

The Cost of Faking a Smile

Perhaps surprisingly, the smiles that greet you upon arrival at a hotel might not be genuine. A positive, welcoming demeanour is part of the job description for housekeeping, front desk, and restaurant workers, whose smiles, moods, and emotions are distinguishing features of the hospitality sector. But when frontline employees have to fake it, what strategies do they use? Eye-opening new work from SHTM researchers Dr Deniz Kucukusta and Ms Yoo Jin Lim has revealed more about the emotional labour strategies adopted by frontline workers to counter the emotional dissonance experienced when their expressed and felt emotions do not match. Their novel findings show that suppressing or hiding internal feelings can be detrimental to employees and reduce their intention to remain their role, which has clear managerial and practical implications.

Emotional Labour

Frontline employees who interact directly with customers are also delivering a “product”. To be sure, customer interaction, satisfaction, and loyalty, hinge on frontline employees’ ability to display organisationally accepted positive emotions, which is a form of “emotional labour”. “Emotional labour takes the form of displaying fake or genuine feelings toward customers”, explain the authors. These emotional “products” are designed to enhance customers’ emotions and moods during service encounters. Yet for employees, excessive emotional labour can lead to burnout, poor job performance, low job satisfaction, and a strong intention to leave one’s job.

Putting on a positive, welcoming demeanour becomes far more taxing – and the emotional labour more intense – when employees’ authentic feelings do not match the emotions they display. This is known as “emotional dissonance”, which can lead to emotional exhaustion and burnout further down the line. It is therefore a major priority to understand the strategies used to cope with emotional dissonance. Namely, the researchers investigated the adoption of “surface acting”, “deep acting” and “genuine acting” strategies by frontline hotel workers in Hong Kong.

Surface acting involves simply hiding internal feelings and displaying fake emotions during customer interactions, which means that felt emotional dissonance remains. Deep acting occurs when employees actually suppress and modify their internal feelings to align with the moods required of them. This reduces emotional dissonance but might require more emotional labour. Finally, the emotional strategy of genuine acting refers to the display of sincere and actual feelings. “Because it does not involve fake emotions, employees tend not to experience emotive dissonance in their work role when engaged in genuine acting”, explain the researchers.

Generational and Demographic Differences

The modern generational groups are known as Baby Boomers (1946–1961), Generation X (1965–1981), and Generation Y, or “Millennials” (from 1981). The personalities, values, beliefs

and even work habits of each generation have been shaped by environmental, political and economic realities, which means that their adoption of emotional labour strategies might also differ. Given that most of the working world comprises members of Generation X and Generation Y, the researchers focused on these two groups. They made specific predictions regarding preferred emotional labour styles based on the documented characteristics of each generation. “By understanding how employees of different generations with different values react to and cope with emotive dissonance”, say the researchers, “managers will be able to offer the right mitigation solutions to the right employees”.

Whilst Generation X and Generation Y have been found to share work values and to similarly relish personal growth opportunities, Generation Y members have been characterised as having comparatively high self-esteem and low work engagement. For this reason, the authors hypothesised that “Generation Y members have a higher tendency to practice surface acting and deep acting”, and that “Generation X employees are experienced workers, so are more likely to practice deep acting and genuine acting”. If so, they expected emotional dissonance and its effects to be stronger among members of Generation Y than Generation X.

The decision to engage in surface acting, deep acting or genuine acting may also depend on a variety of demographic characteristics. For example, women have been found to more successfully communicate happiness and suppress anger in the workplace than men, which corresponds to deep acting. “Older employees are more likely to

control their emotions and display them appropriately, using genuine acting rather than surface acting”, add the authors. Therefore, the researchers also considered how frontline workers’ gender, years of work experience, monthly salary and the hotel service standards they are expected to uphold affect their use of surface acting, deep acting and genuine acting.

Frontline Worker Questionnaire

Adopting a data-driven approach, the authors asked frontline employees from seven hotels in Hong Kong to complete a two-part questionnaire. Of the 192 participants, 58.3% belonged to Generation Y and 41.7% to Generation X. The first part of the questionnaire collected demographic information, such as age, gender, and monthly salary. The second part of the questionnaire collected information on the respondents’ use of surface acting, genuine acting and deep acting, as well as their sense of emotional dissonance. Using these data, the researchers were able to study the preferred or default emotional labour states adopted by two different generational groups working in three-, four-, and five-star hotels.

Unfeigned Feeling

For both generations, frontline employees who adopted surface acting had a lower intention to stay in their job. This suggests that surface acting is more labour-intensive and leads to more emotional dissonance and internal conflict. In contrast, genuine acting (expressing sincere feelings about one’s role) increased employees’ intention to remain with the organisation. The authors therefore

recommend that employees adopt genuine acting over surface and deep acting to reduce emotional burnout and turnover rate. “The most effective acting state”, they say, “is to act with heartfelt and sincere emotions”.

As predicted, Generation X employees tended to express genuine emotions more than did Generation Y employees, who more often engaged in surface acting and deep acting. This suggests “that Generation Y members may experience higher levels of emotional burnout and intention to leave their job”, say the researchers. However, Generation X members still reported feeling emotional dissonance. In addition, the use of genuine acting versus surface acting was affected by years of work experience – perhaps corresponding to age – and gender.

To minimise the effects of emotional labour, the researchers suggest that managers should help employees to understand the concept of emotional intelligence and encourage them to discuss their feelings. They recommend providing employees with tailored emotional intelligence training according to generational differences in the use of emotional labour states. This might increase involvement at work, reduce emotional burnout and enhance job satisfaction.

Right for the Job?

This innovative research acknowledges the burden commonly felt by frontline hotel employees, whose warm, positive manner during customer interactions can come at the expense of their own mental and physical resources. Most strikingly, this research offers hotel managers generation-based information that could be used to improve

working conditions, turnover and human resource policies. “By understanding how employees of different generations with different values react to and cope with emotive dissonance, managers will be able to offer the right mitigation solutions to the right employees”, conclude the authors.

Whilst steps can be taken by managers to reduce the negative impacts of internal conflicts in their employees and care for their existing workforce, the most effective way to increase employees’ intention to stay is that they express their own, authentic feelings. “This underlines the importance of selecting the right employees for the hospitality industry”, say the researchers. These results could therefore also prove extremely useful for hotel management in the process of recruiting new frontline hotel staff.

POINTS TO NOTE

- Frontline hotel staff may engage in “deep” or “surface” acting to display appropriate emotions.
- Surface acting is especially common among millennials and men but can lead to burnout as suppressing emotions is taxing.
- Deep acting and emotional genuineness are healthy signs of sincere, competent engagement with work challenges.
- Employers should encourage emotional authenticity and respect their experienced employees.

Kucukusta, Deniz and Lim, Yoo Jin (2022). Emotional Labor of Frontline Employees: Generational Differences and Intention to Stay. *Journal of China Tourism Research*, Vol. 18, Issue 3, 472-494.