The Professions of IT, Moods (Part 1)

Denning, Peter J.

Moods (Part 1) (December 2012). Recognizing and working with moods -- your own, your team's, and your customers -- is essential to professional success. This part examines the definitions of moods and how they affect your interactions with others and your team.

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The Profession of IT Moods

Recognizing and working with moods—your own, your team’s, and your customers’—is essential to professional success.

Cooperation, it is said, is a stronger force in nature than competition. To get things done, we need to be good at collaborating and coordinating. Competition is necessary with rivals, but competition with customers, clients, and teammates will not get us very far.

You have probably heard dozens of tips about the mechanics of collaboration and coordination. One thing you have probably not heard much about is moods. Mastery of moods—your own, your customer’s, and your team’s—is essential to your success.

Imagine yourself as a project manager. One of your ideals is clarity: your requests clearly state the desired outcome and due date. But is clarity enough? If you make your request to Jane, who is in a cheerful mood, she will accept your request gladly. But if you ask Mike, who in his mood of resignation sees no possibility that your desired outcome is achievable, you may find yourself in an argument about the futility of the request. Or if you ask Leslie, who is in a mood of resentment about perceived injustices by teammates, you may encounter a begrudging acceptance followed by covert attempts to undermine your project. In short, the same request leads to different negotiations and different actions depending on the recipient’s mood.

Or imagine that your team just suffered a setback because customers did not react enthusiastically to the new software. You ask team members for their evaluation of what has happened. Caitlin says, “I don’t know what is going on. But I would love to interview our customers and find out what was behind their reactions. I am certain I will learn something that will help improve our software.” Harry says, “I also don’t know what the heck is going on. But I do know those customers are jerks. We listened to their requirements and delivered what they asked for. And this is how they treat us?” Which of those two is going to be helpful to finding the mistake and fixing it? Both say they do not know what is going on. But each embeds that acknowledgment in another mood that shapes their attitude toward future actions. Caitlin brings curiosity, a mood of openness to learning from the situation. In contrast, Harry brings confusion, a mood of hostility toward not knowing what is going on. Team leaders wish that everyone brought the mood of curiosity, or even wonder, when it is time to learn something new. Teachers wish the same for...
their students. It is so much easier to learn from your mistakes and move on in a mood of curiosity. Can such a mood be cultivated?

Moods belong not just to individuals, but to groups. Your mood is often shared with others around you. Speakers try to read the “mood in the room”—a sense that the audience as a whole has an overall receptivity or hostility to what the speaker has to say. Managers pause when their teams or organizations have poor morale; they know they will have trouble accomplishing their mission unless they can instill team spirit. Marketers pitch advertisements to their sense of the public mood.

These examples remind us that we are constantly affected by our own moods and the moods around us. But we are not always aware of moods and we do not always know how to respond to and manage them. My purpose in this column is to help you recognize moods and interact effectively with them.

Moods Defined

Moods and emotions are related but are not the same. Emotions are feelings that individuals experience in response to various stimuli, in the context of their individual histories. Psychologists recognize eight basic emotions, with each positive balanced by a negative, as follows:

- Love – Hate
- Joy – Sadness
- Peace – Anger
- Curiosity – Fear

Each emotion has multiple shades corresponding to different intensities of the feeling and the disposition toward acting on the feeling. For example, a thesaurus shows at least 40 synonyms for anger, representing different degrees of anger from annoyance and irritation on the low end, to chagrin in the middle, and resentment, rage, and revenge on the high end.

You can find many quick tabulations and maps of emotions on the Web. Robert Roberts and Robert Solomon both give deeper, insightful accounts of emotions.

Moods are general pervasive states of interpretation about the world. They act as “filters” for seeing the world. They incline toward certain emotions and actions and away from others.

Table 1 lists examples of moods commonly encountered in the workplace. The table includes sample linguistic indicators for each mood.

### Table 1. Common workplace moods.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Mood</th>
<th>Linguistic Indicator</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Positive (energizing)</td>
<td>joy, gratitude</td>
<td>Sees many things as gifts and is delighted and grateful for them.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>speculation</td>
<td>Sees new possibilities and likes them.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>ambition</td>
<td>Strongly desires an outcome and is committed to achieving it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>resolution</td>
<td>Determined to make the outcome happen, no matter what.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>wonder</td>
<td>Does not know what is going on, and enthusiastically welcomes the opportunity to learn more.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>curiosity</td>
<td>Has a strong, perhaps overwhelming, desire to find out what is going on.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>inquiry</td>
<td>Does not know what is going on, and will keep looking until an answer is found.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>perplexity, bafflement</td>
<td>Unable to make sense of what is going on.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative (de-energizing)</td>
<td>apathy</td>
<td>Indifference toward the proposal and no motivation to try.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>confusion</td>
<td>Does not know what is going on, and annoyed or hostile about the lack of knowledge.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>overwhelm</td>
<td>Frustrated by the sheer volume of what is going on, and cannot figure out what to do.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>resignation</td>
<td>There are no possibilities for resolving the issue.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>resentment</td>
<td>The person perceives insults or injuries and quietly and resolutely seeks retribution; refuses to discuss.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

a Numerous Web resources tabulate and categorize emotions and moods, for example, http://www.scribd.com/doc/3850260/Map-of-The-Emotions.

Some emotions sustained over a period of time can be moods; for example, joyful is a mood in which one experiences constant joy. The main features of moods are:

- Social. They belong to groups as well as individuals. In contrast, emotions are individual responses.
- Physical. They are accompanied by feelings and sensations. For example, tightness of chest when in anxiety, fatigue when in resignation, and muscle tension when in resolution.
- Outlook. Interpretation is positive (energizing), neutral, or negative (de-energizing). The interpretation tells us what is possible or not possible.
- No identifiable trigger. You find yourself in a mood but you cannot identify an event that put you there or even experience the transition into the mood. It just happens. Yet, moods are malleable: certain conversations, as well as music and poetry, can bring on a mood.

- Linguistic indicator. Your internal and external conversations give strong clues to moods.
- Cultivation. You can cultivate moods so that you spend more time in good ones and less in bad ones. For example, a daily practice of expressing gratitude can cultivate a mood of gratitude.

Table lists examples of moods commonly encountered in the workplace. The table includes sample linguistic indicators for each mood.

### Being Wise in Interactions

How does my mood interact with people I am managing? Leading? Teaming with? The answer depends on the moods and your skill at interacting with them. If you and the other person are in positive moods, the interaction is likely to go smoothly and you can achieve the desired outcome. If you both are in negative moods, a stand-off or some sort of losing outcome is likely. If one is positive and the other negative, the outcome is much less certain. Which person’s mood will most affect the outcome? A person skilled in working with moods may be able to identify and then shift the other’s mood to positive. For example, a good manager will:

- Help the resigned person by initiating a conversation for possibilities.
Help the overwhelmed person lessen the perceived overload by sorting through commitments and dropping the least important.

Help everyone avoid the toxic moods of distrust and resentment by coaching them to avoid commitments they cannot fulfill, keep the ones they make, and take care of others’ interests.

Help end confusion by bringing others into moods of curiosity or wonder.

The bottom line is this: By entering into conversations associated with the mood you would like, you can take the other person there with you.

**Collaboration and Competition**

Collaboration is a strong human force. In collaboration, you and the others share a desire for an outcome and are committed to working together to achieve it; no one of you can do it alone. For collaboration to work, the group members need moods of appreciation, trust, and mutual commitment to the mission. Teams and networks good at collaboration are most likely to achieve their goals.

In competition, you and your rivals vie for an outcome that only one of you can have. You get it by defeating or outperforming the others in some way. Your team may distrust your competitors. To win a competition, your team needs moods of focus and discipline.

Collaboration and competition are complementary moods with strong interplay. In professional life, for example, your projects may be competitions with other teams or companies. But your team, company, or profession will continue on when individual projects are done. Your skill at recognizing and reconciling the moods for collaboration and competition is a definite professional asset. Hone it well.

**Moods for Teams**

Richard Strozzi-Heckler describes four stages of project evolution on a team as follows:

**Formulation.** You invite a group of people to help you accomplish a mission. You help them develop mutual appreciation and personal commitments to work together for the mission.

**Ramp-up.** You establish team discipline to meet commitments and start producing results; a lot of discipline and determination are needed because few results will be apparent yet and mistakes will be costly. You constantly remind of the value produced by the mission. You help team members learn to work together and trust each others’ actions. To improve team performance, you help them share assessments about individual performance. You help establish needed outside relationships (with suppliers, for example).

**Containment.** You help the team stay focused on its mission, execute its commitments, cope well with the occasional breakdown, produce good results, and satisfy its customers. In some cases your team will enter the “zone,” a higher state of perception where the results seem to flow without much effort and every coordination goes seamlessly.

**Completion.** You help the team declare that its work is done, wind down its remaining commitments, and celebrate the end of the project.

The effective leader inspires the team to the moods conducive to each stage; otherwise the team will not make it to the next stage (see Table 2).

The progression through these stages is difficult to achieve without solidarity—a mood of mutual trust, taking care of each other, and willingness to stand firm in unity against adversaries. Personal moods can coexist with the group mood of solidarity. Solidarity is a coveted mood. Leaders can cultivate it by instilling five basic practices into the team:  

- Respect everyone’s differences.
- Effectively make and coordinate commitments that produce value for others.
- Listen for opportunities to bring value to others.
- Build trust with others by making assessments that facilitate taking care of each other’s concerns.
- Observe and bring to the foreground underlying moods that may help or hinder the ability to act with and listen to others.

The last two practices explicitly rest on skills with emotions and moods. A leader’s skills can be put to the test when some team members fall into distrust, resentment, or other negative moods. If the leader cannot resolve the negative moods, the team may fail.

**Conclusion**

The moods and emotions of the people around us—our partners, teams, and groups—strongly affect performances. Positive moods enhance performance; negative moods detract and can render teams and groups dysfunctional.

Skilled managers, facilitators, and teachers are keenly aware of moods and emotions. They know how to interact effectively with different moods and can guide their groups through the moods necessary for a successful project, problem resolution, or learning.

The conclusion for us as professionals is that we have to continue to develop our own sensitivities to moods and emotions. We rely on our individual skills to manage moods in our teams and groups.

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**Table 2. Moods and team project cycles.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stage</th>
<th>Supporting Moods</th>
<th>Detracting Moods</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Formulation</td>
<td>speculation, wonder, ambition</td>
<td>resignation, confusion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ramp-up</td>
<td>discipline, focus, destiny, perseverance</td>
<td>apathy, indifference, lack of focus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Containment</td>
<td>appreciation, trust, resolution, “zone”</td>
<td>resentment, distrust</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Completion</td>
<td>gratitude, forgiveness of debts</td>
<td>lack of appreciation, grudges</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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**References**


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I am grateful to Fernando Flores who, in 1987, introduced me to linguistic signatures of moods and emotions, and inspired me to learn more.

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