

**Leading through emotional labour
Child protection assessment officers in high quality call-centre**

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ABSTRACT

This paper highlights that performing emotional labour - the management of emotions and emotional expressiveness - when consulting about child safety over the phone is a complex task. The control and suppression of emotional displays is a labour skill that is performed upon organisational demand. This research involved the semi-structured interviewing of 20 Assessment Officers from a high quality telephone advisory service. The findings suggest that the Assessment Officers' performance of emotional labour is more than a role-based skill; it is a way of providing leadership that is necessary to facilitate change and practice improvement in their agency. The Assessment Officers have become a distinct resource who provide assistance to interdepartmental Government staff in their management of child protection concerns.

Keywords

Coaching, emotional intelligence, interpersonal communication, organisational effectiveness, transfer of training/learning

In NSW the child protection sector comprises of various departments that require high level interdepartmental liaison. In 2010, the Special Inquiry into Child Protection (Wood, 2008) made recommendations to address the child protection crisis in NSW. Consequently, the NSW Government established Child Wellbeing Units in three of the major Government Agencies; NSW Police Force, NSW Health and the Department of Education and Communities. The units are high quality and high performance call-centres that consists of professionals, Assessment Officers (AOs), whose role it is to guide their agency's mandatory reporters, through a decision making tool to respond to concerns for children and young people who are understood to be exposed to violent or neglectful circumstances. Although the purpose of the unit was envisioned as a measure to upskill agency staff in the assessment of risk, in the 6 years of operation the AOs have become a central part of the practice of child protection in NSW. Despite the clear managerial role of the AOs, the research findings suggest that the level of emotional engagement and one-on-one coaching with the agency staff requires the AOs to think beyond the purely managerial; the work demands deployment of leadership skills and qualities. This paper calls for understanding the managerial work through a leadership lens. AOs are the agency's facilitators of change and improvement in responding to child protections concerns through their emotional labour performance, professional expertise and ability to negotiate and coach the callers. The AOs perform high levels of emotional intelligence and emotional labour, the latter which is often an overlooked and tacit requirement of the role. The AOs work with their clients' emotional states and the AOs are required by the technical aspects of the role and systems to listen beyond the words uttered by their clients in this responsive work role. The findings suggest that emotional labour and role performance are deemed necessary leadership skills that enable the AOs to build capacity for change within their individual agency's staff; empowering staff to competently respond to child protection concerns.

STUDY

Three Government Agencies in NSW Australia have implemented a telephone advisory service for their respective internal and affiliated staff to access professional advice and to meet the staff's mandatory child protection reporting requirements. This paper reports a three-year study with the

telephone advisory service workers, the Assessment Officers (AOs) of the units. The fieldwork was approached from a constructionist paradigm, framed within the reflexive interpretivist theoretical perspective and the data was gathered through conducting qualitative semi-structured interviews (King, 2004) and group discussions (Greenbaum, 1998), totalling 20 employees from two of the three Agencies. The constructionist perspective positions the interviews as social productions where both the interviewer and interviewee play an active role and where the interviews are regarded as 'interpretive achievement, a collaborative construction of meaning' (Garfinkel, 1967; Heritage, 1984) that is recognised as 'active interaction' (Fontana & Frey, 2005, p. 698). The research is reported from an insider perspective; this subjective appraisal of individuals' experience, world and social interactions generates deep insight and understanding of their perspective of the world (Crotty, 2005; Denzin, 1994; Hay, 2002; Hennink, Hutter, & Bailey, 2011; Lincoln, 1991; Patton, 2002; Sarantakos, 2005; Snape & Spencer, 2003). The data was thematically analysed using NVIVO[©] and preliminary analysis discovered emotional labour as a major theme of the research. Supra-analysis (Heaton, 2004) involved the subsequent in-depth focus on the emerging trend of leadership qualities and extended the original work by investigating the work from a leadership theory perspective. The leadership qualities theme goes to answering the research question; 'How is leadership enacted through the interactions, relationships and performance of call-centre staff in their work?'

EMOTIONS, EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE AND EMOTIONAL LABOUR

Many professions include a form of emotion management (Mann, 1999), face-to-face or telephone interactions often involve the tacit expectation that people control their emotional expressiveness (Brotheridge & Grandey, 2002; Lewig & Dollard, 2003). Emotional management is the manipulation of the display and the influence that negative and positive emotions have on the self and others. Emotional intelligence refers to the aptitude to recognise, decipher and acknowledge an individual's emotions. It is understood that this knowledge will lead to desirable personal and organisational outcomes (Elfenbein, Polzer, & Ambady, 2007; Goleman, 1998). Emotional labour, as performed by

the AOs, requires a level of emotional intelligence to enable them to access, monitor and make distinctions between their own and others' emotions (Goleman, 1995).

The foundation of emotional display manipulation is positioned in Hochschild's conceptualisation of emotional labour (EL) (1983; 2012) in which she regards a person as an actor who has a role to play, a performance in which the actor has to control, manipulate, adjust and suppress feelings and emotions in a conscious manner that aligns with emotional display rules as set out by the organisation or society. Managing the dissonance of the emotional expression to the inner feelings is part of this manipulation (Zapf, Vogt, Seifert, Mertini, & Isic, 1999). Hochschild (1983; 2012) makes the distinction between managing emotions at work - emotional *labour* and managing emotions in a social environment - emotional *work*. This simplistic differentiation highlights the recognition of the management of emotions and its expressiveness as a labour aspect, which has been unacknowledged previously (Bolton, 2005). Hochschild (1983; 2012) diverges the emotional labour performance in surface-acting and deep-acting. Surface-acting relates to managing observable behaviour and facial expressions, or '*faking*'; putting on a happy face, lending a sympathetic ear and generally having a happy and caring disposition. Surface-acting is the ability to control the outward expression of inward feelings, appropriate to the social norms ascribed to a particular situation (Goffman, 1974). Deep-acting involves the accurate alignment of innermost feelings and the emotional expressiveness; it demands the individual to entirely disregard one's true feelings and self. Hochschild (1983, 2012) argues that the organisation's appropriation of emotions and its expression is an organisational commodity that has a commercial value which is often unrecognised and mostly unpaid.

Emotional labour is a necessary performance in jobs that involve high levels of face-to-face or voice-to-voice interaction (Hochschild, 1983; 2012; 1995). Emotional expression, during interpersonal contact, is expected by the organisation to transpire in accordance with organisational standards (Morris & Feldman, 1996). For instance, employees in many caring-professions are expected to be sensitive to the customer's emotional states and needs (Zapf, Seifert, Schmutte, Mertini, & Holz, 2001) and perform their duties in an emotionally correct manner (Bolton, 2000). As in most industries, call-centre management also exerts control over the emotional display of their employees (Grandey, Dickter, & Sin, 2004; Grandey & Fisk, 2006). Hence, emotional labour is a

component of the AOs' work. The complexity of the performance of emotional labour in virtual communication is found in the lack of non-verbal cues and body language, as well as the ease of misinterpreting the meaning of written language (Matteson & Miller, 2012).

CALL CENTRES AND EMOTIONAL LABOUR

Call-centres are moving away from cost-effective, robotic and restricted practice and there is a focus on delivering an individualistic and a high quality service (Korzynski, 2002). Contemporary practices encourage a 'humane' and 'understanding' approach to the call centre industry (Koskina & Keithly, 2010) and the operators in those high performance call-centres are subjected to intrinsic recruitment and selection processes (Marti-Audi, Valverde, & Heraty, 2012). The AOs, as they work in a high performance call-centre, are required to have attained tertiary qualifications, relevant front-line experience and a level of autonomy and EI necessary to perform the role (Houlihan, 2002). Matteson and Miller (2012) acknowledge that the performance of emotional labour exist similarly in virtual communication and face-to-face interactions. Call-centre employees are required to adjust their emotions and emotiveness during the telephonic interactions as much as one would when the interaction occurs face-to-face. Emotional labour, performed in person or in virtual reality is comparably complex and either way will have similar positive or adverse consequences for the performer (Kinman, 2009; Kruml & Geddes, 2000). Most organisations mandate that staff present in a 'professional manner' (Fournier, 1999, p. 298), remain neutral, sensitive, cheerful and sympathetic when interacting with clients, irrespective of whether the expression of which is contrary to true feelings and emotions (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1995; Bono & Vey, 2007; Zapf et al., 2001). The AOs' emotional labour performances range from remaining calm during high call-volume periods, to being friendly, tactful and sensitive to callers when they are highly emotive (Frenkel, Tam, Korzynski, & Shire, 1998; Hannif, Lamm, & Vo, 2010). The emotional labour performance of the AOs involves consoling, coaching, guiding, confronting and educating the callers. The following excerpt describes the emotion work that is performed by the AOs and how this is a necessary tool to meet the performance requirements of their role.

'Well, you process the information [provided by] the caller [...], you present and you give them the advice in, in a way that de-escalates them, you formulate a plan with them so [...], I ensure my tone of voice is, at a level where it is comfortable for them, so they're feeling comfortable so they are not in a space where they are maintaining that space of panic [...]' (Participant 3 from Agency 1)

The above speaks about AOs using a degree of self-control and emotional intelligence, whilst at the same time remaining astute to each word the caller utters and understanding the explicit and implicit meanings of those words. The AOs acknowledge and understand the callers' emotional state. These leadership qualities are instrumental to AOs' discussion with their callers. The aim of the interaction is to educate and empower callers to respond competently to the identified concerns and vulnerabilities for children and families. The AOs are an internal resource available to agency staff around child protection. In many instances AOs have challenging conversations with callers during which the AOs manipulate and encourage the callers. AOs are able to calm the callers and to take them out of their comfort zone by gently demanding them to think and practice differently (Heifetz & Laurie, 2001). As the agency's leaders in the field of child protection, the AOs utilise their leadership skills and the performance of emotional labour to facilitate practice change and improvement.

LEADERSHIP AND EMOTIONAL LABOUR

Emotional management is an expression of the worker's individual authenticity (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1993; Brook, 2009, p. 545). This paper therefore suggests that emotional labour and its individualistic properties are a part of the leadership skill set. A leader is defined by their role, skills and qualities and leadership is constituted in many ways, through art and music, speaking, advocating and through influencing others (Evans & Sinclair, 2015, p. 15). Leadership skills are demonstrated in one's collaboration and relationship with others and how those aspects lead to change in practice and thinking (Frost, 2003). A key leadership role, Frost (2003) explains, is to 'respond compassionately to pain'; meaning that leadership encompasses the acknowledgment of discomfort in people and assisting them to work through this. Research findings intimate that leadership qualities are found in

the work of the AOs; AOs take control of the problem the callers present and the AOs take responsibility of situations, acknowledging their moral accountability to be part of the action to solve the problem. The AOs' approach to work, and the performance of EL as part of this, exemplifies the AOs as leaders in the field (Fairhurst, 2011) through displaying and executing relevant leadership qualities in the course of their work.

Leadership scholars further propose that leaders utilise and perform emotional labour with various intentions; firstly, to regulate their own emotions, secondly to influence the moods, emotions, and performance of others and thirdly to create an organisational-wide emotional display rule that assist with the creation of an organisation's distinctive ethos and character (Ashkanasy & Humphrey, 2011; Humphrey, 2005, 2006, 2008; Humphrey, Pollack, & Hawver, 2008). Heifetz and Laurie (2001, p. 131) define leaders as those people who '[...] ask hard questions and knock people out of their comfort zones. Then they manage the resulting distress'. The AOs emotional labour performance is a leadership quality; they handle the callers' emotions, encourage them to consider alternative options that may cause some discomfort and help them through this. The AOs create a professional status for their work to be recognised as a resource to their agency's staff.

THE LEADERSHIP ROLE OF AOs

Originally the telephone advisory service was established primarily to build capacity in the governmental workforce by providing expert workers to lead staff through a decision making tool and the assessment of risk of harm to children. However, the AOs have developed their role into a unique support and advisory resource; the AOs discuss emotion evoking information, refocus, validate and de-escalate the callers' discomfort. They are sensitive to callers' emotional response, educate and provide tools to accomplish the risk assessment as well as asking the callers difficult questions, challenging their personal opinion and biases. The AOs persuade callers to approach situations and their work practice from an alternative perspective. Additional leadership qualities are found in the AOs' effectiveness and efficiency in making decisions (Frost, 2003).

The leadership research conducted by Ospina and Foldy (2010) argues that leadership emerges when a group of individuals come together. This is the work and the meaning-making the AOs

conduct in their own agencies - their community of practice - and creating the opportunity for change in the work practice of their agency's staff. AOs coordinate action, they build capacity and they share the accountability and responsibility for child safety and wellness with their callers (Fletcher, 2008; Fletcher & Käufer, 2003). As one participant explained;

*'Yeah, and I think that thing that [...] I really like doing is when I know when there is a number of [...] workers working together and linking them all together, I like it when that happens.
(Participant 9 from Agency 1).*

The above explains that AOs' leadership contribution does not resemble the conventional organisational leadership; their contribution to leadership is found in the skills they possess to form collaborations to address problems and to embrace and encourage the change and improvement to practice. The AOs display the qualities of informal leaders who, according to Heifetz and Laurie (2001), become apparent when challenges are encountered. The AOs' work evolves around problems and challenges and they take 'the lead' in the situations where the existing structures, procedures, and processes are not sufficient. During many calls, the AOs are confronted with a challenge that requires adaptation (Heifetz, 2006). AOs accept those adaptive challenges as a part of their role; they discuss, challenge and reframe the callers' thinking to improve practice. This work can be construed as the AOs' leadership contribution (Evans & Sinclair, 2015). AOs encourage callers to rethink the position child safety has in their daily work. AOs explained in the interviews that their involvement with one caller often has a flow on affect and will subsequently benefit other families. The AOs recognise that their discussion with one caller will not only lead to a child receiving a holistic and timely response, it also results in a consistent practice framework that ensures that all children receive similar responses and support. In line with Ospina and Foldy's (2010) work around leadership, the AO's leadership role is about redefining child safety as more than statutory child protection; it is about encouraging their callers to embrace the responsibility and to become child protection champions in their individual services. Following is an excerpt in which a manager of Agency 1 explains the complexity of the work performed by the AOs. She outlines the multiple layers of the work that AOs perform in order to

improve the practice and confidence of callers as well as doing their core role of assessing the level of risk to a child;

We [are] managing [the caller's emotions] as well as the information about the child and we are doing it over the phone and [that] has [its] challenge [...]. And we are talking to people who have their own agenda, [their] own busy-ness and we are having to be agents to change. (Participant 10 from Agency 1)

The leadership work performed by the AOs involves understanding and empowering the callers to construct networks with and around families. Linking services, workers and resources to collaborate in holistically responding to child safety concerns is a key role the AOs undertake. Additional complexities are managing the callers' preconceptions, personal biases and emotional responses about child protection. Adequately addressing and managing callers' emotional state is a part of the AOs' leadership role; without challenging this, the AOs cannot assess the risk level to the children.

CONCLUSION

The AOs' performance of emotional labour is a leadership skill of coaching and reframing callers' responses to child safety and welfare. AOs are leaders in the field of child protection, as is demonstrated in their communication and negotiation skills, emotional labour performances as well as their qualifications and experience when preparing and encouraging their callers to best respond to the identified child abuse issues. AOs provide logical and structured guidance to improve callers' practice and responses to vulnerable families. Their leadership contribution is found in the way they facilitate changes in thinking and practice and they encourage callers to take on responsibility and be accountable when responding to child protection concerns. All the while, the AOs continue to support and mentor the callers, resulting in professional practice and outcomes to be enhanced to benefit the children and families as well as the organisation.

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