

by Stephen Carter



## Are you more *serious* than *playful*, or more *conforming* than *rebellious*?

*Here's a scenario you might recognise. A team of hard-working employees, who have already been successful in working together, is given a new set of targets - their toughest yet - by senior management keen to see how much value and profitability can be squeezed out of them. True, the financial rewards the team members can expect for on-target performance are very substantial, but the targets are truly daunting.*

*From the outset, the team members feel anxious about being able to meet the new targets. This anxiety quickly leads to a situation where none of the team feels any more that work is fun. Worsening results make the team even more anxious, serious and generally low-spirited. Before long, a team of well-motivated high-performers are struggling to turn in even a nondescript performance. As for the new targets, they are an impossible dream.*

**H**ow serious are you? How playful? How rebellious? How conforming? How much fun do you find *your* work?

What mix of these is right for happiness and success? How do you know? Does it matter? Reversal Theory Applications (RTAs) - methods for maximising and fulfilling the human potential for happiness and career success - are now becoming available to UK organisations. These techniques are based on 'Reversal Theory', a theory of human behaviour developed in the academic community.

What's good, and exciting, about Reversal Theory is that it appeals to commonsense and does not take long to understand and put into



Motivational state:	Experienced as:
Serious	Focus on objectives, achievement, direction, planning, risks – current activity in relation to future goals.
Playful	Focus on experimenting, trying things out, creativity, open thinking and intrinsic pleasure of the activity or job itself.
Conforming	Focus on implementation, following agreements and processes, a concern to meet expectations. Wanting to 'fit in'
Rebellious	Focus on being different, challenging, breaking conventions, critical analysis and conflict.
Mastery	Wanting oneself, the team or the organisation to succeed. Focus on building up the power and resources of oneself and others.
Sympathy	Focus on building harmony and good interpersonal working relations, wanting to co-operate and showing empathy. Wanting to support and be supported.
Self-oriented	Focus on personal needs, personal circumstances and experience
Other-oriented	Focus on guiding and caring for others, willingness to sacrifice own needs for others. Team spirit.

Figure 1 - Summary of states of being according to Reversal Theory

practice. You don't need to read a weighty tome to 'get' what Reversal Theory is all about. You simply need to be motivated to explore how you might be more effective in everything you do, and how you might be happier and more alive to the possibilities of what you can achieve in your life and in your career.

#### Getting the best from your humans

In today's global business community, organisations in the same industrial and commercial niches tend to have access to the same fundamental resources. Similar technology, communications, information, interest rates and so on are usually available to every player. However, what *are not* available to everyone are *human* qualities: human talent, human effectiveness and commitment, human dynamism, human passion, human yearning for excellence. Real productivity is founded in today's business world on those qualities. Those are the qualities that really determine an organisation's success, especially in a commercial world where quality of customer service matters more and

more. In today's business world, engaging employees' hearts and minds is the essence of doing business sincerely - and winning customers' hearts too.

Organisations might like to buy human qualities, but they can't. No, instead of trying to *buy* them they need to *nurture* them. Paying people a high starting salary and generous bonuses doesn't guarantee people will offer the best of their talent, effectiveness, commitment, dynamism, passion and yearning for excellence to the organisation. It doesn't make them more productive. The truth is that people will only display those qualities if they personally feel motivated to *want* to display them.

Organisations seeking to develop and carry out effective initiatives to encourage employees to offer more of these human qualities in the workplace need to know about key principles of human motivation and behaviour, or have access to specialists who do. But the trouble with most existing theories of human psychology and behaviour is that they are mono-dimensional and inflexible. In particular, theories that

seek to analyse personality 'traits' frequently make the strange assumption that each of us is much the same kind of person all of the time. This is something which our own knowledge of ourselves and our clearly *different* responses to *different* experiences at *different* times tells us is not so.

**'Human qualities are the qualities on which real productivity is founded in today's business world.'**

#### Eight states of being

Reversal Theory says that not only are we inconsistent and inherently changeable by nature *but also that we can exploit in a very positive sense our capacity to switch (or 'reverse') between different states and can grow enormously as people - and employees - by doing so.*

Far from each of us having one given 'character' or 'personality', we all tend to inhabit eight states

of being. These eight states of being are categorised by Reversal Theory into four *pairs* of states. Within these four pairs of states, people switch or 'reverse' between opposites - serious and playful, for example - at different times. Central to the idea of Reversal Theory is that you are in either one state or the other; you can't be in both simultaneously but you *can* switch or reverse between opposites *quickly*. This whole concept completely avoids the age-old mistake of categorising people according to certain 'types'.

The four sets of motivational states are as follows:

- ◆ serious / playful
- ◆ conforming / rebellious
- ◆ mastery / sympathy
- ◆ self-oriented / other-oriented

An essential principle of Reversal Theory is that *all these eight states are required if a human being is to achieve maximum fulfilment*. Figure 1 summarises the precise definitions of these motivational states.

### Playing at work

Why should Reversal Theory Applications matter to anyone in business? The answer is that they should matter to anyone who is ultimately trying to *create* a well-functioning, creative, purposeful organisation that delights customers with its products and services and whose staff love to work there and love giving their very best to their work.

One of the key points about the applications is that *if someone is to function in their most creative, productive, effective, fulfilled and happy fashion, they need to be in a situation where all eight different states of being are available to them*.

Unfortunately, this is rarely the case at most workplaces. For example, few workplaces actively encourage playfulness, and indeed most employees take it for granted that they can't be playful at work. Many people are playful outside work but feel awkward about bringing the playful state into the workplace. Of course, the playful state is not *always* a suitable one for work, but nor is the serious state. What's more, it is fact that *activities which generate the most revenue for organisations are carried out most effectively in the 'playful' state*.

For example, people who are in a



playful state usually do the creative act of founding an organisation. Great inventions, too, are always developed in a playful state. As for *selling...* well, try doing that successfully in a *serious* state. Basically, you can't. You *need* to be playful to sell successfully, by which I mean you need to be in a free-flowing, easy-going, creative state of *enjoyment* in which you undertake the activity primarily because you *like* doing it.

In the case of the team mentioned at the start of this article, my organisation used RTAs to re-inject an exciting and dynamic sense of

*fun* (or, stated a little more formally, playfulness) into how the team saw itself and its objectives. The team was encouraged to *talk about* how it felt about its targets, to 'name its demons'. Team members were shown techniques that helped them

**'The team was encouraged to name its demons.'**

rediscover the very important, even elemental reasons why they did the job in the first place. The result? The team was put back on track, and infused with a new sense of how much *fun* they could have while progressing towards the new targets.

**'Few workplaces encourage playfulness.'**

The point is this: good business *does* require the serious state, when we have to focus very soberly on getting a task precisely right. But it also requires a playful state, when we can have fun with a task, experiment with it, are creative with it and indulge ourselves with it. Interestingly, the very best creative ideas tend to be brought to birth by people who are in a playful state.

#### What's your handicap?

If you like, think of all the eight states of being like eight golf clubs. You need them all to negotiate the tricky course, full of the difficult-to-see bunkers and unpredictable changes of direction that is your personal and professional life. Alternatively, think of the eight states of being as like the eight notes of a musical octave: where all eight notes are needed to play the most melodious tune.

Overall, Reversal Theory Applications helps people to live and develop themselves professionally and personally without feeling unnecessarily afraid of unfamiliar situations, people, challenges and other new experiences that they have not experienced before. RTAs promote personal courage in confronting unfamiliarity. This courage is an immensely important attribute for *anyone* in business, whatever his or her current position within the corporate hierarchy.

Reversal Theory Applications offer a comprehensive and powerful range of tools to help people throughout an organisation do the following:

- ◆ Understand better what they want from their lives in general, and from their working lives in

particular;

- ◆ Accept that sometimes being in states they may not have regarded as part of their usual 'pattern' of states can liberate their potential for productivity, performance and happiness in a way they might not have imagined possible;
  - ◆ Deal with situations that have previously caused them anxiety, even to the extent that they may have consciously avoided those situations
  - ◆ Generally, be all they can be in their lives and make a maximum contribution to their organisation
  - ◆ Take *measured* and *considered* risks in areas where complete avoidance of risk may be bad for their organisation and themselves
- How can your organisation put RTAs into practice? While the techniques need to be carried out with specialised help, the essence of deploying them involves creating an organisational *climate* where people feel liberated into being encouraged to exist in all eight states of being. Experience shows decisively that if you are in that climate, and are being actively encouraged to exist in all eight states, you are likely to be developing yourself and your role within your organisation in a powerful, dynamic, enjoyable way, and bringing your personal and career goals closer to fulfilment.



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## What is reversal theory?

Reversal theory is a psychological theory of motivation, as well as being a theory of emotion, personality, stress and many other psychological phenomena. In fact, it is a general theory of human behaviour and experience derived from an analysis of motivation.

#### Where did it come from?

Some of the founding ideas were advanced in the mid 1970s by Dr K C P Smith and Dr M J Apter, a British psychiatrist and psychologist respectively. They were later added to and developed into a full-scale theory by Dr Apter.

#### What evidence is it based on?

It is grounded in a variety of types of data including experimental, psychometric, psychophysiological and clinical evidence. This evidence has been collected over a period of more than 20 years by researchers in many countries around the world. Eight international conferences have been held to discuss this research and its applications, and there have been more than 200 publications, including 10 books.

#### What is special about the theory?

- ◆ It argues that we cannot understand behavior unless we understand the **personal meaning** which that behavior has for the person who is performing it;
- ◆ It emphasises the **changeability** of human nature; the way in which we are all different kinds of people at different times, even from moment to moment. From the perspective of the theory, people are inconsistent and even **self-contradictory** over time;
- ◆ It faces up to the **complexity** of human beings, a complexity which is missed by the popular but static 'trait' concept in personality theory, and the attempt by many theorists to reduce motivation to one or two basic needs;
- ◆ The theory brings out sides of human nature often overlooked by other theories, including playfulness, rebelliousness and self-sacrifice. (In the process it deals with phenomena such as humour, art, sport, military combat and religious ritual.)
- ◆ It has been applied in a range of areas, including health psychology, stress management, sport performance, and child guidance.

#### What are its basic ideas?

At the heart of the theory is the idea that our experience is shaped by a set of alternative ways of seeing the world, each based on a fundamental value or motive.

Specifically, four pairs of such opposite states have been discerned. We switch - or "**reverse**" - frequently between these opposite '**motivational states**' or '**styles**' in the course of everyday life and under a variety of circumstances.

These pairs can be characterised briefly in the following way, with the technical term for each member of the pair placed in parenthesis following the everyday term, where it differs from it:

The **serious** (telic) style, focussed on important goals, and planning ahead, versus the **playful** (paratelic) state, focussed on immediate enjoyment and acting spontaneously

The **conforming** (conformist) style, focussed on obligations and the maintenance of rules and routines, versus the **challenging** (negativistic) style, a challenging state that is focussed on personal freedom.