

# People see through bosses who fake it

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“Emotions are infectious. This means that it is important to equip managers with knowledge about ways of handling their emotions, and how their emotions affect those around them”, says Annie Haver. Credit: University of Stavanger

Previous research has shown that suppressing your emotions can result in increased stress, burnout and poor relationships. However, there has been very little research into how managers regulate their emotions – until now.

"Emotions are infectious. This means that it is important to equip managers with knowledge about ways of handling their emotions, and how their emotions affect those around them", says associate professor Annie Haver at the Norwegian School of Hotel Management.

She has recently completed her doctoral thesis at the University of Stavanger, in which she examined the strategies managers use to regulate their emotions, and the health-consequences of their [emotion regulation](#). The sample comprised of 600 middle and senior managers in the Norwegian and Swedish hotel industry. In addition her research involved interviewing experts (leaders) with extensive leadership experience.

## **You can see through fakers**

Being a manager depends largely on mutual belief and trust, both in the staff below them and in those higher up in the system. Research shows that managers who put across a negative message in a positive way are very effective. They are believed. However if they try to fake [positive emotions](#), they are quickly seen through.

"The way in which managers control their emotions has major implications, not only for their performance but also for their health", says Haver.

## **Putting a lid on emotions**

As one of them put it:

"In tough times, I think the easiest thing to do is to create a façade; a façade of security and control. Then you use all your time to contain yourself, and then you aren't able to see how others are doing, because you're using all of your energy on yourself (...). Most managers put on an

act for their superiors...Even my boss and my boss's boss play this game."

Haver has discovered that there are two factors in particular which are stressful to managers: centralised management and tight objectives (i.e. organizational change or cost cutting). She also found that the emotion regulation strategies they use to tackle these stress factors vary tremendously.

"The more centralised the management, the more managers suppress their emotions. They feel that decisions are being made over their heads, and that their input is not valued", she says.

Suppressing one's emotions, particularly over time, is an unhealthy strategy because it means you are putting a lid on your emotions. This can result in health problems such as high blood pressure, cardiovascular disease, burnout, a loss of motivation and declining performances. And according to the researcher, all these combine to make the company more vulnerable.

## **Young people keep a tighter lid**

The lower you are down the system, the more you suppress your emotions, according to Haver.

"Managers at lower levels are often young, recently qualified, lack experience and are anxious to establish their careers. They comply with the expectations of the company as to how they should behave in order to climb up the system", says Haver.

One of the leaders she interviewed says:

"I cannot allow myself to come to work in a bad mood. I'm going for

gold the whole time, and that means I have to perform. You may struggle with things, but you can never allow yourself to be grumpy or in a bad mood."

A key finding in this regard is the importance of displaying natural emotions and venting of negative emotions. A high ceiling in terms of making room for physical and mental space for venting of emotions can help in particular those on lower level to avoid the harmful psychological effects that accompany surface acting and suppression says Haver. Haver claim that we should give everyone, including managers, space to vent [negative emotions](#). But how your manager responds when you vent your emotions is hugely important.

Haver elaborates:

"If your manager responds properly to your emotions, this allows you to choose better strategies because it takes the pressure off you. This is good for your health and you will do a better job."

## **Positive slant**

When managers perceive an increased requirement to report on various objectives, they make use of a positive approach. This then allows them to choose healthier strategies, i.e. electing to put a different and positive slant on the situation.

If a manager is told by her boss to cut her staff by 10 people, she can either be angry and frustrated, or she can choose to reassess the situation in a constructive way. She can agree that this is the right decision, that it's good for the business, and that it will improve the company's financial position and efficiency.

One of the leaders in the study put it like this:

"I feel irritated rather than stressed if I'm told: this is the way it is, get it done! I then think that I have to accept it and be professional, and sell it to my staff."

"It's about finding a different, positive perspective on decisions that you are told to implement. This is a healthy strategy that allows you to feel more positive about something, which has fewer effects on your health", says Haver. Notably, there appears to be gender differences in emotion regulation, where females seem to be using more effective and healthy emotion regulation strategies, males were more likely to use suppression.

However, it also requires you to be true to yourself. It means that you have to fundamentally change your way of thinking in order to see an issue in a different light.

## **Emotional intelligence**

Leadership style, the employee-manager relationship, norms and culture all affect how and to what degree managers regulate their emotions. Personality also plays a part. For example, managers with a high [emotional](#) intelligence tend to choose the most effective emotion management strategy for day-to-day challenges.

"Leaders with high emotional competencies utilize wise emotion regulation, they read a situation cleverly, recognise the emotions of themselves and others, and understand how to handle the situation", says Haver.

## **Protecting themselves**

One of the reasons why managers use strategies to control their emotions is to protect themselves. This can be from their own managers, from

their staff, visitors, customers or clients. They put on a mask in order to hide what they are really thinking and feeling, which enables them to handle difficult situations.

Other motivations can include a desire to hide insecurity, to play a role in order to build trust and acceptance for a message they want to sell, or to climb the career ladder.

One of the leaders says:

"As managers we like to make ourselves look good (...). We put on a formal appearance and waffle on in empty jargon (...), which hides the fact our message might be empty and uncertain. So there's a lot of suppressed fear out there, and you create a mask of control for yourself. It's about finding a solution without losing face".

"Every professional group uses emotional regulation strategies. Surgeons, hotel managers, dentists, teachers, artists. It's easy for a doctor to hide behind their white coat, PC or medical terminology. This is something that we all recognise", says Haver.

## **Important for leadership development**

Haver believes that we have to understand how important it is to train, support and coach our managers, thereby enabling them to choose healthy strategies in order to handle a variety of situations at work. Haver believes that there should be more emphasis on this in leadership development.

One of the leaders she interviewed felt that they had been taught a lesson:

"I have had feedback telling me that everyone knows when I am in a [bad](#)

[mood](#). That was an extremely important lesson for me, and early on I decided I needed personal coaching in order to learn and develop."

"Managers who are better at tackling stress become more efficient. This can then reduce absence due to sickness, increase professional performance and build more resilient organisations", says Annie Haver.

**More information:** A. Haver et al. Emotion Regulation and Its Implications for Leadership: An Integrative Review and Future Research Agenda, *Journal of Leadership & Organizational Studies* (2013). [DOI: 10.1177/1548051813485438](#)

Annie Haver et al. Wise Emotion Regulation and the Power of Resilience in Experienced Hospitality Leaders, *Scandinavian Journal of Hospitality and Tourism* (2014). [DOI: 10.1080/15022250.2014.899141](#)

Provided by University of Stavanger

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