



Digital Article / Mindfulness

How “Surface Acting” Drains Leaders—and How to Break the Cycle

A new study uncovered the compounding consequences of masking emotions at work. *by Gordon M. Sayre, Alicia A. Grandey, and Nai-Wen Chi*

Published on HBR.org / October 20, 2025 / Reprint [H08XWF](#)



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It's Wednesday afternoon and you're halfway through another exhausting day of putting out fires, slogging through endless meetings, and handling personnel issues you wish you didn't have to deal with. The time comes for your next team meeting, where you are expected to introduce a new company cost-cutting initiative. You have your own doubts but need to deliver the missive to your team. With your

emotional gas tank running low, you can only manage a feigned enthusiasm while bombarded with questions about the implications of the new policy. Your half-hearted performance fails to inspire or create any genuine connection, meaning that Thursday morning rolls around and you're running on empty. With nothing left in your tank, you limp through the day trying to hide your frustration and forcing a smile when necessary, starting the cycle all over again.

If this sounds familiar, you're not alone. All leaders must manage their own and others' emotions (known as emotional labor) to stay effective. But with competing priorities it can be hard to have the energy to engage thoughtfully with emotional demands. Past research has found that people tend to respond to this kind of labor with two broad strategies. First there's "surface acting," as described in the scene above, where you suppress your true feelings and simply fake the emotions you're expected to show. Second is "deep acting," which involves genuinely reshaping your emotional response, for example thoughtfully engaging with the new initiative to find an angle that genuinely excites you or proactively imagining ways that the policy may cause fear and anxiety, so that you're prepared to address your team's concerns.

It's probably not a surprise that deep acting yields better outcomes—while surface acting is linked with lower performance, job satisfaction, and well-being, and more emotional exhaustion, work-family conflict, and desire to leave a position. Yet given how demanding leadership can be, it's also understandable that some leaders resort to surface acting to get through the day.

In our new research, we explore the impacts of surface and deep acting over time and offer guidance about how to spot and address surface acting to prevent the vicious exhaustion spiral that can undermine

even the best leaders. We offer strategies to help leaders feel restored, refreshed, and able to connect meaningfully with their team.

The Research

To test the impact of surface and deep acting over time, we conducted two studies surveying employees across ten workdays. Each morning, we asked about their energy levels going into the day. Each evening, we asked what emotional labor strategies they used at work that day.

We found that when people started the day already low in energy, their options for engaging in emotional labor were limited. While deep acting is generally more beneficial, it requires up-front investment to proactively regulate one’s emotions. When people start the day drained, they struggle to muster the effort needed to deep act. As a result, they resorted to surface acting to meet the emotional demands of their job.

But this choice had implications which reverberated across days. Because surface acting is emotionally costly, relying on surface acting resulted in individuals reporting lower energy levels the following morning. The result? A vicious spiral where surface acting drains energy, leaving one exhausted and forced to rely on surface acting again the following day. In short, people become stuck in a loop of faked smiles and the inevitable exhaustion that comes with it.

Signs of You’re In a Surface Acting Spiral

How can you recognize when you’re stuck in a surface acting spiral?

Here are some warning signs:

- **You start your day already depleted.** If you wake up feeling drained or dreading the workday, it is a sign that you have not fully recovered from the previous day. When you start out feeling negatively, surface acting can feel necessary to deal with people and events that day.

But that in turn makes you more exhausted, creating the spiral we observed in our study.

- **You feel disconnected from your team.** Struggling to form genuine connections or feeling like your team is emotionally distant is another sign of surface acting. [Research](#) shows that others can tell when you’re surface acting and respond negatively because you seem inauthentic or even deceptive. In contrast, emotional labor by deep acting appears more genuine and is followed by more positive interactions from others.
- **You struggle to handle your own or others’ emotions.** Research has found that managers who surface act have less self-control later, increasing the odds that they [lash out at others](#) and even [consume more alcohol](#) to numb their feelings. You might also find yourself [feeling overburdened when an employee opens up or shares their concerns](#), instead of recognizing it as a sign of trust or an opportunity to learn about pain points and improve processes.

How to Break Free from a Vicious Cycle

In our study, we explored ways to break free of this surface acting spiral. We tested three strategies—low-effort activities like relaxation, social activities like grabbing dinner with friends, and physical activities like exercise and sport. We found that low-effort activities uniquely protected individuals from the downsides of surface acting in both our studies. As a result, they started the following day more refreshed and less likely to surface act.

The key was not how long participants relaxed after work, but rather that they did it regularly and effectively [detached from work demands](#). We theorized that relaxation works best because it requires little up-front effort. Reading on the couch, sitting outside to watch the sunset, or listening to music can replenish energy even when you’re feeling exhausted. Unlike coordinating time to see friends or working up the

motivation to hit the gym, these low effort activities helped people escape the surface acting loop that so easily drains leaders.

Take micro-breaks on those non-stop days

Of course, leaders don’t always have the luxury of simply relaxing after work (hello kids, partner, housework...) but investing a few minutes to rest during the day can make a huge difference. In fact, though many of us think we have to just tough it out when feeling exhausted, it’s best for health and performance to take micro-breaks. The investment is small, as micro-breaks can be effective while lasting five minutes or less. They might include deep breathing or stretching, looking at nature, taking a walk, or having a quick chat with a close colleague. But the payoff is substantial, with micro-breaks being effective for recovering energy, boosting mood and even performance that day. By taking advantage of short breaks in the action to step away and physically or psychological detach, you’ll be less likely to surface act and start the downward spiral.

Manage emotions in the moment

Even micro-breaks require some time away from the demands of the job, which isn’t always possible. So what can you do in the middle of that Wednesday meeting, when you’re struggling to muster the enthusiasm needed to get through?

- **Take a breath.** A simple pause can reset your mind and keep you from saying something you’ll regret. It also tells your body that you are okay, reducing any “fight or flight” reactions that might drive behavior in stressful or draining situations.
- **Tune in.** Recognize what you are feeling and accept that *feelings are information*. From here, you can dig deep and change your emotional labor strategy. For example, reappraising critical questions from team members as an indicator of their commitment to the organization. Or viewing the situation from the team’s perspective, which can encourage empathy and understanding. While these approaches

require an initial investment of energy, the returns—more authentic and positive interactions with team members—can make up for it. And in contrast to surface acting, people tend to drink less on days that they deep act, so it’s good for your health too.

- **Talk about it.** Sharing your authentic emotions can be a powerful tool for leaders when used appropriately. Surface acting is easy to spot, and puts up walls that make interactions more adversarial and less rewarding. Opening up can help humanize you as a leader, and research even shows that authenticity from leaders is linked with lower stress and higher work engagement among team members. If you can’t talk about your feelings with the team, find a trusted colleague. Research shows that feeling safe sharing your real emotions with colleagues breaks the burnout spiral of surface acting.

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Leaders must shoulder an increasingly heavy burden. This includes the emotional labor we have come to expect, which can trap leaders in a costly spiral of surface acting. To help leaders effectively navigate these challenges, one of us teamed up with an executive coach to write a book sharing evidence-based strategies for today’s emotionally demanding workplace. Both our recent study and years of research confirm that to be effective, leaders should prioritize time for reflection, reframing, and restoration to recover from daily emotional demands. Reflect on the triggering events that led to surface acting by journaling or sharing with others, so you are prepared next time. Reframe the events and emotions as a chance to learn about others, yourself, or your work situation and what you want to do with that information (e.g., schedule a break after certain meetings). Then, as our new study shows, take time to restore your energy, so you can break the surface acting spiral and go to work the next day ready for action.

This article was originally published online on October 20, 2025.



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