Does Emotional Regulation Training Work During Angry Service Encounters?

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Abstract

Empathy is vital in all service encounters, but especially so when the customer is angry. Research on emotional regulation is of key importance in establishing the effectiveness of training techniques for service providers who are required to deal with angry customers. This paper investigates the effectiveness of using reappraisal, a form of reframing, as an emotional regulation training technique. The study specifically measures the impact of reappraisal training on service providers' levels of empathy during angry complaint encounters. Training sessions were followed by a scenario based role play experiment. ANOVA results revealed that even minimal training in reappraisal as an emotional regulation technique can be effective in fostering higher levels of empathy in service providers dealing with angry consumers, as well as enhancing emotional awareness and control. Implications for managers are discussed outlining the bottom line advantages including the minimisation of the debilitating consequences and negative outcomes of traditional training methods such as surface acting.

Introduction

In the ever increasingly competitive service environment, regardless of the nature of the service, there is a need to ensure better management of complaint interactions. Such improvement is not only necessary to reduce defections, but to stem the destructive impact of negative word of mouth. It is unfortunate that consumer's feel most of their complaints have been badly handled (Tax, Brown and Chandrashekaran, 1998), with 43% of consumers rating the service providers post service failure responses as dissatisfactory (Bitner, Booms and Tetreault, 1990), and still this problem persists. Therefore once a service failure has occurred it is the service provider's response to the consumer's complaint that presents a significant challenge.

Regrettably for Service Providers (SP) the frequency of consumer complaints has a direct relationship with the intensity of complainants (Casado Diaz and Maz Ruiz, 2002; Bougie, Pieters and Zeelenberg, 2003), therefore typically SP will be confronted by consumers experiencing strong negative emotions (Weiner, 2000). Furthermore a study by Scherer and Ceschi (1997) revealed that 50% of airline passenger complaints are angry and not only does this anger persist, but it is difficult to placate. While other research has shown call centre employees on average are confronted by verbally aggressive consumers 10 times per day (Grandey, Dickter and Sin). Therefore angry complaint encounters place SP in situations that involve dealing with negative emotions. Researchers such as Grandey (2000) have identified SP use multiple forms of emotional regulation during these encounters. However at times SP adopt inappropriate methods of emotional regulation, such as thinking of something funny or leaving the service area (Bailey and McCollough, 2000). For SP regulating their emotions to show empathy and not inappropriate emotions such as anger is an essential element of their role (Schneider and Bowen, 1999).

Grandy's (2000) article also identified the link between the response focused Emotional Regulation (ER) techniques of suppression to the emotional labour equivalent of surface acting, and the antecedent form of ER cognitive change/ reappraisal to deep acting.
As Gross's (1998) process model of ER demonstrated, an emotional cue triggers a coordinated set of response tendencies, which have developed to facilitate adaptive behaviours in the face of opportunities or threats (e.g. fight or flight responses to a harmful external situation). However, even when activated response tendencies do not guarantee action, as response tendencies may be modulated, which can alter behavioural, experiential and physiological responses. ER works on response tendencies which in turn modulate the actual behaviour to a particular emotional stimulus (Gross, John and Richards, 2000).

The process model of ER highlights the distinction between the two stages at which ER can occur – Antecedent-Focused and Response-Focused (Gross, 1998). Antecedent-focused or proactive regulation is generated early in the process from the input side with emotional cues perceived by the individual. As it takes place prior to the activation of the response tendencies, it is capable of altering the emotion experienced and the visible behavioural responses (Gross, 1998; Pugh, 2002; Grandey, 2000).

One response-focused form of ER is suppression that is generated after the activation of response tendencies and acts to suppress or hide the subjective feelings by displaying expressions different to those being experienced (Gross, 1998; Gross, John and Richards, 2000). Suppression or surface acting, has been referred to as faking of emotional displays (Grandey, 2000), and requires substantial cognitive resources, whilst also heightening physiological responses such as heart rate and body temperature (Gross and Levenson, 1993; Richards and Gross, 2000). Suppression has also been found to generate undesirable consequences including, disrupting the communication process, reducing rapport and inhibiting relationship formation (Butler, Egloff, Wilhelm, Smith, Ericson, and Gross, 2003). As a strategy for controlling emotional displays it has another limitation, consumers can be put off by emotional displays they perceive to be fake (Gutek, 1995).

On the other hand, reappraisal, an antecedent-focused form of ER, refers to the evaluation of a situation as to alter its emotional significance. This can be done by either changing how an individual thinks about the situation or their capacity to manage the demands it presents, in a way that decreases its emotional relevance (Gross, 1998; Gross, 1999; Richards and Gross, 2000). The individual perceives the situation in such a way as to diminish its emotional impact (Grandey, 2000). As reappraisal alters the emotional experience, it allows the individual to adjust their emotional response from one of anger to a more appropriate emotion (Lazarus, 1991), such as during an interaction with an angry consumer. As described by Hochschild (1983) flight attendants are trained to cognitively reappraise difficult passengers as children to prevent feelings of anger developing. Studies have also found that through reappraisal/ reframing through skills such as self-talk participants were able to interpret verbal harassment in a more non-threatening and detached manner, which resulted in lower levels of physiological arousal to the stimulus (Stemmler, 1997). In fact reappraisal has been shown to modify the actual emotional experienced in response to negative stimuli, thereby minimising or preventing any detrimental emotional or physiological effects experienced by SP (Gross, 1998). Reappraisal is therefore proposed as an ideal form of emotional ER during angry customer complaints.

The development or enhancement of empathy felt by the SP toward the consumer through ER using reappraisal is highly desirable in complaint encounters. Empathetic ability has been

described as the accuracy in judging others emotions, interpersonal relationships and personalities (Davis and Kraus, 1997). These empathetic qualities correspond to those used to describe emotional intelligence. Emotional intelligence differs from general intelligence in that it specifically focuses upon the capacity to recognise and understand emotional reactions in oneself and others, assimilate emotions into thought, as well as the ability to regulate emotions (Goleman, 1995; Mayer, Caruso and Salovey, 2000). Dimensions of emotional intelligence as identified by Mayer and Salovey (1993) include self-confidence, self-control, emotional awareness, and empathy. All of these dimensions represent highly desirable skills for SP dealing with angry complaining consumers.

Recent evidence supports Goleman's (1995) findings that emotional intelligence skills can be improved by training, with research indicating improvements in emotional and social competencies (Jordan, Ashkanasy, Hartel and Hooper, 2002; Dulewicz and Higgs, 2004). These competencies included being better able to recognize one's own emotions, understanding the causes of emotions, better frustration tolerance and anger management, greater self-control, improved ability to take another's perspective, and increased empathy and sensitivity to others. It has been demonstrated that even basic coaching in cognitive reappraisal can lessen the emotional arousal experienced (Stemmler, 1997), such as that aroused in a SP dealing with an angry complaint.

It is therefore proposed that training in ER to enhance service SP reappraisal skills inclusive of emotional intelligence skills, will enable SP to recognize, and manage their emotions, thereby enabling greater levels of empathy during an angry consumer complaints.

H1 After receiving reappraisal training SP will feel higher levels of empathy towards angry complaining consumers than those with basic complaint handling training.

H2 After receiving reappraisal training SP will feel greater levels of being in control when dealing with angry complaining consumers than those with basic complaint handling training.

Methodology

Design

The study used an experimental scenario based role play design, based on previous research undertaken (Dallimore, Sparks and Butcher, 2007). The laboratory enabled the requisite levels of environmental control including the type of complaint, and status of the complaining consumer. A complaint scenario credible in producing anger in the consumer was produced based on an airline passenger disembarking to find his luggage, which included garments to be worn at a wedding the following day, lost. Lost luggage has been shown to produce high levels of anger in passengers (Scherer and Ceschi, 1997), with airline travel and lost luggage a familiar experience for many people. The simulated complaint was video taped and had proved both realistic and believable in previous studies (Dallimore et al., 2007).

Participants, Training Materials and Training

A total of 93 participants were recruited from one semester of Griffith University Services Marketing tutorial classes; all students were screened for having recent frontline service experience (currently employed or within 3 months of the study). Students were seen as

representative of the mixed levels of experience and training that occurs in the frontline service provider population. Tutorial classes were randomly assigned to either basic complaint handling (control) or reappraisal training. Training materials were developed from published training instructions and exercises for enhancing emotional intelligence and reappraisal as well as complaint handling skills from the following 17 authors listed in Table 1, Forty-six participants received the basic complaint handling or control training and 47 the reappraisal, which also included some complaint handling skills.

Table 1: Authors of Training Materials

Apps, 1989; Martin, 1993; Hosking, 1997; Anderson and Zemke, 1998; Collis, 1998; Carlaw and Deming, 1999; Kilner and Deslandes, 1999; Barlow and Maul; Roberts-Phelps, 2000; Freedman, Jensen, Rideout and and Freedman, 2001; Lennon, 2001; Lynn, 2002; Harris, 2003; Merlevede, Bridoux and Vandamme, 2003; Hay, McBer and Goleman, 2004; Morris, 2004).

Participants undertook 3 training sessions via, (1) a Pre-pack kit of exercises to do prior to the face to face training session, (2) Face to face training, which took place during one weeks tutorial classes, and (3) a Post-pack, a take home kit of further exercises to be completed before their laboratory sessions. After participants had undertaken the training they were booked into individual laboratory sessions. Strict protocols were observed to ensure standardisation of data collection. Each session started with a briefing, which provided a general description of the research as well as a cover story. The cover story informed participants that the study was investigating their verbal responses to an angry complaint, thus distracting their attention from the true intention of the study. The briefing informed participants that they were to take on the role of an airline employee working at the lost luggage counter. After the briefing participants were placed in a cubicle with a PC and headphones, answered the pre-test questions on SPSS online, viewed and then responded to the complaint. After viewing and responding to the angry compliant participants answered the post-test questions, which was followed by a debriefing and finally each participant was presented with a small gift.

Measurement

Self-report measures using 7 point Likert-type items were used to determine the level of empathy felt towards the consumer, the effectiveness of the training in handling complaints, as well as emotional awareness and emotional control skills.

Results

Reality checks revealed that 93.5% of participants reported that there would be similar complaint situations in real life. While 88.7% felt that as a portrait of a complaint, the scenario was believable. Results showed the scale for feelings towards the complainant scale to be reliable with alpha = .81, as was the scale for helpfulness of the training for handling complaints and ER skills with alpha = .91. As expected the ANOVA test results confirmed that the 47 participants who had received the training in reappraisal techniques reported significantly higher feelings of empathy toward the angry consumer (M = 5.83, SD = 1.07), than the 46 control group participants (M = 4.76, SD = 1.70), $F_{(1, 92)} = 4.46$, $p < .05$, $\eta 2 = .05$. This effect size indicates that the reappraisal training moderately increased feelings of empathy in participant SP (Cohen, 1988). Therefore H1 was supported. Conversely the self

reported assessment of the training revealed no differences between the two groups as both groups felt the training useful for handling consumer complaints. However ANOVA test results revealed those participants who received the reappraisal training reported significantly higher levels being aware of their emotions and their ability to control them (M = 4.39, SD = 1.30) than the control group (M = 4.39, SD = 1.95), $F (1, 92) = 6.99$, $\eta2 = .07$. Such an effect size indicates the difference between the two types of training received was substantial (Cohen, 1988). Consequently H2 was supported.

Discussion

This study demonstrates the considerable impact and effectiveness of even minimal levels of ER training in influencing service providers feelings toward angry complaining customers, thus supporting research by Gross (1998). It adds to the work of Gross (1998), and Grandy (2000) in exposing reappraisal or deep acting as the most desirable training method. Reappraisal is capable of producing more favourable interactional outcomes, especially during angry complaints, by producing greater empathetic responses in SP and hence a greater the likelihood of a positive experience for the consumer, and their ultimate satisfaction. There can be no doubt of how critical feelings of empathy are in any service encounter, but they are substantially more important to assist in a successful service recovery. But of equal importance are the benefits for the SP who is less likely to suffer the detrimental consequences of using suppression or surface acting as an ER technique when dealing with angry consumers. These consequences of reappraisal training are favourable for the service firm, for increasing customer retention, reducing negative word of mouth, as well as healthier and happy employees, all of which can only improve the bottom line. Therefore, it is critical that management is service firms' devote more effort in training their frontline SP, regardless of the frequency of dealing with difficult customers, as improving empathy and emotional management will improve all service interactions, and subsequent consumer satisfaction.

This study suffered the consequences of all laboratory experiments, in it's inability to precisely replicate a real angry complaint encounter, that may have resulted in the results being more or less significant than have been reported. Included in these limitations is the methodology's incapability of simulating the workplace environment that potentially includes such factors as working long shifts, dealing with multiple difficult and or angry customers. Therefore results obtained from infield studies may in fact demonstrate even stronger effects. Only further studies into this type of training will be able to clarify this issue. It is recommended that further research should investigate the impact of more comprehensive reappraisal training.

There can be little doubt of the benefits of training for SP. However, as these results demonstrated it is critical that those SP who deal with complaining customers receive training that empowers them during difficult encounters. They need training that develops and enhances their ability to recognise emotions in themselves and others, as well as their ability to manage those emotions, while fostering empathetic responses to every consumer, as every consumer is valuable.

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