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# What Library Managers Should Know about Emotional Labor

by

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# Abstract:

This article presents emotional labor in a library context and offers library managers strategies to minimize the negative effects of emotional labor on both staff and users. The components of emotional labor are explained and a framework of response levels is presented with strategies targeted to each response level: incident, training, supervision, human resources, and organizational culture. The strategies offer library managers some ideas for effectively managing emotional labor in their organizations. Understanding the effects of emotional labor and developing the tools that can offset potential negative outcomes can create a more positive work climate and better customer service.

**Key Words:**

Emotions

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## Introduction

Outstanding customer service is a priority for public libraries. The American Library Association’s Code of Ethics includes the statement, “We provide the highest level of service to all library users through appropriate and usefully organized resources; equitable service policies; equitable access; and accurate, unbiased, and courteous responses to all requests” (<http://www.ala.org/advocacy/proethics/codeofethics/codeethics>). Many public libraries have written values statements that include a commitment to excellence in customer service, such as the King County Library System (<http://www.kcls.org/about/mission.cfm>). One of the senior executives of the Columbus Metropolitan Library System is the Chief Customer Experience Officer (<http://www.columbuslibrary.org/about/library-leadership>).

A critical element of exceptional customer service is the quality of the interactions between library employees and customers. When public library users are asked to make open-ended comments about their interactions with librarians, they nearly always speak initially on whether or not the staff member who served them was friendly or helpful. This affective dimension of the service transaction, frequently described as being courteous, friendly, or pleasant, can form a strong impression in the minds of library patrons (Jordan 2005). Additionally, interactions between library workers can have as much affective impact as exchanges between library workers and customers.

To manage affective experiences and create positive interactions in public libraries, it is important to remember that all work is filled with emotion: pride and joy at successfully accomplishing challenging tasks; frustration interacting with a difficult customer; anxiety in anticipation of a meeting about a sensitive issue. Emotion is part of all work environments and public libraries are no exception.

Most work environments have expectations for what are appropriate emotional expressions. These are called “display rules”. Ordinarily regarded as informal norms, display rules may be made explicit in formal guidelines or employee handbooks, or communicated to employees through training. Just as frequently however, display rules are tacitly held expectations that mirror norms brought from society into the workplace (Ashforth and Humphrey 1993). Most public-facing service professions such as banking, teaching, nursing, or librarianship have display rules that call for expressing positive emotions and suppressing negative emotions. Other professions may perform work that requires the opposite expectations such as lawyers, bill collectors, or police officers. Still other professions such as therapists or judges may require more neutral emotional expressions.

## What is Emotional Labor?

Emotional labor is a construct that deals with the challenges associated with expressing the appropriate emotions as required by workplace and or supervisor expectations. Defined as “the effort, planning, and control needed to express organizationally desired emotion during interpersonal transactions”, emotional labor includes understanding the display rules of the organization and self-regulating emotions to conform to those rules (Morris and Feldman 1996, p. 987).

Even if employees are aware of the emotional display rules required by their organization, they may not always naturally feel the desired emotions as they carry out their work tasks. In those moments of emotional dissonance, employees typically regulate their emotions to meet the organization’s expectations. “Surface acting” is an emotion regulation strategy where the employee expresses the desired emotion externally, without changing the underlying emotion they actually feel. Deep acting occurs when employees reappraise a situation to change their interpretation of the event and consequently change their emotions so they can express the emotions in line with organizational expectations.

Researchers over several decades have studied various aspects of emotional labor across many different occupations. To a certain extent, how employees manage their emotional labor stems from individual differences such as personality factors like neuroticism and extraversion (Judge, Woolf, and Hurst 2009); from their perception of the organization’s display rules (Diefendorff and Richard 2003); or from their understanding of and commitment to customer service (Pugh, Groth, and Hennig-Thurau 2011; RW.ERROR - Unable to find reference:1089).

More important to library managers, though, are the research findings related to the outcomes associated with emotional labor. Extensive research has examined the effect emotional labor has on the employees who perform it. Over the years and across different occupation groups, the findings are fairly consistent. In a meta-analysis of 105 independent samples, surface acting – the faking strategy of emotional regulation - was associated with negative individual outcomes such as emotional exhaustion, cynicism, psychological strain, lowered job satisfaction, reduced organizational attachment, and psychosomatic complaints (Hülsheger and Schewe 2011). In the same meta-analysis, deep acting was only weakly associated, and not at a generalizable level, with negative individual outcomes (Hülsheger and Schewe 2011). These results are echoed in a study of emotional labor in librarians. Matteson and Miller (2013) found that surface acting was associated with emotional exhaustion, cynicism, and lowered job satisfaction. Deep acting was weakly associated with emotional exhaustion, but also associated with professional efficacy, a mixed finding with associations with both positive and negative outcomes.

These results show that surface acting is not an effective strategy for librarians to take when confronted with situations requiring emotional labor. Deep acting is perhaps a better strategy because it is not meaningfully associated with negative individual outcomes and in some studies is shown to be associated with positive performance outcomes such as emotional performance and customer service (Hülsheger and Schewe 2011).

A final aspect of emotional labor to highlight is that it occurs between library employees and customers, but also among library employees, including colleagues, supervisors, and subordinates. In an recent study, diary entries kept by librarians showed that of the 83 incidents of emotional labor reported: 36% occurred with customers, 29% involved peer colleagues, 20% occurred with superiors, 10% with others (i.e. vendors), and 5% with subordinates (Matteson, Chittock, & Mease, forthcoming).

Given the prevalence of emotional situations in library work – with customers and co-workers – along with the serious negative effects that co-occur with such labor, library managers should be aware of the emotional labor phenomenon, and be proactive in creating work environments where positive emotional labor effects are maximized.

## Strategies to Manage Emotional Labor

Although individual factors play a part in how library employees respond to situations of emotional labor that are beyond the sphere of influence a library manager might have, there are strategies managers can use across the organization to attenuate the negative outcomes associated with emotional labor, and with surface acting, in particular. The strategies, depicted in Figure 1, emerge from the emotional labor literature and address emotional labor at different layers of managerial engagement. We use the pyramid shape to illustrate the range of strategies, starting at the top with obvious events that occur above the surface, but also then moving downward to include broader ideas that can be explored outside a particular incident.

INSERT FIGURE 1

While these response levels provide a helpful way to group the suggested strategies, the figure is not intended to suggest that a manager should move in a linear fashion through the response levels. Rather, library managers should be familiar with strategies at each of the levels, and develop the awareness to assess situations of emotional labor within their organizations and apply the relevant strategies.

### The Incident

Events requiring emotional labor cannot always be anticipated. Situations arise instantly, or develop over time, that create emotional dissonance in library employees. When necessary, a first strategic area managers can address is to manage the incident. In the most immediate of terms, this involves intervening in the situation so that the interaction partners can collect themselves or remove themselves from the situation. In interactions with customers, employees should always feel able to involve a manager in a situation that has become emotionally challenging. In these moments the manager may be called on not only to enforce a policy, or problem solve at a higher level, but also to directly manage an emotional situation. In such cases the manager should intervene with deep acting strategies that help resolve the situation and eliminate emotional dissonance. More discreet calls for assistance may also be useful to put into place. At one library, an empty red file folder was kept behind the desk. When an employee found herself involved in an interaction with a customer where she felt she needed help or needed to step away, holding the red folder was a cue to other staff in the immediate area to step in. Any technique used in managing an active incident requires an ability to be calm, to reinforce library policies that may help resolve a situation, and to communicate in a clear, professional manner.

Emotional labor incidents between colleagues may not often rise to a level of urgency requiring a manager to intervene in the moment. Nevertheless, managers should be aware of potentially volatile situations and be available to step in if needed to facilitate a conversation or negotiate a solution among staff.

### Training

Training all staff on the phenomenon of emotional labor can empower employees to exercise more effective emotional regulation tactics. For emotional labor events that occur with customers in particular, it may be helpful to view training as a two-pronged endeavor, with a training session designed for all employees and a supplemental training offered especially to managers. Training for all staff should include an introduction of the main concepts of emotional labor: awareness of display rules and surface and deep acting. This could include a group discussion about what the display rules are for the library and clarify that everyone knows them, and agrees with them. If no such rules have been made explicit through personnel handbooks or best practice guidelines, then taking the time to discuss, agree, and document the display rules for the organization, both for interactions with customers and for interactions between library staff, is an important part of training.

In introducing surface and deep acting, it is important to make employees aware of the research that shows the negative individual outcomes that can come of these emotional regulation tactics, including emotional exhaustion, cynicism, lowered job satisfaction, and reduced professional efficacy (Brotheridge and Grandey 2002). It is also important to remind employees that surface acting, though potentially not a good solution, comes from a good instinct – the desire to at least superficially display the desired emotions of the organization. Employees should not be made to feel badly about times they find themselves surface acting, but should be encouraged to learn the techniques associated with deep acting so they have a range of regulation responses at their disposal. Such deep acting techniques include cognitive reappraisal, where the employee reconsiders the situation with an effort to understand it from the other person’ point of view, called perspective taking. Alternatively, employees can be trained to, in some cases, use attentional deployment to perform deep acting. In this technique, employees change the stimulus causing the emotional event to an alternative stimulus that will lead them to experience the desired emotion. For example, perhaps a library employee knows she will be spending some time in meetings with a colleague with whom she has a difficult relationship. She may find it beneficial, when aroused by an interaction with that colleague, to place her attention momentarily on a pleasant experience from a recent vacation to change her internal emotion process, resulting in a positive emotion.

Beyond training directed at the specific concepts of emotional labor, training on closely related topics can also be incorporated, such as communication skills, particularly communicating feelings, and training on emotional intelligence – the ability to perceive understand, and manage emotions in ourselves and in others (Mayer and Salovey 1997).

Managers may benefit from specific training at recognizing the signs of emotional labor in their employees. This training should include an awareness of the emotional demands that exist in many frontline positions throughout the workplace, as sometimes managers who are more removed from public service may lose sight of the powerful, cumulative effects such work incurs. Another angle to cover with managers is to increase their awareness of the influence they hold over their employees’ emotional experiences. The manager who can effectively model deep acting sends an important message to employees about ways to manage their own emotional regulation.

Finally, managers should think creatively about what tactics they can use to carry out effective training sessions. Literature on adult training and facilitation will be helpful here, but it goes without saying that handing down a memo or circulating an email message reminding employees about good customer service will be less effective than training that encourages engagement and interaction. For example, realistic scenarios, perhaps pulled from actual library events (protecting confidentiality, of course), could be used as cases around which discussion and role playing can occur. If employees are resistant to actual role playing, the scenarios can be used to generate discussion about best courses of action. Training on emotional labor may also be more effective in small groups where library staff can participate a lower stakes environment.

### Supervision

Where the first category – the incident – speaks to strategies to use during the emotional labor event, or immediately after, at the supervision level, the emphasis is on putting into practice some ongoing, routine systems that may buffer against the negative effects of emotional labor.

It is important to create and monitor social support networks among library staff. This can take a variety of forms, such as a regularly scheduled time for employees to share any recent difficult exchanges they may have had. It could also be handled in a mentor/mentee relationship where mentors are assigned to employees and the mentors are trained to regularly check in with employees to offer social support. Research backs up the value of having support networks. Studies have shown that when employees believe their organization values their effort and cares about them the negative effects of emotional labor are lessened (Duke et al. 2009; Moon, Hur, and Jun 2013). Further, recent research has shown the benefits of social sharing – talking about an emotionally difficult situation with colleagues (Rimé et al. 1991). Typically referred to as “venting”, research has shown the beneficial effects of social sharing on reducing employee anger after experiencing difficult customer interactions (McCance et al. 2013). With this approach, managers can establish protocols where employees who have just experienced an emotional taxing situation can request a few minutes to talk about the incident with a supportive colleague. Those conversations may involve discussing the events that occurred, and/or discussing the feelings the employee felt during the event. These techniques may help reduce the negativity that follows an emotional challenging event, and even more gains may be possible if during the social sharing the employee is prompted to share a positive though about the recent event. In a simulation experiment, participants instructed to share positive experiences after a series of difficult phone interactions with pretend customers were more likely to perform active sensemaking to try to develop a shared understanding of the experience than those assigned to different sharing conditions (McCance et al. 2013). Thus, library managers should put processes in place where employees can vent to a supportive colleague about a recent difficult situation. Part of the system should include training for the listeners to steer the social sharing toward a discussion of the positives of the experience which may encourage the employee to move past the negative sense of the experience into a more constructive understanding about the event, thus diminishing even further any negative emotions.

Emotional labor with fellow employees requires other kinds of support from managers. Establishing communication norms within a department or across the larger organization for managing emotionally challenging interactions with colleagues will provide employees with the tools to better manage such situations. Borrowing from the literature of conflict management, these guidelines may include techniques such as encouraging employees to be honest about their emotions while maintaining a dispassionate demeanor. For example, developing the habit of using precise feelings language such as “I feel frustrated when…”, instead of the more accusatory, “You make me frustrated” may create an exchange where the employees can authentically express their emotions in ways that are communicative, but not incendiary. Other techniques useful in small group settings include imposing a brief period of silence – 10 seconds or so – between conversational turns to encourage better listening and reflecting before responding. Something else that may be useful to incorporate into practice is to delay resolving a difficult situation between interaction partners in order to give them time to lower the emotional dissonance. Some emotional labor events may best be handled not in the moment they are occurring but after the parties have had a chance to calm down and reflect on the situation. With all these techniques, the overriding goal for the manager should be to foster open, constructive, and honest communication in the work environment.

Finally, managers should not lose sight of the ongoing challenge emotional labor presents to library staff. When employees are feeling tired, or overworked, or have personal issues weighing on them, they may not be fully equipped to engage in deep acting. Being sensitive to the internal emotional resources library employees have available to them and being ready to step in if those resources become depleted should be a part good managing. For example, managers should review the service point schedule being mindful of shifts that may be particularly draining for some employees and adjust accordingly. Further, managers themselves should be able to perform deep acting in their own interactions with customers and colleagues, modeling for the rest of the unit the desired emotional regulation strategies. Along with modeling the desired behaviors, managers should look for opportunities to recognize and celebrate employees who are effective at managing their emotional labor. For example, examples of librarians successfully performing deep acting could be submitted to an organization’s employee recognition system to reinforce the value of effective emotion management to the organization.

### Human Resources

Emotional labor can also be managed by looking at broader organizational systems and processes connected with the work of the human resources (HR) department. Of course, not all libraries have an HR department, but all libraries have human resources, so library managers at any level of the organization in any size of library need to be aware of how human resources work may influence emotional labor.

One aspect to consider is the emotional demand placed on different positions in the organization that may lead to high levels of emotional labor. The tasks associated with some positions make them inherently prone to emotional labor situations. For example positions with a significant amount of customer service interaction will likely encounter more situations of emotional labor than positions with less public exposure. Positions with low cognitive demand but high emotional demand, such as entry level, frontline positions are particularly vulnerable to emotional demands. Managers may wish to implement staffing plans that balance frontline work with other tasks that require less interpersonal interaction to give employees the chance to replenish their emotional resources. General staffing levels should be regularly evaluated to be sure that the library employs the right number of staff to fit the organization’s workload. In tight budget situations, understaffing can be a common plight, and managers may find themselves working with less than ideal staffing levels. Such situations require a heightened vigilance toward the emotional demands placed on existing staff, who are likely already feeling overworked by the staff shortage.

Another aspect of HR work to consider is including in the performance appraisal process clear expectations for and fair assessments of the emotion work embedded in library positions. If the library has an expectation for specific emotional expressions as part of successful job performance, an argument can be made that that expectation should be documented as a performance dimension in the appraisal process so employees can receive regular, standardized feedback on how they are doing in this area. By formalizing these expectations in the review process, the organization is legitimizing employees’ emotional effort, making it a visible dimension of a job description, and recognizing the value effective emotional labor can bring to the organization in terms of outcomes such as task performance and customer satisfaction.

A final idea related to HR work is for libraries to consider offering to all employees general programs and job benefits related to stress management and wellness. Programs that address the psychological and emotional health of employees can serve to replenish valuable resources that enable employees to better manage emotional labor. The conservation of resources theory, which states that employees work to attain, protect, and foster resources that they value, and they also seek to minimize any threats to those valued resources, provides support for this idea (Hobfoll 1989). Organizational display rules function as demands placed on employees, requiring them to use effort in surface and deep acting to perform their jobs. To the extent that that effort is depleted and not replaced through experiencing rewarding social interactions, employees will experience strain and detachment (Brotheridge and Lee 2002). Thus, organizational initiatives that help employees rebalance resources contribute to more effective emotional labor.

### Organizational Culture

Organizational culture refers to the physical symbols, the written and espoused values, and the underlying, deeply-seated beliefs that exist within an organization (Schein 1990). Aspects of an organization’s culture at each of these levels can have an effect on how emotional labor is carried out in the organization.

At the top level, libraries should consider the physical signs and symbols that may contribute to emotional labor. Take for instance the servicescape: how are the customer service points configured? What do they look and feel like from the customer and the library staff perspective? And most importantly, does the setting enhance or detract from the desired emotional expression from interaction partners? What about the space reserved for employees? Are there places for library staff to go to have private conversations, or are they working in a fishbowl? Creating a physical space with signs and symbols that promote the desired emotional regulation behaviors will enable employees to more consistently and effectively manage their emotional labor among co-workers and with customers.

The middle level of culture – the aspects of a culture that are documented in guidelines and rules – reveals what the organization claims to be about. Are display rules documented and shared with all employees, even those who don’t routinely provide customer service? How are the rules talked about? Emphasis should be placed on “feelings” rules rather than “display” rules, to build the recognition of the deep acting work that is preferred over simply changing an outward emotional expression. What other organizational statements reinforce the practices inherent in deep acting, such as being empathetic, taking the perspective of others, and fully embracing the service mission of the organization? Has the organization written a values statement or a service philosophy document where these practices could be made explicit? What guidelines or policies exist to describe the expectations of emotions expressed among library staff?

Finally, the deepest layer of organizational culture consists of the embedded ideas an organization holds about the nature of work, of effort, of time, of truth, and other fundamental dimensions of organizational life. Managers should explore how emotions are understood at this deep level of culture. For example, how open is the organization to honest expressions of emotions among employees? Research has shown that a climate of authenticity, that is, a work environment where group members are encouraged to authentically express their emotions with other group members reduces the negative effects of emotional labor and was particularly effective for employees most likely to engage in surface acting (Grandey et al. 2012). Is it acceptable to show anger to a colleague? A superior? A subordinate? What would it take to create a culture where emotions could be shared authentically, without leading to excessive affective conflict? Changes at this level are not easy to implement. However, the underlying beliefs about emotions in the workplace may be contributing to an environment less conducive to positive emotional labor. Exploring the shared beliefs about workplace emotion may reveal opportunities for cultural shifts that improve the environment.

## Summary

As this discussion has shown, managers have an array of strategies – at varying levels –to address emotional labor, summarized in Table 1. As a first step, just introducing the concept of emotional labor to library staff and opening a conversation where staff can share their experiences with emotional labor may be an effective way to begin to put into place best practices for managing emotional labor.

A great deal is asked of library managers. They must be knowledge experts in their functional area of librarianship (i.e. digital products, adult services, discipline-specific subject areas, technology); they must understand their community and their customers’ needs; and they also must understand how organizations work and how individuals best function in organizational settings.

Emotional labor is a concept that resonates widely in public librarianship and explains some amount of several negative outcomes for individuals in public libraries, such as symptoms of job burnout and reduced job satisfaction. Emotional labor is present in all types of library work and often places an invisible, but demanding burden on library workers. Fortunately managers are not without strategies to effectively cope with the strain of such emotion work. Managers who understand the concept of emotional labor and employ steps at a variety of response levels to buffer against the negative effects of emotional labor help create a more positive, better functioning work environment.

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