can talk to and share their stressors and frustrations with. Having such a friend at work not only provides a release for any negative thoughts that we may carry but also allows us the luxury of another perspective that helps us relook at a situation with a fresh outlook, hopefully a more positive one!

Practice Mindfulness

Most of us are constantly in thought. Most of our thoughts revolve around regrets about something that happened in the past or a worry about something that is yet to happen in the future. Mindfulness helps us get rid of our baggage by helping us be in the moment without any judgement. Mindfulness practices, thus, help us find a more balanced or neutral state reducing our stress levels and emotional exhaustion we may experience. A 2013 study in Journal of Applied Psychology found that individuals practicing mindfulness experienced lower levels of emotional exhaustion and higher levels of satisfaction (Hülshager, Alberts, Feinholdt, & Lang, 2013).

There are several physical and meditative practices that have been found to be effective in helping an individual become more mindful. However, in our experience with teaching mindfulness, it is more important to build mindfulness into your daily activities such as walking, eating or even engaging in tasks at work that may be routine. Doing so provides the necessary breather to break from a pattern of activities that may be particularly draining both physically and emotionally. We started offering weekly mindfulness sessions for our HVS Americas team recently and have received very encouraging results.

Key Take-Away

- Emotional labor is a real challenge that has not yet received much attention in organizations. However, the research on its impact on emotional exhaustion, stress, burnout and reduced performance is extremely compelling. These negative outcomes not only affect individuals working in customer service roles, but also organization's bottom line directly and indirectly.
- Measure the level of emotional exhaustion and burnout experienced by your employees.
- As an organization, seek expert advice to bridge gaps in training, leadership development, cultural assessment and emotional intelligence training. Invest now so you can see better financial results and improved employee satisfaction.
- As a leader, provide support, coaching, training and create a culture of participation and psychological safety. Invest in your leadership development for greater self-awareness and leadership development.
- As an emotional laborer, try to be positive, find humor if you can, have friends at work and learn to practice mindfulness to create a more positive experience for yourself while you create memorable experiences for your guests.



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