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Managing emotional labor for service employees: an HRM-based approach

Jatin Pandey

In the organizational context, emotional labor involves the process to bring about congruence between emotional displays desired by the organization and dictated by the job role *vis-à-vis* the projected or actual emotional displays by the employees. Consider the smile of an air hostess while boarding or alighting an aircraft or, for that matter, the concern shown by a nurse at a hospital; these are examples of emotional labor in action. Unlike the manufacturing setting where quality of output is dependent on tangible components (measurable specifications like dimensions and weight), quality in service settings to a large extent is dependent on the verbal as well as nonverbal interactions between the service provider and the service recipient. This interaction, often a matter of seconds, becomes the “benchmark” or the yardstick of service quality based on which a customer would evaluate the service rendered to her/him. Scholars are of the view that “Like a sculptor needs physical effort to carve a stone similarly a community health worker needs psychological effort to carve a positive image in the minds of the beneficiary” (Pandey and Singh, 2015, p. 58).

Emotional labor, when sustained for long may have detrimental effects not only for the employee well-being but also for the organization. The growth in the service economy dictates the importance of emotional labor in many newer forms of work, such as call centers, counselors, and community health-care workers. Organizations thus need to manage the thin line between maintaining employee and customer well-being (almost simultaneously) to maintain top-notch service quality. The HR manager becomes thereby an important boundary spanner between the organization and its employee. To address the challenge of emotional labor, HR needs to look minutely at four critical processes beginning with recruitment and selection, followed by compensation, training and development, and lastly performance management.

Let us delve a little deeper into the four processes to see how each of them is critical and inter-dependant in the larger scheme of things and present guidelines on how to adapt these process for managing job roles that involve emotional labor.

Recruitment and selection obviously is the entry point of individuals into an organization, and following are important factors to be considered in this process:

- Emotional labor to be considered as an “affective” job demand (Brotheridge and Grandey, 2002) and clearly mentioned as part of the job description of customer-facing jobs.
- *Focus on employee personality*: Emotional labor warrants interaction with customers, and therefore, managing the displayed emotions is critical to service delivery. Holland’s personality–job fit theory recommends “social” or “helpers” type to be fit for roles that involve interactions with others (Holland, 1966); therefore, a conscious effort on hiring people with social personality who like to meet and interact with people must be made.

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- *Focus on emotional intelligence:* In addition to intelligence quotient (IQ), emotional intelligence (EI) must also be given weightage. Researchers have confirmed the significance of EI in the context of emotional labor (Kim *et al.*, 2012).
- *Focus on communication and interpersonal skills:* Verbal and non-verbal communication are the instruments for conveying emotions to a customer; therefore, these along with interpersonal skills must be emphasized on during the selection process.
- *Focus on the attitude toward job:* Attitude toward the job is the major steering mechanism for performance of emotional labor (Callaghan and Thompson, 2002). A fun park guide who entertains visitors will be able to perform better emotional labor if she/he inherently likes the job; similarly, a nurse would perform better if she believes that her/his job involves helping others, and hence, is important.

Compensation decisions play a major role in dictating how an individual evaluates her/his *vis-à-vis* the amount of effort needed for performing the job *per se*. Listed below are some important factors to be considered in this regard. Employees sell emotional labor in return for compensation; therefore, emotional labor has exchange value (Hochschild, 1983):

- *Compensation:* It plays an important role in emotional labor. It indicates what in the job is valued by an employer. Traditional construction of wage hierarchy fails to take into account emotional labor performed, and there have been calls by researchers to redesign compensation practices (Steinberg, 1999). Introduce wage premiums for instance for jobs involving high emotional labor *vis-à-vis* jobs involving high physical or cognitive labor.
- *Quality rather than quantity to dictate performance:* The focus should be on the quality of a customer being serviced (rather than the numbers of customers being serviced) through customer satisfaction/feedback forms.
- *Rewards and recognition:* Rewards and recognition for those who perform exceptionally well in service interaction will motivate others to follow suit.

Under the ambit of training and development, following are some important factors to be considered:

- *Training on managing emotional labor:* Training on how effectively emotional demands can be met by employees should be provided (Pandey and Singh, 2016a). These include projecting desired emotions through visible aspects like expressions and tone.
- *Effective performance of emotional labor:* It should be considered as a competency, and competency developmental programs for affective skill development should be fostered.
- *Existence of service scripts:* Service scripts help employees in following a pre-determined course of actions under different situations (Hennig-Thurau *et al.*, 2006). These service scripts also shield employees from panicking in case of unwanted situations, e.g. health emergency in an aircraft.
- *Feedback on emotional labor performance in service encounters:* It should be done to identify the shortcomings, and developmental feedback on how to perform it better in the next service encounter must be provided.
- *Organizational support:* Research has shown that perception of organizational support can reduce emotional labor outcomes (Duke *et al.*, 2009); therefore, organization must support and see to it that the support is perceived by employees.
- *Developing spaces to buffer impact of work on family and vice versa:* A barrier between work and family space needs to be created by having a time lag between the entry and

exit of these domains (Pandey and Singh, 2016b). A space for employees to relax before they enter or leave the organizational premise can have a buffering effect in seepage emotions from one domain to other.

- *Increasing self-efficacy through motivational environment:* Self-efficacy dictates that employees feel equipped to perform their job roles; therefore, motivational tools and techniques like group support should be developed to enhance self-efficacy. Research studies on nurses have supported this view (Yang, 2011).
- *Emotional intelligence:* It aids in handling social encounters (Grandey, 2000). Self-awareness and emotional intelligence to be enhanced through training programs so that employees are able to manage themselves as well as manage the interactions with customers and other employees as well.

Performance management for service roles: Unlike traditional manufacturing setting where individuals can be judged on the quantity and/or quality of units produced, service settings with customer interactive roles need a finer grain approach. The following should be kept in mind, therefore:

- Adherence to service script should serve as the matrix to measure performance. Service scripts provide time-tested course of action to be followed for frequent service interactions; they thus minimize the dissonance between the expected and actual customer response and in turn help in serving more customers with the quality required and desired.
- Creativity in dealing with situations outside service script is to be given recognition and recording. There are interactions which are not covered in service scripts: hence, how effectively and creatively an employee addresses these “out of script interactions” should be recorded for future reference after through feedback on possible improvements. In addition, the concerned employee must be recognized for out-of-the-box-thinking.
- Customers are the best judge of how effective the emotional labor strategy has been; thus, their inputs are vital for evaluating performance. Customer ratings of service should thus be included as part of multi-rater feedback system which should also include ratings by coworkers, supervisors, and subordinates.
- Feedback by experienced personnel to new recruits on their performance will help transmit the unsaid rules of the game from one generation to other.

Recognition and respect for affective investments made by employees for the organization will lead to a better quality of relationship between the organization and employee. A better fit with the organization will hence lead to enhancement and retention of the human capital. The growth of the service sector warrants more HR managers, who are aware and equipped to deal with employees who perform emotional labor as part of their job roles.

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