

The Emotional Labor of Being a Leader

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Summary

While leaders have always performed emotional labor, this demand has increased dramatically over the last few years. It's time for organizations to step up and to stop dismissing this substantial emotional burden. By recognizing emotional labor and providing proper education, training, and support, organizations can help leaders effectively handle this essential but often overlooked requirement of their role.

Effective leaders have long managed the emotions they display at work. They project optimism and confidence when team members feel thwarted and discouraged. Or notwithstanding their skepticism about the company's strategic direction, they carry the company flag and work to rally the troops.

This emotional labor, whereby leaders manage their feelings and expressions to fulfill the expectations of their role, is substantial. In fact, research suggests that leaders perform emotional labor with a frequency matching that of front-line service workers who must consistently deliver "service with a smile." Given leaders' substantial influence over group moods and emotional states and how these impact organizational performance, this emotional labor is essential.

Despite its importance, however, it has historically been overlooked by academics and organizations alike. And now, due to changes in the work landscape, the emotional labor leaders must perform is greater than ever.

Leaders are expected to attend to employees' mental and physical health and burnout (while also addressing their own), demonstrate bottomless sensitivity and compassion, and provide opportunities for flexibility and remote work — all while managing the bottom line, doing more with less, and overcoming challenges with hiring and retaining talent. They should appear authentic, but if they get *too* honest about their distress, others may lose confidence in their leadership, known as the “authenticity paradox.”

Without proper support, there will be significant costs to this additional burden of emotional labor. Unmanaged, it puts leaders at an increased risk of burnout and health issues. In turn, organizations risk decreases in productivity and performance and high turnover of leadership talent.

To avoid these costs, organizations must support their leaders in managing the emotional labor they perform. Here's how:

Recognize emotional labor as labor

Leaders may quickly recognize the mental fatigue that can come from cognitive labor and the wear and tear from physically pushing through long days or sleepless nights. However, they often underestimate and neglect to directly address their role's emotional labor.

To cope with emotional demands, leaders may “surface act” and put on a game face that belies their true feelings. Unfortunately, suppressing and faking emotions has high costs for both the leader and the organization. The effort expended reduces self-control resources, making leaders likelier to lash out at work, for example, by belittling or making rude comments to a coworker. The stress of consistent surface acting can also impact leaders' health, making them more prone to bodily aches, burnout, insomnia, and drinking heavily when they get home.

Business schools and leadership development programs rarely prepare leaders to handle the emotional demands of their roles. So, leaders are likely unaware of the ineffectiveness and adverse outcomes of emotion suppression and surface-level acting. Recognition is the first step toward better performance and health.

To support leaders in reducing the incongruity between how they feel and what they communicate, organizations should assess the emotional culture of their organization. Recent research demonstrates that allowing employees to express their full range of emotions at work can result in better team-building, idea generation, and problem-solving. Organizations can encourage such authenticity by creating psychologically safe climates where employees trust they can share distress without being branded as weak or soft.

Promote self-compassion from the top down

Given the pervasive myth that leaders must be strong, some may be reluctant to embrace self-compassion. Many mistakenly shun the practice due to misplaced fears that it might make them complacent or undermine their success.

However, research strongly confirms that leaders who practice self-compassion have higher emotional intelligence, resilience, and integrity. In short, they are better leaders, and there's a trickle-down effect to their teams and organizations. When leaders practice self-compassion, they treat others more compassionately. One study showed that self-compassionate leaders helped others more with task-related and personal problems. In turn, stakeholders perceive these leaders as more competent and civil. Further, leaders who show vulnerability and admit they don't have everything figured out create a more psychologically safe context where others can feel safe to share.

Organization can support their leaders by educating them on the numerous benefits of self-compassion and encouraging them to practice being patient and understanding with themselves when they don't handle things perfectly. When leaders trust that it's okay to not be okay, it can help them better align their true feelings with their expressions and reduce the toll of surface acting and emotional labor.

Provide training on handling others' emotions

When employees share their suffering or resentment at work, it can be difficult for leaders. Distress and frustration about work conditions can feel like a personal attack and create defensive reactions. Even when team members vent about non-work distress, leaders are expected to show compassion and can feel drained from the effort. Further, leaders can "catch" the team members' distress or frustration and carry that load throughout the day, making them more likely to subsequently mistreat others.

The good news is that leaders can neutralize compassion fatigue and negative emotional contagion by learning new emotional skills, such as reframing *emotions as information* to be processed. By purposefully assuming the role of information seeker, leaders gain valuable information about how to lead effectively *and* protect themselves from the collateral damage of lending an ear. This is similar to the "compassionate detachment" that doctors learn to mitigate witnessing pain and suffering. As we illustrate in leadership workshops that we've conducted, this is the difference between absorbing emotional comments like a sponge versus holding them out as objects in your open palm.

Organizations can offer skills training that helps leaders build emotional capabilities so they are less drained by their emotional labor. Interventions that train mindfulness — accepting experiences and emotions rather than judging or avoiding them — reduce the need for managers to surface act and the costs of that effort. Participating in emotional skills training can also help managers feel more genuinely compassionate and demonstrate more servant leadership behaviors.

Offer peer support groups

As the adage goes and the research proves, it's lonely at the top. Contributors include physically separate offices and psychological separation from possessing confidential information, power distance, and high-level responsibility for decisions. As one manager stated in interviews about leader loneliness, "You feel lonely because, in the end, the final responsibility is always going to be yours."

Organizations can mitigate this isolation and loneliness by ensuring their leaders have peer support groups where they can share their experiences and stresses. Organizations can provide these forums internally or sponsor leaders' membership in external peer groups, such as YPO or Vistage. As we have seen firsthand in our leader coaching circles and workshops, leaders feel immense relief simply knowing they're not alone with their experience. The camaraderie and support that leaders receive in these forums sustains them through professional and personal challenges and fosters their long-term success.

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