

“May I Help You?”

Engagement and Emotional Labor in Frontline Senior Living Employees

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Issue in Focus..... 5

Objectives and Methodology10

Key Findings11

Implications for Practice.....14

References.....16

EXECUTIVE OVERVIEW

In this study, we explored an often-overlooked aspect of staff-resident relationships within a Life Plan Community (previously called Continuing Care Retirement Community) in order to identify additional ways to support employee engagement, focusing on what researchers call “emotional labor.” In customer service-oriented jobs, employees are typically called upon to present a positive, solution-oriented approach in their communication with customers. Not surprisingly, there are occasions where employees feel frustrated or less than positive, whether because of an inability to help the customer, or due to some other aspect of their interaction. In such instances, employers naturally expect their staff to maintain a positive tone and presentation of emotions;

however, this can be challenging for the employee, particularly if they are not skilled in empathizing with customers. Thus, it is important to determine to what extent employees are experiencing such challenges, and for those who are, to provide them with strategies for interacting with customers that are both positive and emotionally healthy.

This preliminary examination includes analyses on the experience of emotional labor from 37 frontline employees working in a Chicagoland Life Plan Community. Participants completed a 26-item questionnaire sharing their perceptions and beliefs regarding their organization's expectations of expression of emotions while interacting with residents. Additionally, survey items probed participants regarding their emotional experiences and the type of strategies they employ when confronted with situations where they felt emotions, such as frustration, that they did not feel they should express.

The study produced three key findings:

- 1) Employees recognize the expectation that they should manage any negative feelings they might experience in order to maintain positive interactions with residents.
- 2) The data showed a positive correlation between recognizing expectations and the frequency with which employees reported engaging in a form of emotional labor known as "surface acting." This means that they were *acting* one way on the surface but *feeling* another on a deeper level, without empathizing with the other individual. (This report will elaborate on how this type of emotional labor has been found to have both positive and negative consequences for employees in other industries.)
- 3) There was a significant relationship between time spent interacting with residents and the amount of surface acting reported.

Ultimately, understanding how senior living staff experience interactions with residents can provide lessons to support employee engagement, retention, and staff satisfaction.

ISSUE IN FOCUS

In service-oriented positions where employees have frequent interactions with customers, and, in the case of Life Plan Communities, residents, these interactions often affect employees emotionally. For example, they may feel a sense of purpose and satisfaction when finding a solution to a resident's difficult situation. Conversely, they may feel frustrated if they are unable to find a solution that the resident appreciates. In both cases, there is an emotional consequence to the interaction. From the perspective of the employer, employees who maintain their composure and positive tone may appear to manage situations effectively—and in one sense, they do. Senior living communities strive to create a positive environment by training staff to convey a positive outlook in their interactions. Communities invest in this training because they recognize that employees may encounter situations which they find emotionally challenging, and that employees have a major impact on the satisfaction and well-being of residents. **What employers may not be aware of, however, is that although two employees may each manage a difficult situation by presenting themselves in a positive and solution-oriented manner, the emotional impact on each individual may be very different, depending on the way in which they deal with the internal emotional aspect of the interaction.** Research suggests that certain ways of experiencing these interactions help to decrease the stress of the interaction, while others may exacerbate it. Over time, these approaches may impact employee engagement and job satisfaction.

While the emotional welfare and satisfaction of residents during interactions with staff is a topic of research and practical attention in senior living, the staff members' emotional experience has received less attention. Yet, such studies may shed light on helpful strategies to support employees, and by extension, residents.

This study provides an initial look at how staff perceive, and are emotionally affected by, interactions with residents. To address this issue, we surveyed Life Plan Community staff (1) to understand how they view their employer's expectations regarding management of emotions while interacting with residents, and (2) to determine what strategies employees use when they need to manage challenging emotions. This report provides an initial look into how the participants perceived these issues, and the behaviors that they engage in. This in turns provides the basis for recommendations for employee training.

THE CONSTRUCT OF “EMOTIONAL LABOR”

Working in a continuum of care environment can be both challenging and rewarding. In particular, it poses unique demands because it involves work that has been termed *emotional labor* (EL). EL involves a mix of emotional requirements (those demands that exist in the environment), emotion regulation (displaying certain types of emotional responses), and emotion performance (behaving in a way that is consistent with certain emotional states). Performing work that is high in EL can be challenging, because regulating emotions can be demanding, stressful, and depleting—particularly if the demands are continual and not well-suited to a worker’s personality. Yet, work high in EL can also be highly rewarding and energizing,

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particularly if workers understand the positive impact they can have on residents. EL within the senior living industry is under-studied and deserving of research attention both for the benefit of the industry and of its workforce and resident populations.

In most theories of EL, organizations have specific “on-stage” policies or expectations that function as standards for engagement while interacting with customers. To varying degrees, these standards are embedded in the mission and values of many Life Plan Communities. EL in the senior living industry involves staff being cognizant of how to interact with residents in the most friendly, compassionate, and understanding ways possible—even on days when they may not be feeling quite so positive. Thus, a central focus of EL research conducted to-date has been to more fully understand how employees in customer service positions can engage properly with residents when they are not feeling very positive.

Previous research has found three basic strategies that customer service employees tend to enlist in such instances. The first option is to simply show how they feel, even if it’s negative. This engagement technique has obvious downsides, in that the employees are not performing their jobs in the way they’ve been trained to do, and it is likely to result in experiences that are less than optimal for residents. The other two routes are (a) for employees to display emotions they don’t actually feel (e.g., act happy) and/or suppress emotions they do feel (e.g., don’t show frustration), or (b) to adjust their emotions internally so that sincere emotional displays and engagement with residents follow. In the research literature, the first strategy is known as *surface acting* and the second technique has been coined *deep acting*. The latter is a bit of a misnomer, as the experience of deep acting deviates from what most what call “acting” into the realm of empathy. Both surface acting and deep acting are considered compensatory strategies

that employees utilize when their immediate emotional reaction to a situation is considered inappropriate for display within the workplace. **The distinction between these two strategies is at the heart of this study, and employers may be completely unaware of it.** An employer may simply want employees to act in a positive manner, not realizing that which of these two strategies the employees utilize affects their long-term engagement, satisfaction, and retention.

Thinking of emotional labor as surface and deep acting is beneficial for several reasons, because it can help explain negative outcomes such as individual stress and health problems, and positive results such as customer service. Also, if surface and deep acting lead to different positive or negative outcomes, suggestions can be made for organizational training and stress management programs to promote one type over the other (Grandey, 2000).

There is a general consensus that all customer service employees must, at certain times, conceal their emotions (surface acting) or try to empathize and experience more positive emotions (deep acting) (e.g., Ashforth & Humphrey, 1993; Diefendorff & Gosserand, 2003). Given this assumption, what are the consequences for employees—particularly those dealing with older adult populations—who regularly engage in surface and/or deep acting strategies? And how does this relate to engagement?

Generally speaking, emotion research has shown that the inhibition of negative emotions over time can be associated with a variety of physical ailments, such as high blood pressure and cancer (Gross, 1998; King & Emmons, 1990; Smith, 1992). Hence, while surface and deep acting allow employees to effectively perform their jobs as expected and create positive experiences for the customer, these techniques may also contribute to unfavorable outcomes with respect to employees' physical health and psychological well-being over time. Yet, it's worth noting that under some circumstances, expression of positive emotions can also cause physiological changes that may result in increased well-being for employees (Zajonc, 1985). In other words, the physical act of smiling may improve your mood. However, these experiments were carried out by physiologists and experimental psychologists primarily in laboratory settings, and so it is helpful to look at research specifically addressing these issues in the workplace.

Examining EL studies, we find that emotional exhaustion, which can lead to job burnout and decreased job satisfaction, has been linked to on-the-job emotional labor in other customer service industries (e.g., food service). The extant literature shows that emotional exhaustion and job burnout are more likely to occur when: (1) an employee is emotionally invested in interactions with customers, and (2) the employee has little recourse to recuperate from the

drain on his or her emotional resources (Jackson, Schwab, & Schuler, 1986). The first condition is more likely to occur when repeated customer interactions are the norm—such as is the experience with frontline senior living staff.

The second condition is woven into the structure of the customer service experience within Life Plan Communities by the fact that the customer literally lives where point-of-service exchanges occurs. It is not surprising then, that most frontline Life Plan Community staff positions have some potential for burnout. Moreover, customer service employees with extensive customer interaction tend to be at increased risk of experiencing lower levels of job satisfaction (e.g., Abraham, 1998; Adelman, 1995; Morris & Feldman, 1997). It is not surprising that these types of positions generally have such a high turnover rate.

However, these findings are actually quite promising for the senior living industry, since they indicate that the work staff are doing is valuable and meaningful at a personal level. And, with proper training (as discussed on page 14), staff can learn how to manage their emotions in a

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healthy manner, while increasing their level of engagement in the workplace. The reason for this is that the mode of EL undertaken (e.g., surface versus deep acting) has been found to make a difference. For example, surface acting has been found to lead to feelings of inauthenticity and consequently job dissatisfaction. On the other hand, when

an employee engages in deep acting during an interaction with a customer, this has been found to be associated with feelings of personal accomplishment and, by association, job satisfaction (e.g., Kruml & Geddes, 2000). **Thus, it is of pivotal importance to determine what route of emotional labor staff tend to use to manage their emotions when interacting with residents. If they are using more surface acting, it seems they are at greater risk of burnout. In this case, the next step would be to determine strategies to combat this burnout.**

THE PRESENT STUDY

By surveying employees, this study aimed to determine to what extent Life Plan Community frontline staff understood expectations for positive interaction with residents, which strategies (surface and/or deep acting) they employed, and the balance between the two. The following

sections describe how the study was carried out, notable results, and discussion of implications of these findings for frontline customer service providers within the context of senior living.

METHODOLOGY

HOW WAS THE STUDY CONDUCTED?

Employees at a Life Plan Community in the Chicagoland area were asked if they would like to participate in a study about emotional labor. Those who consented completed 26 survey items (in either English or Spanish) that asked them to rate their agreement with statements assessing (a) perceptions of their organization's expectations regarding expression of emotion when interacting with residents, (b) frequency, duration, and quality of their interactions with

residents, and (c) strategies they used during interactions with residents (i.e., naturally felt emotional displays, surface acting, and deep acting).

WHO PARTICIPATED IN THE STUDY?

Responses from 37 frontline Life Plan Community employees who completed the survey were included in the analyses. Descriptive items (e.g., gender, position, tenure within the organization) that could be used to identify employees were not included in the survey, due to the sensitive nature of the questions.¹ The only information that could be used to differentiate participants was the language in which they chose to take the survey—73% (27) completed the English version and 27% (10) completed the Spanish version.

¹ Note: All of the findings reported in this study are statistically significant at $p < .05$ level using two-sided tests, regardless of the small sample size.

KEY FINDINGS

ON-STAGE EMOTIONS AND EXPECTATIONS

The 92% of participants who chose “agree” or “strongly agree” in response to the statements below indicated that they understood organizational expectations regarding “on-stage” behavior when interacting with residents:

- Part of my job is to make the residents feel happy.
- Part of my job is to also look happy when I’m on-stage in front of residents.
- My organization would say that part of the product to residents is friendly, cheerful service.

Similarly, 92% of participants agreed or strongly agreed with statements about negative displays of emotions:

- Part of my job when I’m on-stage is to hide my feelings in front of residents when I’m unhappy, sad, or angry about something.
- My organization expects me to pretend I’m not upset or distressed when interacting with residents.
- I am expected to not show residents if I’m feeling frustrated at work.

Additionally, 89% of participants indicated in the same manner that they displayed naturally felt emotions while interacting with residents, such as:

- The emotions I express to residents are genuine and authentic.
- The emotions I show to residents come naturally to me.
- The emotions I show residents match what I normally feel on the inside.

Overall, the findings indicated that frontline staff tend to support organizational expectations that they present a positive countenance to residents in order to enhance residents’ experience, and that they do not express negative feelings when interacting with residents. Participants reported that they also expressed naturally felt emotions while interacting with residents that were not censored or altered in any manner.

DISPLAYING NEGATIVE EMOTIONS

The second noteworthy finding from the study was a statistically significant positive correlation between agreement with negative display rule statements and extent to which employees reported engaging in surface acting during resident interactions. In other words, the more likely an employee was to say that his organization didn't want him to show negative affect while on-

The more likely an employee was to say that his organization didn't want him to show negative affect while on-stage, the more likely he was to say that he tried to express emotions positively through surface acting.

stage, the more likely he was to say that he tried to express emotions positively through surface acting. This finding indicates that senior living frontline staff are behaving on-stage in a manner that is in line with what is expected of them. The caveat is that, at least in this sample, there was not a significant correlation between the extent to which

employees engaged in deep level acting and the endorsement of organizational expectations of emotional display. This could mean a couple of different things: the survey items used to measure deep acting were not fully understood or not worded in a way that got at the essence of on-stage empathy; or that the survey participants may favor surface acting techniques as opposed to deep acting ones that could require more emotional energy. Alternatively, it's possible that staff were unaware of how to engage in deep acting. **Thus, the most positive action that Life Plan Communities can take is to train staff on the way to engage more honestly with residents via deep acting techniques.**

TIME SPENT INTERACTING WITH RESIDENTS RELATED TO SURFACE ACTING

The third noteworthy finding was that there was a statistically significant relationship between the amount of time participants said they spent interacting with residents and the amount of surface acting they engaged in. The more time a participant spent interacting with residents, the more likely she was to express feelings for the benefit of the resident, vs. expressing actual negative feelings.

These initial findings speak to the need for additional research to better understand the mechanisms and reasoning underlying senior living staff's decision to engage in surface and/or deep acting strategies. **These findings also suggest that senior living frontline staff are very much in line with and perceptive of the need for appropriate on-stage emotional displays. They also suggest that these staff members are doing what they can to stay true to the goal of providing residents with services that are well received.**

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

TRAINING TO BOOST DEEP ACTING AWARENESS AND UNDERSTANDING

The good news is that the skill of using deep acting techniques can be increased with proper training and practice. There are implications for training staff on developing strategies for interacting with residents when their own emotions run high or low—both for the betterment of their own health and well-being, as well as of the experience of residents.

In addition to using guidance from supervisors, organizations have used classroom training, handbooks, scripts, and bulletin boards to direct workers on how to display and/or feel particular emotions (see Leidner, 1999; Steinberg & Figart, 1999; VanMaanen & Kunda, 1989).

The airline industry provides an example of how organizations can successfully train employees to manage emotions in a friendly, emotionally healthy manner when interacting with customers. In Hochschild's (1983) study, flight attendants were called on to create positive emotions by

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thinking of passengers as if they were *personal guests in the attendant's living room*. Then, attendants were asked to use their emotional memories when offering personal hospitality. This allowed employees to actually experience positive feelings, rather

than just act as if they had positive feelings. Hochschild also found that the more training workers have, the more effort they're willing to exert in creating positive emotions.

Thus, employers may want to provide more extensive training on how employees can create positive feelings within themselves to make it easier for them to act accordingly. Similar to teaching drama students to *feel* the part, employers may be able to teach workers how to *feel* in certain ways that will help them as they try to create positive experiences for residents.

Beyond this, relating stories about previous customer interactions in and out of the training room and using customer letters, taped phone calls, and role plays can help employees better understand and relate to their customers.

For employees who are not naturally skilled at exhibiting positive emotions, employers can provide focused training on interpersonal skills aimed at improving positive emotional contagion, or positive emotion that spreads to others. There is evidence that this training works, that it improves self-efficacy in one's ability to interact well with others, and that it increases employee well-being, as well as other relational outcomes (Kotsou et al. 2011).

Other interventions, such as end-of-day positive reflection and mindfulness (e.g., taking time alone in a relaxing space to concentrate on breathing and being present in the moment) (Bono et al. 2013; Hülshager et al. 2013), are effective for employee well-being and are somewhat related to the practice of emotion and emotional display.

All of the suggested avenues above have clear applicability for the senior living industry, and Life Plan Community frontline staff in particular. **Moreover, taking steps to help employees *feel* rather than simply *present* positive emotions may have numerous direct and indirect benefits, including reduced employee stress and burnout, greater jobs satisfaction, and reduced turnover.** Of course, increasing well-being and job longevity of employees is likely to translate to benefits for residents as well. Future studies should further explore strategies with these outcomes in mind.

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