



Types of feelings

A fresh look at developing emotional intelligence

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In the last two decades the notion of emotional intelligence (EI) has made its way into the practices of adult and children's development. The argument is developing cognitive intelligence alone is insufficient to be a healthy and productive person. The work of Daniel Goleman (1995) in particular, which he applied to leadership in corporate settings, spurred educational psychologists to develop a range of techniques for schools that helped children to systematically develop their affective capabilities. SEAL (Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning) is a notable example in the England. **ecl** builds on this work by offering an important refinement to the notion of feelings using a concept of four types, which was developed by Bert Hellinger (1998).

Daniel Goleman (1995) proposed that EI requires leaders to have an array of skills and characteristics, which at the time of his writing he believed were largely missing from leadership development activity in business schools and consultancies. EI was the driver of effective performance in business and organisations. He saw EI as the ability to monitor and manage one's own and other people's emotions, to discriminate between different emotions and label them appropriately, and to use emotional information to guide thinking and behaviour.

But feelings are complex and have different qualities, some of which can help and some which frankly can hinder performance. This paper explores some of the important subtleties of feelings that adults need to be mindful of when working to develop emotional intelligence.

Going right back to early years, when a baby is born it is totally dependent – their whole being is characterised by, and their survival depends on, a capacity to *reach out* principally to its mother. It is this movement that fuels the fundamental energy for life. During the first three years the child is reaching out all of the time and by doing so they grow themselves 'neuro-biologically'. They develop their identity through processes that enable them to become attuned to key people and their environment. Feelings are as basic as that.

If all goes well during this phase of development then the child becomes discriminating between their ability to live out both *no* as well as *yes*. For example they understand that it is OK to play with sand but it is not OK to eat it. In order to begin the process of operating

autonomously, children populate themselves internally with the people on whom they are dependent in Bowlby's (1988) terms attachment figures. We all carry the yes's and no's of these people within us. They are the basis of our socialisation. It is why social and emotional processes are often looked at together. Shame guides us not to go beyond what any particular social environment (conscience group) permits.

In our work with children and young people we can help to create conditions that stimulate this reaching out. When we reach out the physical manifestation for the movement is the breath – a valuable movement to notice and make space for in working with children and young people. When a person breathes both in and out they are capable of reaching out and letting in. 'No' often shows as a holding breath; it is contraction or holding back in the service of belonging; often producing chronic tension and ultimately difficult behaviours.

So, at everyone's core there are two basic movements that fuel human behaviour.

1. Reaching out (yes to life)

People are interested in the world, open, relaxed and contactful; flexible, spontaneous, life affirming and strengthening,

2. Turning away (no to engaging with life)

People are inclined to withdraw, close down, protect what they have, are tense, complaining, refusing, rejecting, defending, deflecting, prone to conflict.

Note: A neurotic response is when a person starts to open and come towards but reaches the point where they stopped before ... and so turn away again.

Four types of feelings

Underpinning these basic movements are four types or layers of 'feeling'.

Primary feelings

Primary feelings promote action, and express a reaching out. They come in intense, brief waves and resonate for others. Primary feelings guard life and give strength to the one who feels. The anguished cry of a child gives us a small resonant heartbreak. In contrast, when you hear a toddler working up a tantrum you don't feel the same pathos.

Crucially when considering child development, when feelings aren't met children shut down and their primary feelings turn to secondary feelings. The purpose of all primary feelings is to support action. A child held in an uncomfortable way may scream. The fury is used to get the discomfort to stop and when this happens the feeling [anger] is over. Anger, grief, love and guilt all promote needed movement.

Secondary feelings

Secondary feelings actually support an avoidance to act. They are commonplace in our day-to-day interactions with each other, appearing when people have given up believing that they will receive a helpful response. These types of feelings are chronic, fostering seemingly never-ending cycles of blaming, complaining, judging. They weaken us, because they are largely connected to old psychological woundings. They are a substitute for action. Blame and anger, for instance, are often secondary to disappointment, acknowledgement or gratitude. Worry is an alternative to restorative action. This is the stuff of most 'soap opera' programmes shown nightly on our television screens.

Systemic feelings

Less well understood are systemic feelings, which lead us to act on others' behalf often unconsciously. They are appropriate for someone else in that person's system but are held on their behalf by someone who is identified with the other person's situation or role, usually unknowingly. The feelings are not supported by the person's actual biography or competency. We experience systemic feelings when we are living out someone else's feelings/issues/business or fighting someone else's cause. A good example in an organisation is the role of 'ejector seat' where people who take on a particular position repeatedly leave the company after just a short while no matter how competent they are.

When someone has a feeling that doesn't have a personal justification [for example if a baby is born angry] it is likely not to belong properly with him or her but be systemic. When you suspect someone may be caught in a systemic state ask: 'For whom are these feelings appropriate?' When we identify a feeling as systemic the solution involves both acknowledging it in its context and respectfully returning it. We need to let the terrible thing be true about the other person – i.e. in order to hand back someone's fate to them, we need to be able to let them have their fate. When we do this we often become a bit smaller.

Meta feelings

Meta feelings promote 'gathered action'. They carry pure strength and are not emotional in the conventional sense. They are impersonal even showing a level of detachment or even disassociation. Anyone may experience this when they find an unexpected power to deal with a crisis. Meta feelings are what make people reliable. A person in a meta state has distance and from that place they can act. They have a soulful depth. A surgeon, judge or general needs to work from this place. Meta feelings include wisdom, courage, etc, but there is also meta anger, even cruelty.

In practice

In developing and caring for children and young people, we can foster sound relationships and prevent entanglements and poor behaviours that emerge from secondary and systemic feelings by bringing people back to primary feelings which provide the strength to act.

What is at issue for adults working with children is finding ways of communicating that are based on openness and respect and which elicit a primary response. Using sentences in our language that are short, clear and to the point can de-escalate situations, bring calm, let the truth have a place and support that reaching-out energy. They have particular characteristics in that they are:

- Simple and concise
- Respectful, context specific, felt anew
- Soul touching, without jargon

They

- Use 'I' rather than 'you' to encourage personal responsibility
- Acknowledge resistance, and include opposites
- Clear confusion, demarcate via tautologies
- Accentuate the positive, and keep doors open
- Turn complaints into wishes

Such sentences carry the most power when they are spoken calmly and, when dealing with difficult situations, are often related to the four ordering forces of belonging, place, exchange and time.

References

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