RECOGNIZING EMOTIONS
A Core “Positioning” Skill
introduction
“A man finds room in the few square inches of his face for the traits of all his ancestors; for the expression of all his history, and his wants.”

Ralph Waldo Emerson
(1803–82, American poet philosopher)

Let’s suppose that, on the morning of a major strategy meeting, you have an unpleasant argument with your spouse during breakfast. It is one of those disconcerting tiffs about a seemingly trivial issue, but it unnerves you and gets you off on the wrong foot; this, in addition to your already-anxious feelings about the day at work ahead.

You walk quickly to the train station. It starts to rain and you don’t have an umbrella, so your best suit gets wet, as does your neatly combed hair. You arrive at the station and the train has been cancelled, causing a 15-minute delay, which means that you will be running late for your important meeting. Your stress levels are rising. The train finally comes and the journey seems endless and uncomfortable; the crush and human odors more unbearable than usual. When you finally arrive at the office, there is a fire drill, delaying you a further 10 minutes. Arriving at the conference room for your meeting, the team members are wandering around the room looking impatient, speaking on their cell phones or sitting doing other tasks. The mood is not good.

To compound matters, the cleaners have piled the papers you left out on the table in preparation, into a corner. The coffee and chocolate croissants you ordered are not there …

Recognizing emotions is your immediate read of emotions in yourself and others; being aware of what you are feeling, and figuring out how other people are feeling. This read gives you data that help to inform what you do next.

... How are you feeling? (“I am anxious and not at all focused on the meeting.”)

How are others feeling? (“I don’t know; I am not looking, I have other things to worry about.”)

You start the meeting with your presentation. The audience isn’t buying into the pitch, because they have no idea what you’re talking about.
Information about this lack of connection between you and your audience will come from facial expressions and other non-verbal signals. Accurately picking up on these signals is essential for changing course.

Recognizing emotions and understanding them (Branch 3 of the MSCEIT Model) often intersect.

People who fail to recognize and/or understand emotion are often surprised by events (“I had no idea …”) and can shun accountability. They might blame other people for being “misleading”. What you and they are feeling will impact on the effectiveness of the work you are trying to do. So, your ability to read emotions is critical, because picking up those emotional clues—including facial expressions and other non-verbal signals—might stop you miscuing and, in turn, managing the situation poorly. Critically, recognizing goes beyond the literal immediate read and involves intuitive, almost visceral, input of data.

In part, recognition is about precisely identifying and communicating our feelings. We must know how we feel in order to be able to meet our emotional needs; and we communicate our feelings to get and give emotional support and understanding. Hence, the MSCEIT recognition branch is “…the capacity to perceive and to express feelings.”

Recognition is the collection of emotional signals and cues—the available data about what we and others are feeling—which informs us in using, understanding and managing emotions.

Individuals who are strong at recognition naturally and intuitively identify and communicate feelings without too much strategizing or thinking about the process.

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The emotional system of the brain is regulated internally (how we feel) and externally (in our relationships with others). Biologically, emotions are an open-loop system; our brain design is such that other people can help us manage our emotions better. The constant interaction of prefrontal, open limbic circuitry loops between you and the person you are working with, creates a mood in the meeting, and enables the sharing of emotional clues, and ultimately feelings and moods. Emotions can convey your intentions to others, thereby enabling smoother or more fractious communication and interaction. Discussion is an in-the-moment experiencing of “interpersonal limbic regulation”, where one person transmits signals that can alter hormone levels, cardiovascular function, sleep rhythms, and even the immune system inside the body of another.

When you interact with others, you can “mirror”—displaying feelings, often without a single word—remarkably quickly and intuitively. Both your and others’ tone of voice and facial expressions happen in a flash, and give critical data that you might just miss. The immediate impact on the mood in the room warrants attention and management.13
EXERCISE

Recognizing emotions

Think of a recent situation in which it was essential for you to be skilled at recognizing emotions. What happened? What was effective, and what was not? What would you do differently next time? Key questions are: How did you feel and how did you know? How did others feel (and how did you know)?

Write your response above
reading faces accurately
(faces task)
Introduction

Facial expressions are the universal, instant language of emotion. In the MSCEIT, seven “basic” emotions that yield hallmark facial expressions are included: Happiness, sadness, fear, anger, disgust, surprise, and contempt.

The ability to detect emotions in others is thought to be an evolved skill that enables us to calibrate our actions relative to our environment. In past times, the recognition that, for example, someone was about to attack us—as opposed to give us a hug—was said by Charles Darwin to be essential to our survival. In organizations today, the ability to detect from expressions whether people are on board with an initiative, change process, or negotiation bid, and are motivated and engaged, is central to our effectiveness. Detecting how people are feeling is also an important precursor to compassion and empathy.

All of us can read faces to varying degrees, and the better we are at reading static emotional expressions, the more attentive and skilled we’re likely to be with recognizing moving faces (micro and subtle expressions), body language, and tone of voice.

“Through infinitesimal changes in musculature and then facial expressions, we signal to each other our true emotions, giving... clues as to how to respond.”

Annie McKee, Ph.D. (leadership expert and author)

“Think for a moment about how much a person is able to convey with just a facial expression. A smile can indicate approval or happiness, while a frown can signal disapproval or unhappiness. In some cases, our facial expressions may reveal our true feelings about a particular situation. While you may say that you are feeling fine, the look on your face may tell people otherwise.”

Kendra Cherry (writer and educator)
**EXERCISE**

*Reading people—self-assessment*

**ASK YOURSELF THE FOLLOWING:**
What does my Faces score suggest about my ability to read emotions in myself and others?

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*write your response above*
Do I pay attention to others’ facial expressions and body language when I interact with them? Equally, or do I favor one source of data more than the other?

What do I know about different facial expressions/body language and what emotions they might be conveying?
Developing Your Ability to Read People Accurately

FACIAL EXPRESSIONS AND EMOTION

Through decades of work, researchers have been able to successfully map which of the 43 relevant muscles in the face are working at any one time to produce an expression. Out of this work come some fascinating conclusions.

First, certain muscles can predictably be mapped to emotional expressions. Second, and more importantly, this “mapping” can be learned, thereby increasing read accuracy.

As an example, our natural ability to distinguish a lie from the truth by reading a face is no better than our ability to predict the results of tossing a coin. However, people whose jobs depend on successful reads—like FBI agents—have been successfully trained in lie detection.

Interestingly, people can be better at reading the emotions that they feel more comfortable with, whether due to personality or upbringing. For example, a child who was raised in a loving family, but where there was an invalidation of sadness (i.e. “Just get over it”), may be less able, as an adult, to recognize sadness in themselves and in others.
With regard to the seven major emotions (happiness, sadness, fear, anger, disgust, surprise, and contempt), what follows is a useful primer about how these are expressed facially.

**HAPPINESS**

Happiness is experienced and displayed at different levels of intensity. With happiness, it is “all in the eyes”; hence, the term “smiling eyes”.

Happiness is recognized by upturns in the corners of the mouth, and stretching of the orbicularis oculi and zygomaticus major muscles of the face. A genuinely happy expression is also characterized by oblique eyebrows, where the corrugator muscles pull the eyebrows in, but the inner part of the frontalis muscle pulls them up. The corners of the lips are pulled straight down, giving the mouth a curved look and there is a little pouching in the inner part of the forehead, and people will often look down.

Sometimes, social “display rules” dictate that people smile to be polite (like when their boss tells a bad joke), or because they want to appear happy or friendly. Often, it is possible to recognize a “social” smile (a smile that is not a direct result of a feeling of happiness), because the skin around the eyes does not wrinkle—the orbicularis muscle does not tense—and the tell-tale line between their nostrils and the corners of the mouth does not appear. While some people may be deceived by fake smiles, you might now find these easier to spot!
SADNESS
In sadness, the strongest indicator is the facial muscles and eyebrows curving in and upward towards the middle of the brow. Predominantly, the eyes on a sad face appear to be gazing into space, focusing on nothing in particular. The expression of sadness can be confused with shame. A sad expression is exceedingly difficult to fake or do by force of will. Try it right now in the mirror, if you like. Without training, it is nearly impossible to force your face to look genuinely sad, and this is another way in which you can spot someone trying to emotionally manipulate you, or others around you. Crying with real tears is easier to fake than a genuine look of sadness, which involves involuntary movements and complicated expressions, so be sure to watch the eyebrows.
FEAR

With fear, the most obvious indicator is widened eyes—the upper eyelids rising and the lower ones tensing. The eyebrows pull together and upwards, and the lips stretch horizontally towards the ears. This can often cause the tendons in the neck to tense, creating vertical ridges there.

When we’re afraid, our eyes are not open as widely as when we’re surprised, and our mouth is pulled sideways. Our eyebrows are relatively flat and tense when we’re fearful; they arch more when we’re surprised. In fear, the lower eyelids tighten and our mouth appears to be tighter.

Fear is also accompanied by numerous physiological changes in our body, e.g. a flow of blood to the legs, so we are ready to run.

“I’m not afraid of death; I just don’t want to be there when it happens.”

Woody Allen (1935 – , American filmmaker)

ANGER

Anger is relatively easy to spot on a human face. Anger ranges from annoyance through to rage, and has different forms—indignation, exasperation, sulking. There is a slight physical urge to move towards the object that is causing us anger; when people are feeling aggressive, threatened, or frustrated.

You see muscle movements in the lips, around the eyes, and in the brow, with the most obvious marker being a narrowing of the eyes—squinting. This reduces our field of vision and, reflecting our ancestral nature as a predator, allows us to focus on a target. When angry, people will tighten their lips and narrow their eyebrows as well. It has also been suggested that we also make this expression when we’re angry because it could protect the face in a physical conflict; for example, the furrowed eyebrows could protect the eyes.

Anger is accompanied by changes to our body, e.g. a flow of blood to the arms.

People often confuse anger and disgust, but disgust involves a raised upper lip and a wrinkle in the nose that you don’t see here.
“I had forgotten. Disgust shadows desire. Another life is never safely envied.”

Robert Wells (1929 – , British writer)

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**DISGUST**

When we feel disgust, the muscles above the upper lip pull up, raising the upper lip, wrinkling the nose (the upward flaring of the nostrils blocks off our nasal passages to avoid unpleasant smells), and narrowing the eyes. You may also see the mouth open and the tongue come out (just in case we need to throw up). Sometimes, the head will turn away.

Disgust, other than indicating some physical repulsion, is not displayed until midway through childhood, when the cognitive brain has developed to the point of being able to recognize the items that trigger the emotion.

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“A surprise is excited by something unexpected or unknown. We naturally desire, when startled, to perceive the cause as quickly as possible; and we consequently open our eyes fully so that the field of vision may be increased and the eyeballs moved in any direction.”

Charles Darwin (1809–92, best known for his theory of evolution)

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**SURPRISE**

Surprise is an instinctual response, as we are hard-wired to be alert all the time. It is typically a very brief emotion; a response to something novel or unexpected.

Often this emotion is followed by another emotion that informs the surprise. A person may feel surprise for a moment and then feel happiness (e.g. surprise party), or anger and sadness (e.g. walking in on a cheating spouse), and these following emotions are often more intense than would be the case if experienced alone (i.e. without being preceded by surprise). So, using surprise can be a good way to expose emotional responses that you want to elicit.

Surprise displays in a very clear way and may last only a fraction of a second. A surprised person may open their mouth slightly, raise their eyebrows (becoming curved and high), and widen their eyes. It is often the case that our eyes open wide because, when we’re confronted with something surprising, we’re trying to absorb as much of this new information as possible.

We may also see horizontal wrinkles across the forehead, and the lower lid drawn down, exposing the white sclera above and below the iris. Our jaw can also drop when we’re surprised, so that the lips and teeth are parted, with no tension around the mouth.

Sometimes this emotion only displays very subtly—without the open mouth and only the slightest widening of the eyes—and this subtler expression can be very difficult to discern.

Surprise does not linger. You have to be very quick so as not to miss it!
**CONTEMPT**

Contempt has a unique facial characteristic—it is a unilateral expression, like a shrug with a single shoulder. It often indicates a lack of confidence in what is being said.

Normally, contempt is visible on the face as a kind of half-smile. One corner of the mouth is drawn inwards and upwards, signifying an extreme dislike that is different to disgust and anger. It shows a feeling that someone or something is inferior, lacking, or worthless. Most parents with teenagers would be familiar with this expression!

“I’ve seen a look in dogs’ eyes, a quickly vanishing look of amazed contempt, and I am convinced that basically dogs think humans are nuts.”

John Steinbeck  
(1902–68, Nobel Prize-winning author)