

CHAPTER 7

The Value of Feelings

by David Bradford and Mary Ann Huckabay

“I’ve learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel.”

— MAYA ANGELOU¹

As discussed in Chapter 4, people say “I feel” to refer to two different phenomena. When we say “I feel *that*...,” “I feel *like*...,” or “I feel *as if*...,” we are offering an opinion, hunch, or thought. These are cognitions and are fundamentally different from reporting on our emotional or affective state. Saying “I feel that the group is dealing with some difficult issues” is an observation. Adding “...and I feel excited that we are doing so” is reporting our emotional reaction.

The objective of this chapter is not just to clean up our use of the English language. Instead, it is to focus on the incredible value that emotions bring, not only to the communication process, but to resolving interpersonal difficulties and building effective relationships.

The Utility of Emotions

Emotions fulfill several important functions:

- They make communication more complete by *conveying crucial information*. In the example above about “the group dealing with difficult issues,” note how the meaning fundamentally changes if one substitutes “I feel excited about what we are doing” with “I’m worried about what everyone expects of me.”
- Emotions indicate — to oneself and to others — *the importance of the issue*. One can dislike another person’s comment, but the importance of that displeasure varies tremendously depending on whether one is *slightly annoyed* or *deeply angry*.

¹ Maya Angelou (1928–2014) was a Black poet, memoirist, and civil rights activist. A prolific writer, she received dozens of awards and more than 50 honorary degrees.

- Expressing one's feelings is an *important way to be known*. Letting others understand what makes us delighted or upset, close or distant, affirmed or rejected, are all ways that our personhood — our *individualism* — is shown. Our true self comes out more with our feelings than with our thoughts.
- Knowing how we feel serves as an *early warning system*. We often start to have an emotional reaction before we are cognitively aware that something is bothering us. So, if we are in a meeting and we notice that we feel tense or anxious, then we can ask ourselves — before things get out of hand — what's going on.
- Emotions are a *crucial component of effective feedback*. Staying with our emotions keeps us on “our side of the net.” It conveys crucial information about how we feel about other people's behavior. Conversely, if we only “stay in our head,” we are more likely to cross over the net and offer our cognitive assessment of “the sort of person you are” and “why you are acting as you do,” which — as has already been noted — tends to cause more problems than it solves.



Emotions at Work

A common misconception is that emotions have no place at work. We would argue that the opposite is true. Certainly, there are places or times when losing control, ranting, and raving, might be inappropriate (although there are also

occasions when that would be exactly the right thing to do), but those aren't the only ways one shows emotions. Holding back when you are annoyed, angry, or pleased can cause you to lose influence, create misconceptions, and lead others to waste time trying to figure you out — especially if you are their boss.

So we would assert that emotions (including warmth as well as anger) are sources of strength, not weakness, and form an important basis of influence at work. Those who cannot identify their emotions and do not know how to express them are at a decided disadvantage, whether as managers or subordinates.

To illustrate this point, consider a situation in which Antonne made a unilateral decision about a subordinate in Liam's area. Not only does Liam (pronouns: they / them) think that their boss made the wrong decision — one that will create extra work — but they are upset that Antonne made a decision that (as they see it) was theirs to make. Let us further assume that Antonne made his decision with the best of intentions and does not see it as any big deal.

It is likely that Liam is going to feel angry and hurt. It appears to them that Antonne does not trust them or thinks they are incompetent. They may well feel threatened (and perhaps a bit powerless) because, as they see it, some of their autonomy has been taken away. What is Liam likely to do? If they are like most managers, they will not express any of these emotions to Antonne but will, at most, drop into Antonne's office and ask him, with outward calm, why he made that decision — hoping all the while that their boss never suspects how peeved they are. ***We believe, however, that, in a situation like this, holding back your emotions makes you less powerful and less effective.***

How do emotions apply in this scenario? First, it is important that Liam be able to recognize and identify what their feelings are (even if they choose not to express them). Note that they have a choice here. That is, they *could* deny and suppress how they feel. (You will see this occurring in the

T-group.) Although we have little control over whether we have emotions, we do have some choice about whether we choose to recognize them and express them and then how we express them.

Take careful note that when we have feelings but suppress them, this does not make the feelings go away. More importantly, suppressing feelings may not prevent them from influencing our behavior. In fact, it is the feelings of which we are unaware that can control us the most! (Knowing you have termites doesn't stop them from eating your house. But *not* knowing you have termites lets them eat a whole lot more of your house.) When feelings are strong but suppressed, they tend to leak out indirectly in our tone of voice, nonverbal signs, use of loaded words, and so on. It is only when we can identify emotions that we can have some choice about whether to express them.

Second, unless Liam can identify their feelings, they don't truly know what is bothering them. Thus, they won't know what questions would be most helpful to ask Antonne. Asking "Why did you make that decision?" may not get at what is truly bothering Liam. But if Liam recognizes that they feel threatened, they at least have the choice (if not the nerve) to ask Antonne directly, "Are you disappointed with my work?"

Third, if Liam cannot — or will not — recognize and express their feelings, they are holding back crucial information that Antonne needs to know; namely that Liam does not see this as a trivial issue. Remember, we stipulated that Antonne honestly doesn't see anything wrong with what he did. He's not going to see any reason not to do something similar in the future if Liam doesn't let him know that there is a reason.

Even if Liam recognizes their own feelings, they may decide not to express them and yet inadvertently express them anyway. They may respond coolly to their boss. They may just look upset. This may cause confusion and misperception because now Antonne is receiving conflicting signals. Liam's words convey that this is a minor issue or no issue at all, but other things are saying it is. Such confusion does nothing to help their relationship.

So, what might Liam say? When we talk about expressing feelings, there are two forms such expressions can take: You can report your feelings in a calm voice — "Just the facts, ma'am" — or you can report your feelings while also *showing* them through your expressions, body language, and tone of voice. Ideally, your words and your nonverbal behaviors will be in sync, sending the clearest possible message, but this is not always possible. In some organizational (and national) cultures, it may be allowable to report one's feelings emotionally, but taboo to directly express strong feelings. Could Liam say, "Antonne, I don't agree with the decision you made yesterday, and it bothers me that I wasn't even involved. Can we talk about this?" Putting their feelings on the table increases the probability that Liam will get their message across without angering their boss.

Although this approach is likely to make Antonne feel defensive, that very feeling is likely to prompt him to explain the reasons for his action. Which is a step in the right direction, because now the issues are on the table so they can be discussed. It's still possible that Liam and Antonne will end up blaming each other, but it's also quite possible that now they can work out how to handle similar situations from now on.

This is only one way the situation might be handled. There is no single "textbook" way to behave in these situations. The appropriate response depends on you, your boss's style, the surrounding organizational and cultural norms, and the importance of the issue at hand. But whatever the specific situation, if you cannot recognize your feelings and do not know how to express them, you lose many of your options and are that much less likely to find a response that works.

Our Difficulty in Recognizing (and Expressing) What We Feel

Each of us has an easier time recognizing some emotions than others. For some people, it may be the agitated feelings (like anger or annoyance)

that can be quickly felt, whereas for others it could be the more heartwarming emotions (such as gratitude and affection), and for still others it might be the more vulnerable ones (hurt, rejection, inadequacy). The more difficult-to-recognize feelings might only be recognized later or only when they are very strong (“8 on a 10-point scale”).



Even if we can identify what for us are difficult-to-identify emotions, it may be hard to give them full expression. We “tone down” the words we use and cover up our feelings with excuses and lengthy explanations. We say, “I’m wondering why you said that” rather than “How dare you say that?” Or we say, “I was bothered by what you did in the last meeting, but I’m over it now.” This sort of muting and downplaying lessens the impact of our statements. I’m not going to be that worried about a feeling you tell me you don’t even feel any more. Further, we confuse and mislead the listener to say we were “slightly bothered” when we were very hurt and angry.

Note that this discussion of how to deal with emotions is based on several assumptions. First, we tend to assume that everyone has the potential to show the full range of human feelings, even though individuals do vary in the intensity of their feelings — some people have “higher emotional peaks and lower emotional valleys” than others. Second, we assume that over a reasonably long period of time (say, a month or so), an individual will indeed feel the full range of human emotions (though not necessarily all at the same level of intensity). It follows from these two assumptions that if, over a reasonable amount of time, we are not expressing the full range of emotions — despite the (assumed) fact that we can and will feel them — then something is going on inside of us to block full expression. (Of course, if our assumption that everyone does have the full range of human feelings is wrong, then our conclusion amounts to the unfair accusation: “I know you’re hiding something because you haven’t said anything about it.”)²

What are these barriers? One may be our social conditioning not to show what we feel. A more basic one is unwillingness to recognize the emotions in the first place.

Barriers to Recognizing the Emotion

The main barrier, for many, to recognizing emotion may be the belief that certain feelings are not legitimate; they do not have a right to be felt (“boys don’t cry”). This, in turn, can take several forms:

- **“I shouldn’t feel X.”** We might have been raised, for example, to believe that certain feelings are not legitimate. (“I shouldn’t be envious, angry, or competitive.” “I shouldn’t feel sexually attracted to anyone but my husband / wife / boyfriend / girlfriend / fiancé(e)”). On the other hand, we may have been raised to believe that some

² The assumption can be unfair. Students may be disconnected from their feelings for a variety of reasons:

- Some on the autism spectrum experience alexithymia, a condition which makes it hard to identify and describe one’s feelings. This does not mean emotions are not experienced.
- Some with PTSD have learned, as a survival mechanism, to numb their awareness of their feelings. They may “not feel anything” in a situation where others report strong emotion.
- These are just two examples. It may be useful to check in with faculty if you need help identifying or managing your feelings.

feelings are undesirable, but we'll have them anyway because we are human. The distinction we are making here is between feeling something that we do not wish to feel vs. feeling something that we consider an unfortunate but inevitable part of being human. So, if I have been raised to feel that envy is to be avoided but can't always be avoided, I might not like the fact that I am envious, but the fact that I am does not make me a despicable or evil person. And that relates to the second point...

- **Self-identity.** If we have a very settled — or perhaps rigid — view of what kind of person we are (or at least what kind we wish to be), then some feelings will violate that view and may therefore be suppressed. "I'm a strong person, so I can't allow myself to feel afraid." "I'm a smart person, so I can't allow myself to feel confused." A variation on this is the suppression of feelings that violate the identity we wish to project to others. That is, I may know and accept that I sometimes feel vindictive, but I can't ever let you see that because I've staked a lot on having people think I'm gentle and forgiving.
- **"I don't have sufficient reason to feel Z."** We may have an emotional response but not be able to "justify" feeling it. "I don't know why, but Jayden drives me nuts. He hasn't really done anything that bad, so I'd better squash this emotion. I certainly don't want the rest of the group to know I'm like this." The

alternative position that we are suggesting is that feelings have *legitimacy in and of themselves*; they do not need rational justification to exist. (Acting on them, of course, is a different story.)

This is not to say that we should not figure out where an emotional response is coming from; that is usually a worthwhile exploration. However, it might take us some time to get to the bottom of an issue and understand exactly what is causing an emotion. In the meantime, even if we do not seem to have a valid reason for a particular emotional response, that does not take away the fact that we feel that emotion. Furthermore, the best way to figure out why we feel something is often to "honor" the emotion first by assuming that it is valid.

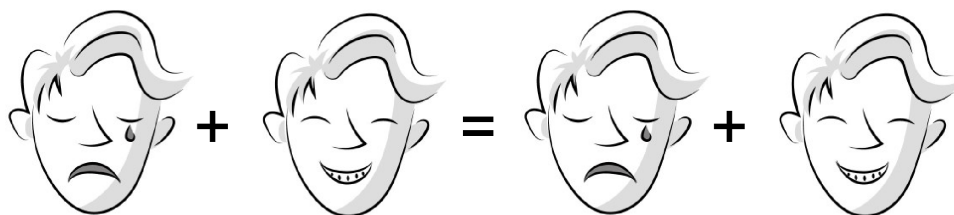
Conversely, if we dismiss our right to have a feeling, we stop exploring what might be causing it and thereby block ourselves and others from learning about ourselves.

- **Contradictory emotions.** It may be hard to honor one emotion if we notice we are having a contradictory one at the same time. People tend to do a certain type of emotional "math" by which two opposing emotions cancel each other out. "How can I be mad at you if I like you?" Another example that frequently arises in the T-group is when people receive tough feedback and wonder "How can I be hurt by his feedback if I know he's honestly trying to help?"

You think emotions cancel each other out...



But in reality, both emotions remain...



In math, it's true that $(+5) + (-5) = 0$. What we need to do is recognize that, when it comes to our emotions, $(+5) + (-5) = (+5) + (-5)$. That is, people can hold several feelings at the same time — including opposite feelings. (It's hard to imagine anyone who has parents, children, a husband, or a wife and has not experienced this.) In the T-group, I can be appreciative that I am finally getting some straight feedback and, at the same time, I can feel hurt by the

feedback I'm getting. Both are real and both might be worth expressing. For example, it may be good to express both appreciation and hurt feelings because I may need some reassurance from you — that is, that you are not totally rejecting me — before I can absorb any more of your negative feedback.

- **“But what if I am wrong?”** — Although we can deceive ourselves by mislabeling what we feel or by downplaying the intensity of our emotions, we are still going to be the expert on what we are feeling. If I am feeling angry, the fact is *that I am feeling angry!* I can be “wrong” about *why* I feel angry — for example. I can believe that it's strictly your behavior that has angered me and not recognize my own short fuse. But I can't be wrong that that's what I'm feeling. That is why, when you decide to express a feeling, *it is important to stick with the feeling and not turn it into an accusation.* If that “rule” is obeyed, it is possible for you and me to get into a joint exploration about what might be causing my emotional response.

But wouldn't it be better to figure out for yourself why you are having a particular emotional response before expressing it? Isn't it a bit embarrassing to express being upset at another's comment and only later figure out that the real source of annoyance is something similar that a friend said to me? Clearly, if one can quickly determine the factors behind the feeling, it is best to express the feeling. However, there are costs to holding back and silently trying to sort out the causes of an emotional response. Doing so pulls you out of the conversation — and the relationship — and when you have finally sorted it out, the issue may be ancient history. Saying, “I was bothered by the comment you made at our last meeting” has less impact than raising the issue at the time the comment was made. Having comfort with expressing more emotions in the moment allows you to respond as needed in each situation.

One more important point: *if one expresses an emotion as a reaction rather than an accusation, joint problem solving can occur.* Saying, “I am feeling very upset about what you did” opens the possibility that my disturbance may be due

to something in me rather than to anything malicious on your part. Which brings us back to our original point: we are almost never wrong about what our feelings are. So, staying on our side of the net can free us to state our emotions *and then* try to figure out how much they are caused by someone else and how much by ourselves.



We hold ourselves back.

Concern About Expressing Emotions

This chapter does not suggest that you should say whatever you feel whenever you feel it. We want to stress that there are occasions in which expressing emotions is ineffective. Recall in Chapter 1 how we outlined understanding of context as a critical leadership (and human!) competency. Expressing emotion is a profoundly cultural — and situational — act. One must consider the following:

- ***Will it hurt the other and / or will it damage our relationship?*** Our view is that you're

more likely to hurt others and damage your relationships with them by expressing feelings indirectly than by being direct. When you are indirect, other people can sense that there is something going on although they cannot put their finger on it. So, they are more likely to think things are more serious than they are. Furthermore, you are more likely to damage a relationship by turning your emotions into labels that you pin on the other person; that is, giving it to her straight — “I feel that you are inconsiderate” — rather than giving it to her straight and staying on your side of the net — “I feel hurt by that.”

- **What if the other has negative feelings about me?** Isn't it better to let sleeping dogs lie? We don't propose kicking a sleeping dog, but it might be a good idea to wake it up. Do you really want to be in the dark if somebody is holding back their feelings about you? If the situation is temporary, the answer may be yes. Why get into it with an ER nurse or the tech support person? But in a continuing relationship, that short-term “benefit” can have a high long-term cost. Even though it can be uncomfortable to hear another person's reactions to you, getting it out in the open allows the two of you to work on the issue to improve the relationship.
- **How I want to be seen.** We may privately accept that we have certain feelings, but not want to express them because we want to keep up a certain public identity. What the T-group allows you to test is whether this presented self really is more attractive than being more fully known. It has been our experience that, in most cases, the person you really are is more appealing than the image you try to present. But one of the real risks in the T-group is testing out that hypothesis.
- **The impermanence of feelings.** “If I express a feeling now, am I answerable for it from now on?” Can I say “I am feeling close to you” now and not feel close to you in the future? Or does that make me fickle? Feelings do change — in quantity and quality — over time, so they should be understood as what we feel now and not necessarily what we will feel forever more. On the positive side,

this means that I can be upset or even angry at you now without that implying that I am going to permanently reject you.

- **Loss of control.** Will I cry, “lose it,” and just be emotional? Will I say things that are exaggerated and that I might regret later? In a North American cultural context, the rules of emotional display rules were set by straight, White men — in particular, those in highly socialized middle and upper classes. These rules emphasize being in control of one's emotions — a stiff upper lip and all that. Showing emotion may be seen as weakness. There are indeed times to keep a stiff upper lip and not show our feelings, but there are costs that come with overcontrol. Our observation is that, overall, more trouble is caused by holding back emotions than by stating them. And remember, we are talking about stating emotions, not labeling others. It's really the latter that is most destructive.

Note that the barriers to recognizing and expressing emotions listed above are not mutually exclusive. There are usually several going on at once. For example, my fear of losing control may come from a fear of losing face (my identity and acceptance will be in jeopardy) or I could be worried about insulting the other person — or I could be worried about both at the same time. Obviously, the greater the number of concerns at one time, the harder it will be for me to see and express what seem like “dangerous” emotions.

Actions You Can Take

- **Take the risk of testing out some of your inhibiting assumptions.** T-group may be the best opportunity you ever have to test the notion that expressing certain feelings will cause you to be rejected, disrespected, or disliked. In T-group, even if it turns out they do, that won't be the end of the world.
- **Put your feelings on equal footing with your ideas.** Admittedly, this can be difficult, given our educational training, but when you have a feeling, try holding on to it and then having an internal “conversation” between your thoughts and feelings for the sake of a mutual exploration.

- ***Catch yourself*** (and help others) when you detect one of these traps. When somebody says, “I feel such-and-such, but I know I don’t have any reason to feel this way,” take that feeling seriously anyway and assume that there really is something important behind it.
- ***Develop a sensitive “receiver” and “preamp booster”*** for those emotions you have a difficult time recognizing and / or expressing. That is, train yourself to be sensitive to weak signals of your emotions and not disregard them just because they are weak. The idea is that if your receiver is weak, even a very important signal may come through only faintly. Likewise, for those emotions that you do not fully express, can you “boost the output signal” and express them more strongly than you may think you feel them? You may feel that you are exaggerating, but in fact you’re more likely to be communicating accurately.
- ***Try to figure out if there is a particular feeling that’s blocking the expression of some other feeling.*** If so, it may be possible to escape this trap by expressing both feelings. For example, “I’m having a hard time telling you that I’m feeling put down because I am worried that you will take this as a rejection and that’s not at all what I mean.”

In Conclusion

Even if we work at recognizing and boosting the signal in expressing our feelings, we may never be fully comfortable with all our feelings. But uncomfortable doesn’t mean impossible. An important lesson is to be aware of the emotions we have difficulty recognizing and expressing. Then we can work extra hard at paying attention to weak signals we receive and begin to gather the messages in those bottles.