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# Linking managers' surface acting to their burnout and engagement: The moderating role of eudaimonic wellbeing beliefs<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

Managers display emotional labor in their interactions with workers, including surface acting (faking emotions). One critical challenge of research is to identify the factors that increase or reduce the negative effects of surface acting on wellbeing at work. "Contribution-to-others" wellbeing beliefs (COWBs) could play a moderating role. COWBs refer to an eudaimonic belief that reflects the degree to which individuals think their own well-being is based on helping others. To test the moderating role of COWBs, we measured the two central dimensions of burnout and engagement: exhaustion and vigor. Two competing hypotheses were considered. First, based on cognitive dissonance theory, COWBs accentuate the negative relationship between surface acting and wellbeing because individuals are forced to act in a way (surface acting) that is contrary to their beliefs. Second, based on the Job Demands-Resources model, COWBs are a personal resource that protects against the negative effects of surface acting. A total of 95 managers in organizations for individuals with intellectual disability participated in the study. Results supported COWBs as a positive resource, but only for vigor. COWBs

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mitigated the negative link from surface acting to vigor. By contrast, COWBs did not play a significant moderating role in the prediction of exhaustion.

**Keywords:** surface acting; “Contribution-to-others” wellbeing beliefs; burnout; engagement; managers

### **Associando a atuação superficial dos gestores ao seu *burnout* e *engagement*: O papel moderador das crenças de bem-estar eudaimônicas**

#### **Resumo**

Os gestores expressam o trabalho emocional nas suas interações com os trabalhadores, incluindo a atuação superficial (fingir emoções). Um desafio crítico da investigação é identificar os fatores que aumentam ou reduzem os efeitos negativos da atuação superficial no bem-estar no trabalho. Crenças de bem-estar “contribuição para os outros” (COWBs) poderiam a este nível desempenhar um papel moderador. As COWBs referem-se a uma crença eudaimónica que reflete o grau em que os indivíduos pensam que o seu próprio bem-estar se baseia em ajudar os outros. Para testar o papel moderador das COWBs, medimos as duas dimensões centrais de *burnout* e *engagement*: esgotamento e vigor. Duas hipóteses concorrentes foram consideradas. Primeiro, a partir da teoria da dissonância cognitiva, as COWBs acentuam a relação negativa entre a atuação superficial e o bem-estar, porque os indivíduos são forçados a agir de uma maneira (atuação superficial) que é contrária às suas crenças. Em segundo lugar, com base na teoria de recursos de exigências de trabalho, as COWBs são um recurso pessoal que protege contra os efeitos negativos da atuação superficial. Um total de 95 gestores de organizações para indivíduos com deficiência intelectual participaram do estudo. Os resultados apoiaram as COWBs como um recurso positivo, mas apenas para o vigor. As COWBs mitigaram a relação negativa entre atuação superficial e vigor. Por contraste, as COWBs não apresentam um papel moderador significativo na predição do esgotamento.

**Palavras-chave:** atuação superficial; crenças de bem-estar “contribuição para os outros”; burnout; engagement; gestores

## **INTRODUCTION**

Service interactions force workers to face highly complex demands, not only cognitive but also emotional, which may seriously affect their wellbeing (Hochschild, 1983).

Emotional demands are increasingly addressed in the literature. In fact, scholars and practitioners refer to *emotional labor* as the management of feelings to create a publicly observable and desirable emotional display as part of the job role (Hochschild, 1983).

Hochschild (1983) described two main strategies for performing emotional labor: *deep acting*, which entails trying to feel and experience the required emotions by purposely engaging in thoughts and activities that help to foster these emotions; and *surface acting*, which consists of modifying one's expression without changing the inner feeling, just "putting on a mask" (Humphrey, Ashforth, & Diefendorff, 2015). Recent meta-analyses have shown that, depending on the strategy workers use to regulate their emotions during the service, deep or surface, the consequences for service performance and health will be different (Hülshager & Schewe, 2011; Mesmer-Magnus, DeChurch, & Wax, 2012; Wang, Seibert, & Boles, 2011). Using a deep acting strategy leads to better performance and does not harm workers' wellbeing, but using a surface acting strategy often has negative consequences for workers' personal wellbeing (Grandey, Rupp, & Brice, 2015; Hülshager, Lang, & Maier, 2011). However, personal differences such as beliefs and skills may buffer or intensify these relationships (Gracia & Ashkanasy, 2014).

With this in mind, the present research study contributes to the literature in at least three ways. First, we extend the investigation of moderator factors associated with the impact of surface acting on the emotional labor of managers. Although emotional labor has traditionally been linked to workers who provide services to customers, patients, or users (Humphrey et al., 2015), managers also have to interact with their subordinates, which requires them to manage daily emotions as frequently as service workers do (Brotheridge & Grandey, 2002). Second, we propose and test the moderating role of COWBs in the relationship between managers' surface acting and their wellbeing at work. COWBs refer to the degree to which individuals think their own wellbeing is based on helping others (McMahan & Estes, 2011a). The moderating role of COWBs has been examined in service workers (Pătraș, Martínez-Tur, Gracia, & Moliner, 2017), but to our knowledge, this possibility has not been investigated in managers. Third, we conceptualize and measure wellbeing at work, considering its positive and negative sides. Accordingly, we assess exhaustion and vigor as the central negative and positive facets of burnout and engagement, respectively. This approach allows a richer picture of wellbeing at work, beyond the traditional focus on repairing damage (see Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000).

### *Surface acting and wellbeing in managers*

Leaders and followers communicate with each other using emotional labor tactics (Mann, 1997) to create better leader–member exchange relationships. In

fact, emotional labor helps leaders to communicate affect, loyalty and professional respect (Liden & Maslyn, 1998), prevent followers' underestimation of the way they are evaluated by their leader (Cogliser, Schriesheim, Scandura, & Gardner, 2009), and manage the emotions of their followers (Brotheridge & Lee, 2008), for example, by creating optimistic feelings among them (Kiel & Watson, 2009; Newman, Guy, & Mastracci, 2009). To do so, in their leadership role, they sometimes mask their negative emotions when walking in the hallways to avoid upsetting others (Iszatt-White, 2009). In other words, managers may use surface acting, even though it can lead them to suffer from burnout.

Burnout is a response to continuous stressors associated with poor physical and mental health (Lee & Ashforth 1996; Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001). It comprises three dimensions: emotional exhaustion, the depletion of emotional reserves; cynicism, an increasingly cynical and negative approach towards others; and diminished personal accomplishment, a growing feeling of worthlessness (Demerouti, Bakker, Nachreiner, & Schaufeli, 2001). *Exhaustion* is considered the core dimension of burnout because it captures the core meaning of what burnout is all about (Shirom, 1989). For this reason, we focus on exhaustion as a central negative facet of wellbeing at work. Based on the job Demand-Resources (JD-R) model (Bakker & Demerouti 2007), we propose that displaying surface acting requires an effort that can exhaust managers' resources. Therefore, we propose the following hypothesis:

*Hypothesis 1: Managers who use frequent surface acting strategies experience higher levels of exhaustion.*

Along the same lines, we expect to find the opposite results in the levels of engagement, a critical positive facet of wellbeing at work (Schaufeli, Salanova, González-Romá, & Bakker, 2002b). Specifically, work engagement is a positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption. *Vigor* is characterized as the main dimension of engagement because it can apply to both intrinsically and extrinsically motivated behavior. It represents high levels of energy and mental resilience while working, the willingness to invest effort in one's work, and persistence even in the face of difficulties (Salanova & Schaufeli, 2008). The high level of resources and energy underlying vigor may be negatively affected when managers are forced to display surface acting in their interactions with workers. Accordingly, we propose the following hypothesis:

*Hypothesis 2: Managers who use frequent surface acting strategies experience lower levels of engagement.*

### *Eudaimonic Wellbeing beliefs in managers*

Wellbeing beliefs are defined as the system of beliefs about the nature and experience of wellbeing. These beliefs are an important aspect of one's worldview, they have many practical implications, and they probably influence behavior in several domains of life (McMahan & Estes, 2011a, 2011b). Individuals define their wellbeing in eudaimonic terms when they look for a virtuous life, develop themselves and contribute to others (McMahan & Estes, 2011a). Eudaimonic wellbeing beliefs, specifically high beliefs in reaching wellbeing through contributions to others (COWBs), could moderate the link from surface acting to wellbeing (Pătraș et al., 2017). However, the moderation by COWBs may have different forms because two theoretical approaches, Cognitive Dissonance theory (Festinger, 1957) and the Job D-R model, support differential roles for COWBs. Accordingly, we propose two competing hypotheses for COWBs' moderation in the links from surface acting to exhaustion and vigor. Researchers increasingly argue that the consideration of competing hypotheses is a good strategy to guard against hypothesis myopia. That is, competing hypotheses avoid conducting research that focuses on one hypothesis exclusively, disregarding evidence supporting alternative outcomes (Nuzzo, 2015).

Cognitive Dissonance theory (Festinger, 1957) argues that individuals experience discomfort or tension when two inconsistent cognitions occur at the same time, as when individuals act in a way that is contrary to their attitudes (Myers, 2010). In a similar way, when managers have high COWBs, they show strong beliefs oriented toward helping others, but they use surface acting and fake their emotions in their interactions with workers. Therefore, the inconsistency occurs because managers act in a way that is contrary to their beliefs, and COWBs accentuate the negative relationship between surface acting and wellbeing. Based on this rationale, the following hypotheses can be proposed:

*Hypothesis 3a: High COWBs increase the positive relationship between surface acting strategies and levels of burnout;*

*Hypothesis 4a: High COWBs increase the negative relationship between surface acting strategies and levels of engagement.*

By contrast, the JD-R model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007) argues that the risk of burnout is highest in working environments where job demands are high and job resources are low. This model also proposes that high job resources mitigate the negative impact of job demands on wellbeing at work. This rationale

could be transferred to the moderating role of COWBs. In fact, COWBs can be considered relevant personal resources in interpersonal relationships. Although research supports the negative impact of surface acting on wellbeing at work, some authors have mentioned some possible positive effects. For example, the amplification of positive emotions could increase job satisfaction and the sense of personal accomplishment (Côté & Morgan, 2002; Pătraș et al., 2017; Zapf & Holz, 2006). Based on this rationale, it is reasonable to expect that managers who are high in COWBs would also assume that surface acting is a necessary strategy to achieve adequate personal accomplishment in terms of creating a good climate among workers. Accordingly, surface acting may exhaust managers, but COWBs could be a personal resource that mitigates the negative effects of surface acting on wellbeing.

*Hypothesis 3b: High COWBs reduce the positive relationship between surface acting strategies and levels of burnout;*

*Hypothesis 4b: High COWBs reduce the negative relationship between surface acting strategies and levels of engagement.*

## METHOD

### *Participants and procedure*

The current research study comes from a larger cooperation project between the University of the corresponding authors and “Plena Inclusión”, a Spanish NGO dedicated to improving the quality of life and social inclusion of individuals with intellectual disability. The study followed standard good practice ethical protocols and received the ethical approval from the University’s Human and Social Sciences Ethics Committee.

We used a sample composed of 95 managers from 95 small organizations for individuals with intellectual disability. All these organizations were affiliated with *Plena Inclusión*. Participation was voluntary and confidential. *Plena Inclusión*, in cooperation with the research team, presented a call to invite the managers to participate in the current research study. The mean age of participants was 42.01 years ( $SD = 8.33$ ), and 75.8 % were women. Average in job tenure was 83.54 months ( $SD = 74.09$ ).

## Measures

**Surface acting.** To measure surface acting, we used the 3-item Emotional Labor Scale developed by Brotheridge and Lee (2003) and adapted it to managers when they have to relate to their subordinates. An example of an item was: "I intend to express emotions that I really do not feel". All the items were rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*never/rarely*) to 5 (*very often*).

**"Contribution-to-others" wellbeing beliefs (COWBs).** To measure COWBs, we used the 4-item Beliefs about Wellbeing Scale by McMahan and Estes (2011b), adapted to the workplace (Pătraș et al., 2017). Managers were asked to indicate their opinion about the contribution of each facet (item) to wellbeing in the workplace. An example of an item was: "Working in a way that benefits others". All items were rated on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*).

**Exhaustion.** To measure exhaustion, we used the 5-item Spanish version of the Maslach-Burnout Inventory-General Survey (Schaufeli, Martínez, Pinto, Salanova, & Bakker, 2002a). An example of an item was: "At the end of the day, I feel tired". All the items were rated on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 0 (*never*) to 6 (*every day*).

**Vigor.** To measure vigor, we used the 6-item Spanish version of the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (Schaufeli et al., 2002b). An example of an item was: "At my work I feel bursting with energy". All the items were rated on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 0 (*never*) to 6 (*every day*).

## Control variables

We also considered three *control variables*: sex (as dummy variable: women = 1; men = 0), job tenure and age, because previous literature suggests that these variables can have an effect on surface acting and/or the relationship between surface acting and wellbeing. For example, previous results found that surface acting was more highly correlated with negative affect (Scott & Barnes, 2011), burnout (Johnson & Spector, 2007), and draining feelings (Bartikowsky, 2013) in women than in men. Moreover, previous studies have found that length of experience in the teaching role positively relates to emotional labor. Specifically, teachers with longer service tended to perform more emotional labour and to feel personal accomplishment and job satisfaction (Kinman, Wray, & Strange, 2011). In addition, the literature suggests that older employees are better able to control their emotions and display appropriate emotions (Hochschild, 1983; Kruml & Geddes, 2000; Springer, Pudrovská, & Hauser, 2011). Hence, older managers could experience surface acting and the relationship between surface acting and wellbeing in a different way.

### Statistical analyses

To assess the study hypotheses, we performed moderated regression analyses with the PROCESS macro for SPSS (Hayes, 2013). This procedure allowed us to separately test the effects of surface acting on exhaustion and vigor through “contribution-to-others” wellbeing beliefs, controlling for sex, age and job tenure. We used the pick-a-point approach to interpret the interaction effects. Simple slopes for the conditional effects of surface acting on exhaustion and vigor for low and high values of “contribution-to-others” wellbeing beliefs (i.e., one standard deviation below and above the sample mean) were estimated, and results for the regression lines were plotted.

### Results

Descriptive results and correlations are presented in Table 1. As expected, surface acting was positively related to exhaustion and negatively to engagement. In addition, COWBs are not significantly related to surface acting, but they are negatively related to burnout and positively related to engagement. Moreover, as the table shows, Cronbach’s alphas were acceptable for the variables, ranging from .65 to .90 (Hair, Black, Babin, Anderson, & Tatham, 2006).

Table 1  
Descriptive statistics and correlations among study variables

Variable	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Gender	-	-							
2. Age	42.01	8.33	-.10						
3. Job tenure	83.54	74.01	.01	.51**					
4. Surface acting	2.46	0.72	-.13	-.08	.08	(.74)			
5. *COWBs	6.51	0.43	.05	-.07	.04	-.14	(.65)		
6. Exhaustion	1.96	1.28	.08	-.14	-.12	.35**	-.25*	(.90)	
7. Vigor	5.29	0.57	-.02	.17	.20	-.22*	.39**	-.35**	(.74)

Note. \*COWBs = “Contribution-to-others” well-being beliefs. \*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ . Point-biserial correlation was used when the data were dummy. Pearson’s correlation coefficient was computed for interval data. Cronbach’s alpha coefficients are in brackets.

Table 2 presents the results of the moderated regression analysis. The results show that the relationship between surface acting and exhaustion is positive and significant ( $B = 0.65$ ,  $p < .01$ ), supporting H1. In addition, the link from COWBs to exhaustion was also significant, but negative ( $B =$



-0.61,  $p < .05$ ). Finally, the results show that the moderator role of COWBs in the relationship between surface acting and exhaustion is not supported ( $B = -0.01$ ,  $p > .05$ ).

Table 2  
Moderation Process Analysis

	Exhaustion		Vigor	
	B	SE	B	SE
(Constant)	2.25**	0.75	5.03**	0.32
Gender	0.48	0.30	-0.06	0.13
Age	-0.01	0.02	0.01	0.01
Job tenure	-0.01	0.01	0.01	0.01
Surface acting	0.65**	0.18	-0.18*	0.08
*COWBs	-0.61*	0.29	0.48**	0.13
Interaction	-0.01	0.41	0.36*	0.18
R <sup>2</sup>	.22**		.28**	
$\Delta R^2$ due to interaction	.01		.04*	

Note. \*COWBs = "Contribution-to-others" well-being beliefs. B = Non-Standardized coefficient. \*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ .

Regarding engagement, the results revealed a significant and negative link from surface acting to vigor ( $B = -0.18$ ,  $p < .05$ ), supporting H2. Additionally, the relationship between COWBs and vigor was also significant, but positive ( $B = 0.48$ ,  $p < .01$ ) (see Table 2). The results also showed that the moderator role of COWBs in the relationship between surface acting and vigor was supported ( $B = 0.36$ ,  $p < .05$ ). The results revealed that, for low COWBs (-1SD), the relationship between surface acting and vigor was negative and statistically different from zero ( $B = -0.34$ ,  $t(91) = -2.87$ ,  $p < .01$ ; [CI = -0.58, -0.11]). Meanwhile, for high COWBs (+1SD), the relationship between surface acting and vigor was not statistically significant ( $B = -0.03$ ,  $t(91) = -0.25$ ,  $p > .05$ ; [CI = -0.22, 0.17]). Figure 1 shows the interaction effect, and we can appreciate that COWBs buffered the negative relationship between surface acting and vigor. As it has been stated, for high values of COWBs, there was not statistically significant relationship between surface acting and vigor, supporting H4b.

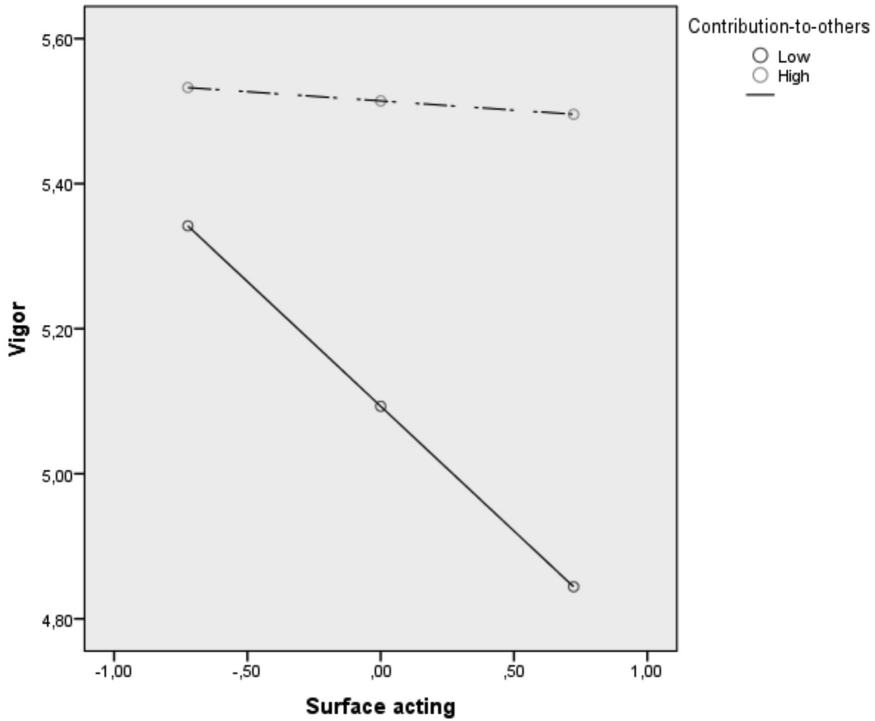


Figure 1. Interaction between surface acting and “Contribution-to-others” well-being beliefs.

## DISCUSSION

This study aimed to test whether managers who use frequent surface acting strategies have low levels of wellbeing, and whether managers’ wellbeing beliefs increase or decrease the relationship.

Results confirmed that managers who use more surface acting experience higher levels of burnout and lower levels of engagement. That is, surface acting is related to managers’ negative wellbeing. This result is in consonance with previous meta-analyses that focused on service workers’ managing of emotions (Hülshager & Schewe, 2011; Mesmer-Magnus et al. 2012; Wang et al. 2011). This study also follows the recent line of studies that have analyzed surface acting in managers and found that surface acting is also related to emotional exhaustion and work is related to family conflict in this type of role (Krannitz, Grandey, Liu, & Almeida, 2015). Therefore, this study contributes

to the knowledge from emotional labor studies indicating that surface acting also produces negative results in managers (see Humphrey, 2012; Humphrey et al., 2015).

In addition, this study has formulated two different competing hypotheses in order to test the role of “contribution to others” (COWBS) wellbeing beliefs as a positive or negative moderator of the relationship between surface acting and wellbeing. Formulating two competing hypotheses makes it possible to explain the final results (one or another) through a grounded theory from the field. Thus, we ensure that the results are not biased by the previous description of the hypotheses. As Pillutla and Thau note, “the examination of alternative explanations with a view towards provisionally accepting the validity of one over the other is good science.” (2013, p. 193). Specifically, results of the moderation confirmed that having COWBs, as a relevant personal resource, reduce the relationship between surface acting and work engagement in managers. Thus, these results support the JD-R model (Demerouti & Bakker, 2007) mechanism by showing that personal resources may reduce the relationship between job demands and wellbeing. By contrast, our findings are not congruent with dissonance theory, which suggests that a combination of COWBs and surface acting could generate dissonance, thus reducing wellbeing.

It is important to note that COWBs moderated the relationship between surface acting and engagement, but this moderation was not significant for burnout. These results highlight the need to analyze not only the negative side of wellbeing, but also the positive aspects, in order to enrich our knowledge because, as this study shows, some variables differentially affect the positive vs. negative sides of wellbeing. Consistent with this, Parkinson and McBain (2013) found that disengagement is not simply the opposite of organizational engagement. Moreover, Fredrickson (2003) argues that positivity does far more than just indicate the absence of the negative (such as fear or threats). Hence, this study is consistent with the Positive Psychology approach (Seligman, 1999) because it considers not only burnout, as the negative side of psychosocial wellbeing, but also engagement, the positive side of psychosocial wellbeing in the workplace. Therefore, this study contributes to identifying the mechanisms that can help to build wellbeing instead of just repairing illbeing at workplace. Likewise, this study contributes to advances in Occupational Health Psychology related to the application of psychology to improving the quality of work life and protecting and promoting the safety, health, and wellbeing of workers (Sauter, Hurrell, Fox, Tetrick, & Barling, 1999). It provides clear information about resources that can help managers to deal with the management of emotions when they interact with their subordinates. Thus, this study highlights that wellbeing beliefs oriented

toward contributing to others' lives are a good resource that could buffer the negative effects of surface acting on managers' wellbeing.

### *Limitations and future research*

In spite of the contributions of this study, there are several limitations that should be considered, as well as possible paths for future research. One of the main limitations of the study is the fact that the results reveal that COWBs buffer the negative relationship between surface acting and work engagement, but they do not affect the relationship between surface acting and burnout. This unexpected result allows us to state that a manager who suffers from the Burnout syndrome probably needs more time and other resources coming from different levels (individual, group, or organization level...) to affect the aforementioned relationship. For this reason, future studies should test these relationships using longitudinal studies, instead of cross-sectional ones, and multilevel analyses. Moreover, if we analyze additional results obtained in this study that are beyond the aims of this study, we can see that COWBs had a direct negative relationship with burnout. This result would suggest that COWBs could be a resource that works directly on burnout. For this reason, future studies could also examine wellbeing beliefs as a core resource for managers in reducing burnout. In any case, the findings offer rich insights into the positive side of maintaining managers' wellbeing, even if they use surface acting during workplace interactions. Future studies should also try to overcome the limitation of only using self-reports. Subjective information about demands, resources and wellbeing are a valid indicator of personal experiences, but other complementary measures, such as physiological data, can complement these results.

### *Main conclusions*

This study extends prior knowledge by showing that managers' wellbeing in the workplace related to the use of surface acting may vary depending on the meaning they attribute to achieving wellbeing. Although surface acting is considered the worst strategy for managing emotions at work because it has negative consequences for wellbeing, this study has shown that managers can use personal resources to avoid the negative consequences of surface acting, such as lower engagement at work. Therefore, building strong values and beliefs oriented toward enhancing the eudaimonic side of wellbeing, that is, contributing to others, may help managers to face one of the most difficult demands at work, managing emotions.

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