

## FEELINGS, SUBSTITUTION, AND EMOTIONAL TRANSPARENCY

This article is an introduction to a series of applications which accompany [Facing Feelings in Faith Communities](#). <<Click for more information.>> The applications offer examples of how ministry and community would be enhanced if we took feelings seriously in all the dimensions of our life together as God’s people. Current applications address:

- The Role of Feelings in the Governing Board
- The Role of Feelings in Children’s Formation and Worship
- The Role of Feelings in Teen and Youth Ministry
- The Role of Feelings in Bible Study Groups
- The Role of Feelings in Newcomer Ministry
- The Role of Feelings in Stewardship Development
- The Role of Feelings in Sabbatical Planners
- The Role of Feelings and Congregational Consultants

These applications can be purchased as a collection, [Congregational Resources for Facing Feelings](#), <<Click for more information.>> and more applications are being written.

While this application is understandable without a detailed knowledge of the theory of affective competence, you will have a much deeper understanding of what follows if you first read about the six primary feelings (fear, anger, sadness, peace, power or agency, and joy)<sup>1</sup> and the messages that accompany these feelings.

The goal of this article is to illustrate how taking feelings seriously will improve your leadership and decision-making and help you to develop and promote deeper relationships. Many leaders have significant cognitive abilities and behavioral skills. The purpose of increasing affective competency is to help leaders, and consequently whole communities, to increase their capacity to notice, understand, and utilize their feeling in service of building beloved communities and engaging more fully in God’s mission. This article will help you and your co-leaders to imagine creative ways of thinking and feeling in order to be more fully present to yourself and those with whom and for whom we work.

*Facing Feelings in Faith Communities* offers the spiritual, psychological, and scriptural foundation for trusting and utilizing our God-given feelings. It describes the six primary feelings and where you are likely to notice them in your body. It also evokes the feelings through the use of art, scripture, and poetry so that you can actually *experience* these feelings, hopefully without the contamination that you may have received as a child when you might have learned or been told that some feelings are more important

than others. *Facing Feelings* also explains the theory of substitution of feelings. Simply put, this theory suggests that most of us, at a very early age, learned to substitute an “acceptable” feeling for one that was prohibited or not valued in our family of origin. Because the feeling that was congruent with our experience was banned or discounted, we “put on” or enacted a feeling that was deemed okay within our family system, even if we knew it didn’t really fit what we were experiencing. The cost of such a substitution is that people are not easily able to understand what we are really feeling, and we are thus less likely to receive from others what we need or want. Unfortunately, such substitution patterns become habits and, over time, we may not notice that we are expressing an emotion that does not “fit” our current situation.

*Facing Feelings* is an attempt to help us restore our emotional systems to their original state, or at least to invite us to imagine how we would live differently if our emotional expressions were more nearly congruent with the situations and events we encounter—without the interference of parental prohibitions and rewards that narrowly limited our emotional expressions. Secondly, it offers examples of how our life in community would be enriched if we and those around us were as emotionally competent as we are intellectually capable and behaviorally skilled.

As you read this article, and the other applications in this collection, you are invited to be aware of how your feelings invite you more deeply into connection with God, yourself, and others. You might also consider how each of us is socialized around the expression of feelings and the role our gender plays in what feelings we are comfortable expressing. These topics are also discussed in depth in *Facing Feelings* along with how some faith communities exhibit a primary orientation as a *joyful, peaceful or powerful* community, or as a *fearful, sad, or angry* congregation.

Before you read this article, study the “Feelings as Messengers” grid. Underlying the grid is the theory that a feeling or feelings arise in response to a stimulus, and that each of the primary feelings “contains” or is accompanied by a message that tells you what you need or what possible responses you might wish to make. Paying attention to the feeling and the message helps you make better decisions and helps keep you connected to yourself and others. It may help to picture the pattern in this way:

Stimulus → Feeling → Message → Need or Response.

### **A Word about Transparency**

Frequently, when I am consulting, I speak about open systems. Or I hear clients talk about the desire for more transparent leadership. Most often the discussion turns to the communication of ideas or goals. Sometimes the conversation is about underlying, hidden assumptions and making them clear to all parties. I would label all of this *cognitive transparency*. Rarely do people include the clear and open communication of feelings in these conversations. And yet it has been my experience that when leaders hide their feelings from other staff members, co-workers, volunteers, parishioners or clients, the waters get much murkier than when assumptions, goals, and rationales are hidden or unexplained. And the confusion or obstruction happens more rapidly when feelings are hidden or opaque than when cognitive assumptions are hidden or ideas are

unclear. Obviously, this is not an either/or situation. However, it is my belief that the technology most groups employ in exposing assumptions, goals, as well as leadership theory and practice is much more developed and accessible than the technology for articulating feelings and examining how they impact our relationships and our work. The applications that follow are an attempt to help individuals and groups move toward greater *affective transparency*.<sup>2</sup>

By reading, reflecting upon, and most importantly discussing this article with others, you will become more affective competent as a leader or participant in ministry. Affective competence will also enhance your relationships with family and friends as you fully utilize all the capacities God gave you. As you become more affectively competent, you might also experience less fear, or have a greater capacity to seek support for your fear, and thus have more desire and ability to be affectively transparent.

Whether you read this article privately or with a group, give yourself permission to breathe in the feelings described and evoked in the situations. The greatest benefit will come when you can experience the feelings that the situations describe and when you can imagine different scenarios and outcomes for routine events and practices.

In summary, my hope is to offer you better access to our God-given emotional software. This software, through often subtle or dismissed changes in our body, allows us to apprehend messages that assist us in the regulation of life and relationships. Developing the capacity to notice and read our feelings increases the chances that we will know what we need or want. As we express our feelings more clearly, other people are more likely to respond in ways that are helpful to us, thus enhancing our relationships and the work we might be engaged in together.

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<sup>1</sup> There is also a chapter on more complicated emotions of shame and guilt. While they differ from the primary emotions they play a significant role in most of our lives.

<sup>2</sup> In addition to cognitive and affective transparency, I also talk about *power transparency*. Sometimes I think of this as behavioral transparency—following a learning/change model with cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions. See William M. Kondrath, [\*God's Tapestry: Understanding and Celebrating Differences\*](#) (Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 2008), p. 79. <<Click for more information.>> One might also think of this three-fold transparency in reference to the communication domains (meaning, affect, and power) articulated by David Kantor in *Reading the Room: Group Dynamics for Coaches and Leaders* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2012), p. 9.