

# Shaping Motivation and Emotion in Technology Teams

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*In previous articles for CROSSTALK, we described the personality dynamics of Information Technology teams and presented a diagnostic model for analyzing the human dynamics of large systems development programs. In this article, we discuss the role of motivation and emotion in maximizing team performance and present an actionable and accessible approach for shaping both motivation and emotion – in self, in others, and in teams.*

The ability to motivate others is a critical skill for anyone leading a technology team, and motivation lies at the heart of any action that someone takes. When we talk about influencing a technology partner, inspiring a team to take a risk, or managing people toward *peak performance*, we are really talking about motivating another person towards some desired end. Motivating others is an act of leadership.

Emotions are a natural byproduct of motivation. When I am motivated to act in a certain way and my motives are satisfied, I feel good emotions such as pride, belonging, gratitude, relaxation, and excitement. When I am motivated to act in a certain way and my motives are not fulfilled, I feel negative emotions such as anxiety, resentment, guilt, and shame.

Emotions are a natural part of being human and they help define who we are. Despite this, we often see technologists try to keep these emotions *under wraps* – as evidenced by the common phrases *let's not get emotional about this* and *let's stay objective, people*.

We believe that by better understanding and actively shaping motivation and emotion, we can lead teams to greater success. This article provides a practical and proven methodology for first recognizing the motivational states and resulting emotions that both help and hinder team effectiveness and then altering those states in order to produce different emotions.

## Linking Motivation and Emotion to Performance

For many, motivation and emotion are seen as somewhat messy and hard to control, which can lead to de-emphasizing their importance in the quest for a more objective and impersonal approach to technology problems. In the end, when everything must be converted to the code of a technology world, the ambiguity of emotions seems like something to avoid.

Consider, however, how some of the specific challenges we have seen in our work with technology teams link to motivation and emotion:

- The call to meet impossible deadlines amidst scope creep and oversight scrutiny leads to high levels of anxiety and turnover on a mission-critical software development team.
- A team that fails to adequately integrate stakeholders early and frequently enough into the system-development process admits a generally low level of empathy for their users.
- A program team that has failed to

plan effectively for integration with another system in a *system of systems* effort professes strong feelings of competition with the *sister* program.

- Developers on a team feel so pressured to meet their sponsor's marketing spin that they fail to speak up when security requirements are compromised in the name of *usability*.

We have all seen how personal motives can impact a work product. Recognizing the link between motivation and performance, however, is only a first step. We need a framework to help systematically detect and then alter these motives, leading to more productive outcomes.

## Understanding Motivational States

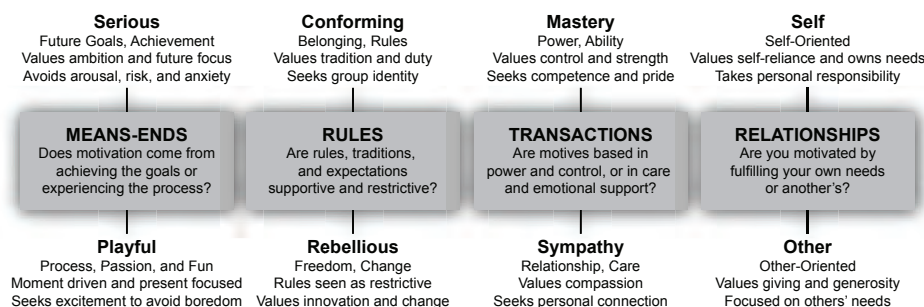
One valuable framework is Reversal Theory (Table 1), a powerful set of ideas that casts a unique light on human motivation, emotion, and behavior. Reversal Theory is a psychological theory addressing the flexibility and changeability of individuals. The theory specifically focuses on motivation, proposing that people regularly reverse between opposing psychological states, depending upon the meaning and motives felt in different situations at different times. These reversals are healthy and necessary – as situations and meanings change, so do motives and emotions [1].

Reversal Theory proposes that key emotions (such as anger and fear) and values (such as achievement and control) can be traced to different motivational states, which operate in pairs along four different focus areas called *domains*. We spend our lives moving between the different motivational states in each domain, producing an ever-shifting series of state combinations. These shifts are called *reversals*. We reverse between states in a domain based upon the meaning we attach to a situation and whether our values are being fulfilled or not. Figure 1 describes the four domains and the two

Table 1: *Reversal Theory*

Reversal Theory: Key Points
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• General theory about what motivates self and others.</li> <li>• Practical tool for understanding change and your reaction to it.</li> <li>• Provides a way to recognize emotions and respond in new ways.</li> <li>• Based on 30 years of research and applied use.</li> </ul>

Figure 1: *The Motivational States of Reversal Theory*



opposing states in each pair.

The following are some examples of how the states and reversals work in technology environments:

- Mark is a programmer. More often than not, he is driven by goals, time requirements and a desire to achieve (Serious state). Today, however, Mark is fixing a bug, and in a moment of trouble-shooting he is excited by the intrigue of the problem. In the process and passion of the work, time melts away (Playful state).
- Wendy is a test engineer who generally feels comforted and supported by the test routines that she is supposed to follow (Conforming state). Suddenly, however, she realizes the standard approach misses a critical element, and she decides to stand up and advocate for a change (Rebellious state).
- Bob is a requirements analyst who is documenting the workflow of a specific user group. He begins the discussion focused on developing his expertise in the user's business process (Mastery state). Later, when users express concern about having to abandon their existing tools, he instead begins to feel empathy for their position (Sympathy state).
- Karen is a program manager who has been seeking input from others and focusing on their interests (Other state). Today, she stops and considers what she thinks is the right direction for the project on her own (Self state).

### Detecting the Need for Different States

All the motivational states offer benefits to both individuals and teams; these benefits can be realized by developing access to and skill with all the states. Is it the right time to advocate leading edge technology to maximize capability (Mastery), or is it time to care about the concerns of other users (Sympathy)? Is it time to follow structured methodologies (Conforming), or to push against the status quo to innovate (Rebellious)?

Recognizing what is working in the moment can be helped by analyzing patterns over time – states underused in the long term may also need to be accessed more in specific moments. Table 2 outlines what a team *looks like* when states are working well, and it lists indicators that suggest the state might be needed more – both in an individual and in a team [2].

When State Is Working Well	Signs a Person or Team May Need This State
<b>Serious</b> – The Serious state is focused, ambitious and time-aware, driven to make progress and achieve goals – attaching significance to the outcomes at stake.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A lack of driving vision or goals; people do not see or take seriously the risks that face them, or consider how today's work impacts the future.</li> <li>• Low follow through on projects or commitments, wasted time, money, or other resources.</li> </ul>
<b>Playful</b> – The Playful state is enthusiastic, adventurous, and open to risk. Attaching no significance to their actions or activities, people are free to be joyous and fully in the moment.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lack of passion and enthusiasm, people who are anxiety prone or overly stressed. Laughter and fun are not frequent or consistent elements of group or work life.</li> <li>• Difficulty knowing where to start on a project because of all the implications associated with every choice.</li> </ul>
<b>Conforming</b> – The Conforming state has a clear sense of duty and order and a unifying group identity, within which both trust and the approval of others are prized.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mavericks that cause friction and needlessly reinvent the wheel, rather than finding out what has worked in the past.</li> <li>• Little concern for tradition or people's expectations, loyalties and commitments. Need for autonomy has impaired teamwork and unity.</li> </ul>
<b>Rebellious</b> – The Rebellious state is innovative and original, pushing against authority and expectations and sparking change.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Over-commitment to routine, policy, and tradition or missing the chance to innovate or improve. Thinking is limited to what is known and deemed appropriate.</li> <li>• Discomfort with change – tend to apply incremental solutions where fundamentally different approaches may be needed.</li> </ul>
<b>Mastery</b> – The Mastery state is motivated to be confident and competent, focusing on gaining skills and power to be used for an individual's own benefit or someone else's.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• People lack power, competence, problem-solving skills, and the ability to exercise control over events, tasks, and action.</li> <li>• Hyper-sensitivity to conflict – frequent needs for approval, affirmation and affection.</li> </ul>
<b>Sympathy</b> – The Sympathy state is interpersonally attuned, sensitive to the feelings of others, and both gives and asks for emotional support.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Underdeveloped personal and professional relationships; blindness to the benefits of trust, friendship, and human connection.</li> <li>• The hunger for power and drive to win trumps personal relationships, values, and emotional considerations.</li> </ul>
<b>Self</b> – The Self state is self-aware, responsible, and individually accountable.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Avoidance of personal responsibility or accountability.</li> <li>• A tendency to rely on others to solve problems rather than solve them alone.</li> </ul>
<b>Other</b> – The Other state is unselfish and motivated to be part of something that transcends themselves and individual concerns.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Loners who miss out on team spirit, community, and connection to meaningful causes.</li> <li>• Strong focus on individual achievement or need leads to appearance of disinterest in the needs of external interests or the group overall.</li> </ul>

Table 2: *Recognizing When New States and Emotions Are Needed*

### Accessing Different States: Creating Reversals

So far, we have concentrated on recognizing the motivational states and associated emotions, as well as described how the states play out. Now, we turn to action planning. There are a myriad of actions available to trigger different states in an individual or a team. Here are examples that have helped technology and systems development teams we have worked with.

### Triggering the Serious State

The motive in triggering the Serious state is to increase the emphasis on goal achievement. One way to do this is to introduce or enforce formal development methodologies, work breakdown structures, and risk management. (Any imposition of managerial or group expectation or norm is also accessing the Conforming state; however, this suggestion focuses on goal-orientation, triggering the Serious state.) In addition, talk about examples of what failure might

bring: functional failures, reputation damage, and perhaps even loss of life. What happens when your work is not done well or on time? Talking about the larger or long-term implications of near-term successes can create the Serious state in a team. What future pay-off might be there for work that is done well or on-time?

### Triggering the Playful State

Triggering the Playful state is often useful in decreasing anxiety and increasing emphasis on passion and fun. An effective way of doing this is to be enthusiastic and excited about what you are saying and doing – raise your eyebrows and the pitch and tempo of your voice. When a complicated problem emerges, encourage others to just *dive in anywhere* by setting aside an open period to share cool ideas. Many teams suffer from an over-emphasis on the Serious state, so look actively for opportunities to inject fun and enjoyment into meetings and everyday work life: supply and engage yourself with colored/scented markers, bright paper, fidget toys, puzzles and games, or hold a party for the team or organization to celebrate something or just have fun together.

### Triggering the Conforming State

This state offers the benefits of increased team identity, shared expectations of process, and sense of belonging. One way to spark this state is to introduce a capability model to focus attention on the way things should be done. This can then be carried through by having regular meetings where team members are all expected to attend and play a specific role (timekeeper, note taker, etc.). Team identity can also be forged by engaging in ritualistic or ceremonial group events such as awards, review sessions, meetings and the like, or encourage the group to enter a corporate contest, like an intramural baseball tournament or a volunteer event together. By talking about it before and after the event, you can further encourage participation and belonging.

### Triggering the Rebellious State

To help increase feelings of freedom and independence, challenge someone or a group by suggesting that a given action or achievement is not possible. Other actions can include provoking an argument or healthy debate; criticizing rules, tradition, or some opposing force; asking *why*; and prodding others to do the same. The Rebellious state is often triggered by questioning, testing, and pushing against

the established way of doing things – urge your team to seek improvements in established approaches.

### Triggering the Mastery State

In this state, the motive is increasing confidence, pride, and ability. One way to do this is to take control of a meeting or conversation by standing up, using both your voice and body to appropriately project conviction, confidence, and competence while coaching those who work with you to do the same when appropriate. This state is also often sparked by challenging and driving yourself or others to craft solutions to tough problems and find answers to complex questions. Finally, one of the best actions from the Mastery state is to teach, mentor, or coach someone to transfer power and ability to another.

### Triggering the Sympathy State

We have encountered many teams that would benefit from an increase in empathy and care – both for themselves and for others. One powerful tool for doing this is to create representative *stories* about different user groups, so that developers have a specific person in mind to care about when creating a product. (For more on this tool, see Cooper's reference to personas in [3].) Within the team itself, do not resist telling people personally and face-to-face how much you value them. You would be amazed at the positive impacts that come when you treat your colleagues as you would want your best friend or family to be treated at work.

### Triggering the Self State

Increasing feelings of self-reliance and personal responsibility often requires demanding and modeling individual accountability for decisions and actions. Be clear about who *owns* what piece of the project or effort and ask for updates on individual progress. Another path is to speak with your team members or colleagues about their own lives and professional development plans and goals. Outside of the team, what interests them? (Note: This requires that the giver of the action be in the Other state to encourage the receiver to be in the Self state.)

### Triggering the Other State

The motive in the Other state is to increase feelings of altruism and transcendence. To do this, speak to the team about the mission, the cause, the *larger than life* ideas: calling out faith and moti-

vation and inviting others to join the group that is fighting the good fight. (Note: These actions may also spark the Conforming state if framed as a path to team belonging or the Rebellious state, if the greater good involves fighting another entity, or if defending the rights of an underdog is present.) Another way to trigger the Other state is to ask the team to role play or brainstorm what their client or customer is thinking. Set aside some time for *walking in their shoes* and determine how the group can meet those needs.

## Implementing Reversal Theory in Teams

Now that we have reviewed ways to detect the states and possible actions to trigger different ones, let us outline a structure and process for implementing this tool to help build and unify a team.

### Step 1: Gather Information – What's Going On?

Before taking action, ask what is going on with the team. Can you match what you see to a motivational state? Is the team generally overly stressed or rules bound (Serious or Conforming)? Do they just talk about work, with little personal connection (Mastery)? Is, instead, the team experiencing conflict because of different states are working in opposition? For example, do those who want the team to *lighten up* (Playful) conflict with those who want the team to *tighten up* (Serious)? Use the structure of the states to analyze team behavior and develop hypotheses for what is going on.

### Step 2: Identify Target – What Do You Want to See?

Ask yourself next what you are trying to do. Does the team need more clarity of purpose (Serious)? More creativity (Playful, Rebellious)? More group unity and shared vision (Conforming, Other)? Are you instead interested in helping team members recognize the value in different states to reframe an existing conflict? Review the benefits offered by each state described previously. Which state(s) do you seek to create in your team?

### Step 3: Select and Take Action – What Changes?

Many actions can trigger a state that might benefit the team. You can also work to change the situation, so the states experienced are more positive (e.g., for a team that is anxious in the Serious state, work to postpone a deadline providing room to breathe). In this step, therefore,

select and then take an action and see if it creates the change you want to see. Three important words of caution: Authenticity is key. If your team members perceive your actions as manipulative or fake, they may feel distrust and cynicism. As such, if you want your team to be in a certain state, try to trigger that state in yourself first. It may be easier for your team, for example, to access the Playful state if they see you excited about the work at hand.

**Step 4: Monitor and Adjust – What Is Next?**

Reversal Theory focuses on change and variability – as such, one state change can cause others, both positive and unexpected. A change in the setting can then shift states again; pushing one state lever can cause others to shift as well. As such, the final step is to continue to monitor what’s going on and then repeat these four steps, adjusting actions to both lead change and respond to emerging emotions and needs.

**Conclusion**

Motives underlie all human action and can lead to a wide range of emotions – both positive and negative. In our experience, effective leaders and teams do the following:

- Know their own motivational tenden-

cies and the impact they have on others.

- Know the state most needed by individuals, teams, and organizations at any given time.
- Trigger specific states in individuals, teams, and organizations as needed.
- Model and encourage motivational diversity.

We frequently recall a chief information officer comment a few years ago when urging transformational change across the Department of Defense: *Change begins with the people doing the work*, she said [4]. We agree. Change begins with each of us: one state, one choice, and one emotion at a time.◆

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