

Working with Feeling

One of the fastest growing areas of interest in the study of work and organisations is the use of emotion as part of the work process. Terms such as 'emotional labour' and 'emotion work' emphasise that controlling and shaping how we feel and express emotion in order to get a job done can, indeed, be hard work. Many questions are now being asked concerning the value of 'emotional' work and the possible detrimental affects upon those who have to continually 'smile and sometimes mean it' (Bolton, 2005; Fineman, 2003). But before these issues can be explored we firstly have to ask: 'why all the recent attention paid to the management of emotion in the workplace?'

A key development here is the way aspects of organisations have changed, including the way they are supposed to work. To some extent, this simply reflects social change. The recent decline in manufacturing, the rise in service industries and the restructuring of the working population this has entailed, are important factors, as are changing emphases in skill requirements. There is less demand today for the formally skilled male, manual worker and increasing demand for people who can deal with customers - typically women - using more obvious inter-personal skills. In addition to these structural changes there is also the emergence of the so-called 'culture of the customer'. Companies can no longer compete simply on the basis of quantity and price: they must also provide quality service to increasingly sophisticated customers.

Working on emotion in the contemporary organisation

The rising service sector is particularly reliant on its employees' ability to display the correct demeanour. For example, workers in the entertainment industry must produce laughter and a sense of well-being. In other service industries the sale of a product depends upon employees' interaction with potential customers and the survival of a company in a competitive market relies on employees' ability to deliver a 'quality' service to customers.

Examples of workplaces such as Disneyworld were once seen as the extreme: places where employees must perpetually smile and be forever playful with customers. But these have now become the normative model that all service sector organisations wish to achieve. The 'have-a-nice-day' culture is now found in a variety of service sector settings. Such is the emphasis on employees displaying a cheerful demeanour at all times that a North American sociologist describes front line service organisations as 'smile factories' (Van Maanen, 1991) which have very particular rules. Employees often have to work hard on their emotions in order to abide by the company's 'feeling rules' and present what is deemed to be the correct face.

Once we begin to equate smiling at customers with hard work carried out within confining boundaries set by the organisation, then various questions begin to arise concerning the 'management' of emotion. For example: 'who (or what) manages our emotions?' and 'what are the motivations to do so?'

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