The Relationship Between Emotional Labor, Burnout, and Turnover Intentions in Collegiate Recreation Employees

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Management - Human Resource Management (Other)  Abstract 2021-271
20-minute oral presentation (including questions)  Mode: Asynchronous
Session: Live Q&A for Management 2 (Asynchronous)  Saturday June 5, 2021, 3:50 PM - 4:50 PM

In nearly all jobs, working with people inevitably involves managing emotions. Hochschild (1983) introduced a theory known as emotional labor to describe the various roles workers play in order to create appropriate emotional responses to work situations and customer interactions. An employee may experience three different types of emotional responses: surface acting, deep acting, and genuine expression. Typical work that calls for these emotion regulation strategies include jobs where general personal emotions are modified or countered in order for employees to handle complaints, influence others, or resolve issues (Cox & Patrick, 2012). Given the close association between emotion and sport (Wagstaff et al., 2012), it seems plausible that emotional labor could also be an important element worth examining in the recreational sport context.

Interest in emotional labor in collegiate recreation employees is warranted because of the distinctive characteristics of operating a highly service-oriented setting which is likely to produce emotionally challenging situations (Ko & Pastore, 2007). For instance, collegiate recreation centers offer a broad number of sport and fitness-related services such as club sports, intramurals, instructional classes, informal recreation, tournaments, and outdoor recreation (Stier et al., 2005). These types of services can potentially elicit unique challenges that require high levels of emotion. This is due to their emphasis on service and how such services are delivered to customers. Therefore, to address this gap, the purpose of the current study was to investigate the relationships between the three emotional labor strategies, burnout, and intent to quit among collegiate recreation employees.

Data were collected through an online survey from 580 collegiate recreation employees. Scales related to surface and deep acting (Brotheridge & Lee, 1998), genuine expression (Diefendorff et al., 2005), burnout (Maslach & Jackson, 1981), and turnover intentions (Cammann et al., 1983) were used. Items from each scale were then averaged into composite scores and the research model was tested through the PROCESS macro to estimate indirect effects. After controlling for age, gender, and tenure, preliminary results revealed significant indirect effects between the constructs of burnout on the relationships between surface acting, deep acting, genuine expression and intent to leave the organization.

The current study advances previous research by examining employee emotions in recreational sport centers. Results will have practical importance to the growing collection of research on emotions within the sport industry. Additionally, findings will provide managers with empirical evidence as to how surface acting, deep acting, and genuine expression influence turnover intent through the mediating role of burnout. This study allows campus recreation leaders to better understand emotional coping strategies and how to design effective human resource strategies for increasing wellness and retention.