

# Faking emotions at work does more harm than good

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The adage "Fake it until you make it"—the idea that someone can fake a positive attitude to elicit real-life benefits—often backfires when used with co-workers, according to a study led by a University of Arizona researcher.

Instead, researchers say, making an effort to actually feel the emotions

you display is more productive.

Allison Gabriel, associate professor of management and organizations in the Eller College of Management, led a team that analyzed two types of emotion regulation that people use at work: surface acting and deep acting.

"Surface acting is faking what you're displaying to other people. Inside, you may be upset or frustrated, but on the outside, you're trying your best to be pleasant or positive," Gabriel said. "Deep acting is trying to change how you feel inside. When you're deep acting, you're actually trying to align how you feel with how you interact with other people."

The study surveyed working adults in a wide variety of industries including education, manufacturing, engineering and financial services.

"What we wanted to know is whether people choose to engage in emotion regulation when interacting with their co-workers, why they choose to regulate their emotions if there is no formal rule requiring them to do so, and what benefits, if any, they get out of this effort," Gabriel said.

## **Putting on a Happy Face**

Gabriel says that when it comes to regulating emotions with co-workers, four types of people emerged from the study:

- Nonactors, or those engaging in negligible levels of surface and deep acting;
- Low actors, or those displaying slightly higher surface and deep acting;
- Deep actors, or those who exhibited the highest levels of deep acting and low levels of surface acting; and,

- Regulators, or those who displayed high levels of surface and deep acting.

In each study, nonactors made up the smallest group, with the other three groups being similar in size.

The researchers identified several drivers for engaging in emotion regulation and sorted them into two categories: prosocial and impression management. Prosocial motives include wanting to be a good [co-worker](#) and cultivating positive relationships. Impression management motives are more strategic and include gaining access to resources or looking good in front of colleagues and supervisors.

The team found that regulators, in particular, were driven by impression management motives, while deep actors were significantly more likely to be motivated by prosocial concerns. This means that deep actors are choosing to regulate their emotions with co-workers to foster positive work relationships, as opposed to being motivated by gaining access to more resources.

## **Faking It Versus Feeling It**

"The main takeaway," Gabriel says, "is that deep actors—those who are really trying to be positive with their co-workers—do so for prosocial reasons and reap significant benefits from these efforts."

According to the researchers, those benefits include receiving significantly higher levels of support from co-workers, such as help with workloads and offers of advice. Deep actors also reported significantly higher levels of progress on their work goals and trust in their co-workers than the other three groups.

The data also showed that mixing high levels of surface and deep acting

resulted in physical and mental strain.

"Regulators suffered the most on our markers of well-being, including increased levels of feeling emotionally exhausted and inauthentic at work," Gabriel said.

## Lessons Learned

While some managers Gabriel spoke to during the course of her research still believe emotions have little to do with the workplace, the study results suggest there is a benefit to displaying positive emotions during interactions at work, she said.

"I think the 'fake it until you make it' idea suggests a survival tactic at work," Gabriel said. "Maybe plastering on a smile to simply get out of an interaction is easier in the short run, but long term, it will undermine efforts to improve your health and the relationships you have at work."

"In many ways," Gabriel added, "it all boils down to, 'Let's be nice to each other.' Not only will people feel better, but people's performance and social relationships can also improve."

The research is published online in the *Journal of Applied Psychology*.

**More information:** Allison S. Gabriel et al, Are coworkers getting into the act? An examination of emotion regulation in coworker exchanges., *Journal of Applied Psychology* (2019). [DOI: 10.1037/apl0000473](https://doi.org/10.1037/apl0000473)

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