

Smile Through the Tears- Fake smiles vs. Real Smiles

By Patti Wood -speaks on sales, body language and customer service

My mother was born and raised in Windber, Pennsylvania. When she took her nickel up the hill to the little grocery store Mr. Conjackos gave her a sincere smile and when she went back the next week, he was there smiling again. It was easy. When she went down the hill to get a square slice of pizza, the counter guy Sam, gave her a big smile, it was easy. Over the years, her father saw the same people everyday at work, he always gave them a big smile, it was easy. His employees at his coal mine came to work each day with their life long neighbors and friends and gave each other real smiles, it was easy. The salesmen at his soft drink company, called on the same customers for years and always had a smile for them, it was easy.

When you are a Business Owner, a Service Provider, Boss, a Co-Worker, or Sales Person you see the same people over and over again. With your neighbors, your sisters boyfriend or your second cousin you have a true warm emotion towards them and smiling is easy. But that's not the way our business world works anymore. Now we are smiling at strangers, strangers we probably never see again and the emotional drain can take a toll.

It requires managing our feelings to create the socially expected facial and body language. Basically making nice, or what business researchers call using "emotional labor." Because this emotional labor requires effort to create expression or to change our feelings to meet employer or job expectations, it can alienate workers from their true feelings and make them feel in-authentic. Think of the flight attendant giving the fake hello and bye bye smile to hundreds of stressed out travelers. Think that smiling labor is easy. No way! The forced smile of politeness and hospitality even has a name in the encyclopedia, The Pan American Smile.

With so many workers forced to give the Pan American Smile, it's no wonder the newest research on emotional labor says the energy spent making nice, faking emotions can lead to job stress, dissatisfaction and burnout. Research shows that inhibition of emotion or bottling up overworks the cardiovascular and nervous systems, and weakens the immune system. In fact, the inability to express negative emotion is one of the strongest predictors of cancer.

So what does this mean to you?

If you're an employer, realize that asking for emotional labor without a structure of organizational support is shown to create more absenteeism and job turnover. More bad news, faking it leads to lower ratings on customer service.

To Do's

1. Create support by creating an environment where true smiles are easy.
2. Don't just use the old Ricardo Manibalan order on Fantasy Island and say, "Smiles everyone," that was FANTASY Island!
3. Create a workplace where workers can be true friends and customers come back year after year.
4. Support and understand their pain. Don't brush over it with platitudes. Talk to them, guide them to reframe bad interactions by saying the customer was having a bad day.

5. Give them control. Research says when employees are given rights to shut down abusive and manipulate customers the employees stress level is significantly lower.
6. Give them training to deal with abusive customers and difficult coworkers. This can give them choices in their Responses and increases their feelings of control. Again shown to reduce their stress.
7. Give them lots of stress relieving options. Let them take a walk outside. Sit somewhere and do deep breathing. Create a distress room with calming colors, music and toys. Hold yoga or Tai Chi classes on site. Bring in a chair massage worker in on a regular basis.
8. Know the gender differences. Women smile more than Men in an informal setting by an overwhelming 77 percent to 35 percent margin. Emotional labor research says women have to work even harder because as a gender we are expected to be even nicer. Women respond to stress differently. All that flight fight response research you've heard was done on men. New research shows that women like to chat and bond with other women under stress so allow them stress visiting time.

If you create environments where there are sincere smiles there is good news. Just look at the answers to following questions.

Why do we feel better when we smile?

There is a two way street between pleasure centers in the brain and facial muscles. We feel good and we smile, but we can also put our faces into the smile positive. The positioning signals the brain that you feel good so it sends "feel good" chemicals into your bloodstream.

Does our impression of the world change when we smile?

Yep, even when we are asked to smile we have more favorable impressions of the people we are with and we think funny things are funnier.

Why do we smile when others smile?

There is actually circuitry in the brain that is set up to respond positively to a smile. And there is the facial feedback loop. We mimic the facial expressions of people we like and want to empathize with to feel what they are feeling. When they are smiling and we mimic it, we feel great.

Can we smile through our tears?

Research shows that faking laughter and smiles doesn't help pain tolerance. But the people who really smile (showing the true smiles around the eyes) did have higher pain tolerance. That means, when they were truly happy and truly smiling they were able to produce an analgesic effect. The pain tolerance with a true smile has been shown to last 20 or 30 minutes. And in some cases, it's doubled the subject's pain tolerance (Dr. Pierre Rainville-Expert in pain-University of Montreal)

So create a place where true smiles are EASY!