

# Workers facing hostility must choose between their mental health or improving performance

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When faced with rude or hostile customers, workers must carefully regulate their emotional responses, often choosing between strategies that either protect their mental health or improve their performance, shows new research from emlyon business school.

The researchers say that the strategies employees use to regulate emotions in the face of hostile customers come with trade-offs. Employees can emotionally engage in the situation, boosting their performance but with costs to their mental health. Or they can “tune out” and distance themselves from the hostility, protecting their mental health but resulting in worse performance.

These findings come from research conducted by Gordon Sayre, Professor of Management at emlyon business school, alongside his colleagues Alicia Grandey, Professor at Pennsylvania State University and Robert Melloy from Culture Amp.

The researchers wanted to understand how employees deal with hostile situations at work and the emotional strategies they use to perform well while protecting their well-being.

To do so, the researchers first identified six separate strategies people use to control their emotions when facing hostility. They include suppressing one’s emotions, diverting attention through distraction, avoiding or escaping the hostile situation, trying to modify feelings, taking action to change the event itself, or seeking support from others.

After identifying these strategies, the researchers implemented two studies to examine the impact these strategies have on the performance and emotional well-being of workers. In the primary study, the researchers followed teachers at an alternative school for children with behavioural problems. Every time teachers dealt with a hostile student that required disciplinary action, they completed a short survey where they were asked how they regulated their emotions during the event and to assess their mental well-being afterwards. Administrators then rated how well the teachers handled the event.

The findings showed that teachers combine multiple strategies to regulate their emotions during these hostile events. Certain combinations were effective for maximizing performance but left the teachers with lower mental well-being after the event. Other combinations were more effective at protecting mental well-being but resulted in worse performance. In short, there was always a trade-off between performing well and protecting mental well-being, with no perfect solution that optimized both outcomes.

“Unfortunately, rudeness and hostility are an increasingly common part of many customer-facing roles.” says Professor Gordon Sayre. “Contending with this hostility is not easy, and our research shows that workers responding to this hostility are forced to make a choice—maximize their performance or protect their mental health”.

The researchers say that organizations should prioritise preventing or minimizing hostility by moving away from the “customer is king” mentality and instead foster a culture of mutual respect between

employees and clients or customers. Doing so would mean fewer instances where employees are placed in this no-win situation of choosing between performance and well-being. Employees themselves could also be trained about the variety of emotional strategies available and trained to use them flexibly, balancing performance and well-being depending on their needs.

If you would like to receive the full research paper, or speak to Professor Sayre, please contact Peter Remon at BlueSky PR – [peter@bluesky-pr.com](mailto:peter@bluesky-pr.com) +44 (0) 77 235 228 30.