Stress Management

Managing the Hidden Stress of Emotional Labor

by Susan David

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With the possible exception of *Sesame Street*'s Oscar the Grouch, very few of us have the luxury of being able to be completely and utterly ourselves all the time at work. The rest of us are called upon to perform what psychologists call "emotional labor" — the effort it takes to keep your professional game face on when what you're doing is not concordant with how you feel. We do this outside the office too (making polite chit-chat in the elevator when you're feeling tired and surly comes to mind), but it is perhaps more important at work because most of us are there many hours per week, and our professional images and livelihoods depend on it.

For example, your boss makes a meant-to-be inspiring comment about doing more with less, and you smile and nod, but what you'd like to do is upend the conference table. A customer talks down to you about the poor service she says she received, and you're unfailingly polite and solicitous, even though you resent being patronized. Or perhaps you simply had a poor night's sleep, yet you push yourself to remain energetic and upbeat because you've been told — more often than you care to count — that "great" leaders bring positivity and inspiration to their team.

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Emotional labor is a near universal part of every job, and of life; often it's just called being polite. However, the extent to which one acts makes a meaningful difference. A person can "deep act"

in a way that is still connected with his or her core values and beliefs at work ("Yes, the customer is being patronizing, but I empathize with her and care about solving her problem") or "surface act" ("I'll be nice here, but deep down I'm really spitting nails").

Research shows that the tendency to engage in this latter aspect of emotional labor — surface acting, in which there is a high level of incongruity between what people feel and what they show, either through faking or suppressing their emotions — comes with real costs to the person and the organization. When people habitually evoke the stress of surface acting, they'll be more prone to depression and anxiety, decreased job performance, and burnout. This has an effect on others, too: Leaders who surface act at work are more likely to be abusive to their employees, by belittling them and invading their privacy, for example. And job stress can spill over into home life. In one study of hotel employees who did a lot of surface acting on the job ("Yes, ma'am, I'd be delighted to bring you a fluffier robe!") their spouses were more likely to see their partners' work as a source of conflict and to wish they would find another job, in the hopes that their relationship would be less strained.

There are common contexts in which surface acting comes about, including:

- a mismatch between your personality (for example, level of introversion or extroversion) and what is expected from you in your role

- a misalignment of values, when what you're being asked to do doesn't accord with what you believe in
- a workplace culture in which particular ways of expressing emotion (what psychologists call "display rules") are endorsed — or not

The ideal, of course, would be to work in a job to which you are so well suited that your actions and feelings are always in perfect harmony, eliminating the need for you to be exhaustingly inauthentic all day. In real life, however, the goal of keeping your surface acting to a minimum and instead engaging in deep acting, where the role is aligned with who you truly are, is a more attainable one. Assuming you find meaning in the work you do and don't feel you're in the entirely wrong field, here are some things you can do at work to reduce your emotional labor and feel better about the way you're spending your days.

Remind yourself why you're in the job you're in. Connecting to your larger purpose — you are learning skills that are critical to your overall career; you're in a dull but stable job right now because your children need health insurance and being a good parent is important to you — will help you feel more connected to your work.

Explore "want to" thinking. It's easy to fall into a "time to make the donuts" mentality, thinking of all work as something you "have to" do. And most of us don't have the financial resources for work to truly be optional. But allowing yourself to appreciate the aspects of your job that give you a charge — maybe it's brainstorming with colleagues or making systems more efficient — elevates your work into something you choose to do, rather than something required of you. To be clear, I am not suggesting you "just think positive" or try to rationalize away real concerns.

But do become more aware of the subtle traps of language in which work tasks, even ones you might enjoy, are framed as chores. If you can't find a true "want to" in key components of your work, it may be a sign that change is in order.

Do some job crafting. Consider whether you can work with your manager to tweak your job so that it is more aligned with what is of value to you. For example, if, when you visit the satellite offices of your firm, you're stimulated by the new people you meet and their different ways of doing things, perhaps you could propose a project that could involve more of these kinds of visits. The goal is to make your job more interesting, so that less emotional labor is required.

When we typically think of stress at work, we focus on time pressures, information overload, and change as the causes. Yet the emotional labor that you invest in your job can be a significant source of demand, and is worth considering and managing.

Susan David is a founder of the Harvard/McLean Institute of Coaching, is on faculty at Harvard Medical School, and is recognized as one of the world's leading management thinkers. She is the author of the Wall Street Journal bestseller *Emotional Agility* (Avery) based on the concept named by HBR as a Management Idea of the Year. An in-demand speaker and advisor, David has worked with the senior leadership of hundreds of major organizations, including the United Nations, Ernst & Young, and the World Economic Forum. Visit her website to take her free Emotional Agility assessment.





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