



**Emotional
Labour and
Antifragility
for Leaders**



There is no doubt that modern leadership is demanding. Employee expectations are increasing year on year. And the already weighty organisational expectations are certainly not going anywhere. Leaders are called on to place the wellbeing and interests of their team members at the heart of their work while also trying to shepherd business performance and manage a truckload of organisational risks. Thankfully, many theorists are starting to talk about the emotional labour required of leaders operating in this space – because it's not insignificant.

What is emotional labour?

For a long time, the focus in emotional labour research has been on the unequal expectations placed on men and women in social and professional settings. Research has [shown](#) that women have traditionally been called on to do emotional labour at a much higher rate than men. Think: smoothing over an awkward remark, making someone feel comfortable or listening to a coworker who is struggling in their personal life.

However, this concept has other implications for the way we interact. In the leadership space, perhaps the most obvious example of this particular kind of labour is the requirement to always project a calm and positive attitude towards one's team (you can imagine, as well, the double challenge for women leaders – doing emotional labour both as a leader and as a woman).

In trying to influence and position teams well, some leaders may feel a burden associated with managing one's own emotions and presenting a certain aspect of oneself to the world. Leaders can feel the pressure to be highly purposeful around their appearance and interactions at all times. Even with the current discussion concerning leaders being authentic and vulnerable in the workplace, there seems to be a limit as to the ways a leader can show up. Many leaders feel the weight of the high (and often unrealistic) expectations from those around them that they cannot be seen to be "having a bad day" - even though we know we are all human with human experiences. Some refer to this tension as the [leadership paradox](#).

And the reality is that, as a leader, this labour never goes away. In fact, as you become more senior in an organisation, there are greater expectations of you to be able to manage your emotions and present a collected front. A CEO who has one negative interaction with a team member or supplier can cause real consequences for their organisation.

Building resilience as leaders means understanding that this is a part of the role. Rather than performing this emotional labour unconsciously, we need to think about what we are doing intentionally and what it is demanding of us.



What are our options?

If emotional labour is a part of leadership that we need to simply accept, then what can we do? One course we can take is to build our resilience in the face of this expectation. Building resilience might look like regularly taking time to replenish “the tank” through self-care or structuring our time better to get a balance of activities which energise and those that take it out of us.

Another tact we can take is to try and become more antifragile about our emotional labour. Antifragility is a concept originally coined by Nassim Nicholas Taleb. Taleb labelled antifragile systems those systems which not only resist but are strengthened by external shocks and disorder coming from their environment. They are better for uncertainty, challenge, and disruption.

In a world that is seemingly constantly throwing up disruption, change and challenge, being antifragile seems to be the ideal state. It means that you can respond to this world adaptively - rather than as someone “just holding on” - as someone who gets stronger. And, in many ways, this is the human experience. We learn. We adapt. We develop tools that we can then deploy in new situations. We become stronger over time. So, how do we apply this thinking to our roles and duties as a leader and their emotional costs?

What is antifragile emotionality?

What does it actually mean to be antifragile when it comes to the emotional energy that you expend? We might think of this as having improved emotional energy and regulation as a result of external inputs.

To reach a place approaching this is certainly not easy because humans experience a phenomenon called emotional contagion. We are highly liable to 'take-on' the emotions of those around us. That's why anger and joy travels in groups (or mobs!).

But we are also conscious and purposeful beings and can choose to shift our own experience. In fact, we see the movement to antifragile emotionality as part of a long-term journey towards understanding our emotions, accepting them, and becoming strengthened through our experience.

Changing our mindset around these experiences isn't always easy. Often taking a first step behaviourally in the direction you want to go is the best way to begin this process. We suggest thinking about the following:



Be proactive rather than reactive

By staying up to date with trends in organisational and team expectations, you can have a plan to meet the moment with style. You will have a better grasp of what your team is likely to be feeling and bringing to the moment – and expecting from you. You'll also be constantly developing your understanding of leadership. Think about these small steps:

- Allocate incidental or unstructured time once a month with the team to "listen" and get a pulse check (and better understand what's going on for team members)
- Read each month one chapter of a leadership book, a journal, a think piece or other resource for staying up to date on research around employee behaviours and engagement



Find joy in helping your team

Across the spectrum of human behaviour, we know that we get the most energy and strength from things we find to be meaningful. So, the question for us is: how can we find meaning in supporting our people (e.g., listening to them when they're having a bad day)?

- When you find yourself in a situation where you're required to support someone that you lead, make a conscious effort to remind yourself of the above to provide motivation and meaning in the present interaction.
- Connect into your purpose as a leader and write down the core outcomes you are trying to achieve in relation to your people. Hold these outcomes front of mind.
- Reflect on a previous time you've been able to resolve a problem, remove a roadblock or assist a colleague. How did it feel? Write down how this experience was.

Embrace each interaction as a learning opportunity

Rather than coming to each moment with a sense that it is a challenge to overcome or a leadership task we must ace, we can shift our thinking to perceive interactions as constant sites of learning and development. This connects to having a growth mindset – a feeling that difficulties are opportunities to grow.

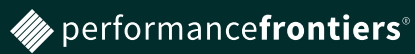
- Ask yourself (and if your relationship is developed - your team member), what does effective support look like in this moment? Does the team member need me to listen and validate their experience? Or are they seeking advice or to help problem solve with them?
- Ask yourself after a team member interaction: "how could I have handled that better - for myself and for them?" Identify one or two things you would have liked to change.
- Write down the communication style of each of your team members and reflect on how you can best engage with that style. Try to put your tailored approach into action next time.

Most of all, be compassionate to yourself

The way you respond to a situation might not always be exactly as planned, but if you give yourself some time for reflection, you'll get to the antifragile response before you know it (that reflection may in fact be it!). [Kristin Neff](#) has written extensively on the power of self-compassion for wellbeing. Consider:

- Observe your critical inner monologue and reflect on how you "speak to yourself"
- Practice incorporating positive self-talk once a day

Changing our mindset around the emotional labour of a leader is key to both our longevity and our impact as a leader.



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