



*"We don't get people who call up and say, 'Oh, I'm happy. You're doing a wonderful job.' We talk to people at their absolute worst, on probably the worst day of their life. They can cuss and swear, and we're not allowed to cuss and swear back."  
– 911 Call Taker*

## MANAGING EMOTIONAL LABOR

John W. Link  
Jo Lee Loveland Link

Emotional Labor is a term first coined by Arlie Hochschild in her 1983 book, ***The Managed Heart***, defined as "work that requires employees to present, unstintingly, emotional states such as caring, enthusiasm, and friendliness to customers or clients."

Emotional Laborers are employees who are generally required to show unflinching courtesy and politeness to their customers, regardless of their treatment. But more importantly they are required to be emotionally inauthentic and subjugate their own emotions to perform their job. Often overlooked, the fact is that jobs requiring Emotional Labor are hard. And since the toll of these challenging jobs is often day-by-day, there is a cumulative emotional exhaustion that occurs as a result.

**Emotional Labor jobs include:**

- **Customer-centric/ Service Environments:** Salesmen, Administrative Clerks, Retail Clerks, Call Centers, and Food Servers/Wait Staff
- **Helping Professions:** Doctors, Therapists, Nurses, Police, and Firemen
- **Media Talent:** Radio, TV, and Improvisation Actors.

This is vastly different from physical labor, which may tax the body or even numb the mind. But in many physical work environments, there are no/ few requirements for civility. Many enjoy physical jobs or technical jobs because they can choose whether to authentically interact with their peers while they work, or not interact at all.

The core problem of Emotional Labor is the “stress response” produced by Emotional Laborers having to manage and subordinate their emotions and to be focused almost solely on the needs of the customer/client.

When we are frightened by a car accident or an intruder, we get a full-blown “fight or flight” response that creates a rush of adrenaline. Stress is the low-level version of the “fight or flight” response to perceived emotional, social or physical danger (such as fear of losing a job) that causes “a trickle,” rather than “a rush” of adrenaline. This trickle of adrenaline has profound mind/body affects by raising blood sugar, raising blood pressure, turning off digestion, turning off sexual function and affecting our emotions and thinking, especially over time. Stress is the culprit in many disease conditions. Stress also is the enemy of effective management of Emotional Laborers.

Much of the current theory of management comes out of managing workers who perform routine physical labor and generally ignores the Emotional Labor aspects of some roles. This industrial mindset often includes a view of Customer Service as a mechanized assembly-line process. In reality, good customer service or client interactions are closer to the creation of “artisanal products,” than a production line.

## **SYMPTOMS OF NOT EFFECTIVELY MANAGING EMOTIONAL LABORERS**

When an organization has any two of the behaviors below, it is an indication of ineffective management of the Emotional Labor force:

- **High turnover of the Emotional Laborers and/or those who directly manage them.**
- **High number of customer complaints of Emotional Laborer indifference, insensitivity, over-sharing or even hostility. (This is not to be confused with complaints about products, services, policies or procedures.)**

- **Emotional Laborer burnout and low morale as measured by survey, or as evidenced by outbursts at other employees, excessive sick leave /absenteeism, and bickering among employees, etc.**
- **Widespread Emotional Laborer drug or alcohol abuse.**

So, the temptation of organizational managers is to view these symptoms as nuisances and look for easy answers. Many organizations will spend billions on Customer Service Training, CRM Software, Recruitment or Drug Testing – and yet ignore managing the emotional needs of their Emotional Laborers.

## **NOT ALL EMOTIONAL LABOR IS EQUAL**

The Emotional Labor of a retail sales clerk is not the same as a hostage negotiator. The intensity and impact of Emotional Labor on the Emotional Laborer will be dependent on several variables:

### **Real World Impact on Customer/Client:**

The degree of real world impact and intimacy of the customer/ client relationships has a huge impact on the Emotional Laborer. Interactions with police, banking, and health services have significant real-world impacts on their customers and the general public, and this creates huge customer/ client vulnerability. This vulnerability, in turn, can deeply affect Emotional Laborers themselves. And when the customer/ recipients of company services feel an institution has treated them unfairly, they tend to respond intensely or even lash out toward the Emotional Laborers.

### **Treatment by Customers:**

There are people who hold negative emotions against a coworker or family member, and who, seeking some kind of catharsis, discharge their anger and negative emotions by taking it out on Emotional Laborers. Some organizations tolerate high levels of such behavior and others will not. Bill collectors often experience disproportionate customer anger. More and more vendors are training their service call personnel to be adept at managing such frustrations and engage sympathetically, which reduces this kind of customer behavior. This contrasts starkly with some old school “hostility-based” collection approaches that encouraged these reactions.

### **Behavior Norms to Mask Emotions:**

When an organization demands enthusiastic or cheerful behaviors at all times, that adds to the stress. Some restaurants have very high standards for a kind of engagement demanding hyper-enthusiasm or flirtatious interaction with the customers regardless of the Emotional Laborer’s own mood or comfort.

### **Relationship with the Management:**

Some Managers bring a disinterested or even near-hostile relationship to Emotional Laborers. Low-end call centers and hospitality are notorious for

creating work cultures that at their core are adversarial, accompanied by business models that accept high turnover and relative indifference to new hires. A not-too-uncommon practice in auto dealerships is hiring an exorbitant number of new sales staff, knowing most will “wash out.” This kind of adversarial environment will often lead to friction among new hires and an atmosphere of unnecessary competitiveness among staff.

*“Clients do not come first. Employees come first. If you take care of your employees, they will take care of the clients.”*

*~ Richard Branson, Founder and CEO, Virgin Atlantic*

## **MANAGING EMOTIONAL LABOR HOLISTICALLY**

The key to successful Emotional Labor management is to holistically look at customer/client interaction as a system of interdependent elements that are greater than just the sum of the parts. Customer service is a series of complex dynamics that make customer/client and Emotional Laborer interaction work.

How well an Emotional Laborer treats customer/client may actually have more to do with management treatment of the staff and the organization’s policies than anything else.

One has to start looking at all parts of the system and their interactions-- the customers, the Emotional Laborers, the management team, the cultural norms of the organization, the processes, policies and procedures, and technology available and even the reputation of the organization among customers -- before investing in changes in technology, training, or Emotional Labor development activities.

The holistic analysis begins with fundamental questions intended to challenge management assumptions:

- Who are our clients/customers?
- What do they really want and need in their interaction? Do they really need “the happiest call center on earth” or will professional interaction suffice to make them feel better supported?
- What kinds of processes and policies will make them satisfied?
- What benefits are there for the company/ organization in improved service interactions? How does that improve customer loyalty and the bottom-line?
- Do you want Emotional Laborers to have only limited tools and procedures to meet customer needs, or do you want to empower them to create customer satisfaction, even though it may increase some costs?
- What kind talent pool of Emotional Laborers can you draw on and will they be able to perform the needed and expected interactions
- Do the Managers of the Emotional Laborers have the kinds of insights, training, or sensitivity to provide the levels of service interaction required?

- What respite do your Emotional Laborers have available? What do they need? (e.g. rest periods, support, ways to strengthen their capabilities, etc.)
- Do you have sufficient staff or scalability of staff to meet demands?

This kind of analysis is critical to finding the right processes, procedures and policies that allow Emotional Laborers to perform at their best.

## 15 KEYS TO MANAGE EMOTIONAL LABOR

At the core of good Emotional Labor Management is making sure that Emotional Labor staff feel connected to their organization's Mission, their Customers, their Peers, their Leadership and Themselves. The connection should be professional, but emotionally authentic. Next, give them the tools, training, and processes needed to effectively perform their role. Most importantly, reduce unnecessary stressors and give them the skills and support needed to manage the stress of Emotional Labor. Here are 15 keys to manage Emotional Labor in your organization:

**1. Hire The Right People:** Hiring the right people for Emotional Labor roles is much harder than most hires. There are some people who are not able to perform effectively in Emotional Labor roles, particularly if the role is demanding, or there is a short "on ramp." A candidate's resume is less important than the physical or phone interview. Ask searching questions about their Emotional Labor experiences and how they performed. Perhaps even ask them to role-play interacting with a difficult customer.

As a counter-example -- If your organization has rigid policies and a business model that is ungenerous to customers, don't hire empathetic Customer Service Representatives, hire tougher types. Hire people who are more comfortable with drawing firm lines with people or being yelled at to facilitate company profits. But, in an era of extensive social media, be prepared for the reputation of the company or organization to get around!

**2. Clarify Their Mission and Remind Them Often:** Emotion Labor almost always has some level of support for the customer/client defined in the role. The sense of value and purpose in their work is becoming way more critical to the new Millennial Generation. Even if the mission is just a "great lunch experience for the customers," that is a much more a compelling mission for the Millennial workforce than "we are here to get the work done" or just "we make money for the owners." Whatever the mission, Emotional Laborers need to be reminded and re-validated in their connection to it.

**3. Conducive Policies and Procedures:** Evaluate your policies and procedures to make sure that they are conducive to providing good customer service and don't put your Emotional Laborers in difficult positions with your customers/clients. Bad policies will likely be hard and draining for your Emotional Laborers to implement with your customer/clients.

**4. Coaching Rather Than Gotcha:** Focus on using performance metrics and customer/client feedback as tools to identify those who need coaching and not as a “gotcha” excuse for slapping them with warnings or punishments. As W. Edwards Demming wrote: “Quality is impossible where people are afraid to tell the truth.” You must drive fear from the workplace and replace with it respect. Coaching poor performing staff generally has a much higher ROI than firing and rehiring. Some of the most problematic employees can become very good performers with some investment in coaching to improve their performance.

**5. Be Holistic and Strategic About Metrics:** Many managers focus too much on productivity metrics. Focusing on productivity alone will increase the stress on the Emotional Labor workforce. A sense of the organization’s real strategy is helpful here. Are your call center reps driven to take as many calls per hour as possible? Or are they encouraged to focus on customer satisfaction by spending the time necessary? What other metrics do you need to focus on: e.g. return calls from incomplete management of the first call? What about employee satisfaction, or even staff turnover? Metrics must be a picture of the whole system.

**6. Rewards, Recognition and Healthy Competition:** Rewards and recognition can be either formal, such as an award, or informal such as an email or verbal expression of appreciation or praise. By contrast: Don’t preach, encourage mutually reinforcing team behavior among those who provide Emotional Labor, and have rewards only focused on each individual’s performance, stirring hostile competitiveness among staff.

In fact, avoid useless and counter-productive competition, which often has negative consequences, such as loss of pay or job security. The Pulitzer- and Tony-Award winning play, *Glengarry Glen Ross*, portrayed a sales team where the sales contest losers – all but the two top performers -- would lose their jobs, with disastrous consequences. The play struck a nerve with audiences, many who had experienced similar job circumstances.

More successful: Team rewards can be very effective in validating Emotional Laborers. Even so, team competitions can be energizing only if rewards are fun, and consequences for flawed performance are not dire.

**7. Make It Clear That The Organization Does NOT Tolerate Its Staff Being Abused:** Nothing destroys the emotional resiliency in your Emotional Laborers than having abusive clients and customers reflexively supported at their expense. Emotional Laborers need to know you have their back, or a single incident can escalate into their emotional detachment from the organization, poor performance and eventual turnover.

Conversely, it is critical to determine if non-verbal or verbal triggers by the Emotional Laborer caused a customer incident. Here you may need to conduct some Manager retraining, ensuring the Manager involved is objective and inquiring. It is absolutely a requirement that any Emotional Laborer have an opportunity to explain their side first. If there are managers who are not supporting your front-line staff, they may need additional coaching also.

**8. Human Centered Staffing and Scheduling:** One of the problems with Emotional Labor jobs is they often tend work outside the normal 9-5 schedule. Scheduling is one of the most critical aspects of managing Emotional Labor. Start with hiring enough staff to be able to scale to staff demand and have slack time as needed. This allows Emotional Laborers time off for some holidays, family events, and some kind regular vacation. Sufficient and scalable staffing is critical to reducing turnover.

**9. Provide Emotional Labor Staff With Self-Awareness Training of Whether They Are Introverts and Extroverts:** Both Introverts and Extroverts can be effective at Emotional Labor roles. However very extreme versions of both personality types often have challenges in Emotional Labor roles. The value of personality type self-awareness for the Emotional Laborer and their managers is defining how each re-charges:

- **Introverts** can be very effective, since they bring listening skills, self-awareness and sensitivity to customer/client interaction, but tend to run out of emotional steam more quickly. At the end of the day they need have quiet time to re-energize or the “bath, book and bed “ re-energizing approach.
- **Extroverts** can make their customer/client feel connected and supported. While Extroverts tend not to find the interaction as draining as their Introverted peers, when they do run out energy, they can become very anxious. Extroverts may find going out with their peers after work, helps them re-energize.

**10. Organized Venting:** Periodically letting staff share challenging customer stories in a group context can be surprisingly cathartic. One of the authors used to have staff periodically share their weirdest customer experiences, without sharing the customer’s identity. The staff shared a common laugh, some catharsis, and understanding that they were not the only ones with difficult customers. This also provided an opportunity to provide some shared skill coaching on how to deal with challenging customers.

**11. Team Building and Social Activities:** Many organizations fail to invest in the social needs of the organization whether it is team building exercises, holiday parties, attending a ball game together, or staff picnics. Additionally, some team building, especially for introverts, can be done using social media such as Facebook or internal SharePoint sites.

**12. Give Staff Control Over their Environment:** Experiments show that if people have some level of control in their environment, their reaction to stressors is reduced. The online shoe store Zappos lets their CSR’s have significant flexibility in their customer interactions, wide interpretation of policies, and freedom in decoration of their workspaces.

**13. Provide High Quality and Available Employee Assistance Program (EAP):** Employee Assistance Programs (EAP) can be contracted to provide

psychological and life counseling which ultimately pay for themselves in increased productivity, reduced anti-social behavior, lower health care costs, and reduced turnover.

**14. Provide Stress Management Programs:** Stress Management is about turning off the trickle of adrenalin caused by stressors. Many EAP providers, health care providers and insurance companies can provide Stress Management Programs that include learning about stress and stressors, the lifestyle choices that Emotional Laborers can make such as diet, exercise and sleep. Increasing numbers of companies are alert to the pressures that Emotional Labor experience and are providing an array of supportive offerings: Yoga and Tai Chi classes, meditation groups, and even nap rooms. These tools all can help turn off mental static and encourage relaxation and centering.

**15. Fun:** High performing teams tend to have fun. Think the *Harlem Globetrotters* or *Cirque du Soleil*. "When we make work fun, it becomes play." Allow folks to have fun whenever possible. Organizations that focus on needless conformity, professionalism at all times and a rigid behavior code are adding additional stressors and Emotional Labor. Having some fun activities or finding the fun in the work, are not only good for morale, they increase creativity and loyalty to the organization.

## CONCLUSION

Managing unique aspects of Emotional Labor may seem to the hard-nosed business guy on the outside as "warm and fuzzy," "New Age," and just a nice-to-have approach -- but "not real management." However, successfully integrating holistic and human scale management practices into Emotional Labor Management can create an accomplished, compelling, and consistent Emotional Labor Force that can transform customers into your extended marketing force and advocates for your company.

Customer's positive experiences with your staff become may well become stories on Facebook, on other Social Media, or a conversation at a party where your customer describes how well your Emotional Laborers treated them. Furthermore, having a well-trained and loyal Emotional Labor force excited to come to work every day is both cost-effective and a joy to be around.

John W. Link and Jo Loveland Link  
Consultants in Organizational Dynamics, Strategy and Strategic Communications  
[www.volvoxinc.com](http://www.volvoxinc.com)  
[johnwlink@hotmail.com](mailto:johnwlink@hotmail.com)  
540-465-1491