

MOOD IS EVERYTHING

BY PAUL TEMPLER

WRIGHT (WRIGHT)

We're pleased to include Paul Templer in our group of contributors for *Success Simplified*. When it comes to overcoming obstacles and turning them into new opportunities, Mr. Templer is a true authority.

Mr. Templer grew up in war-torn Rhodesia (now known as Zimbabwe) living an exotic life surrounded by the wildlife most children read about in storybooks. He spent his youth dreaming of the day when he'd be able to run safaris on Africa's mighty Zambezi River and share his love of the crocodiles, elephants, and hippopotamuses with tourists from around the world. And at the age of twenty-four, he saw that dream come true. Every sun-filled morning, his team of river guides would ease their canoes into the water, feeling confident that the day ahead would be filled with adventure and that they would once again avert any dangers that the river might hold.

A student of the great Zambezi, Mr. Templer knew the rhythms of the animals that lived beneath the river and had become a master of predicting their every move. But as anyone who has lived in the jungles of Africa will attest, danger lurks where you least expect it.

On a crystal blue Saturday morning in March of 1996, as Mr. Templer joked with an eager group of tourists and warned them to keep their hands inside the boat, what he didn't know was that a deadly monster was waiting, silently below. Without warning, an enraged hippopotamus plucked him from his canoe, dragged him into the river, and then went about its deadly attack.

With his body torn in shreds and his crewmates attempting to rescue him—even amid the chaos—Mr. Templer's thoughts were already rising to the surface. His dreams had just been shattered and the life he had envisioned since childhood would never be the same.

Mr. Templer, I'll start by asking what everyone is probably wondering—how do you maintain such a positive outlook after experiencing such a traumatic event?

PAUL TEMPLER (TEMPLER)

Well, it wasn't always easy. There were quite a few weeks after the attack when I was feeling pretty low. At one point, I was lying in a hospital bed, feeling terribly sorry for myself, when the surgeon, Dr. Ncube, dropped by and gave me a mini pep talk. He said, "Paul, you are the sum of your choices—you're exactly who, what, and where you choose to be in life."

Conceptually, I understood what he was talking about, but I couldn't get out of my own way. I was just so angry and frustrated, and I wasn't ready yet to be accountable for what had happened to me and whatever might happen next. While I'd survived the attack, I'd lost my left arm and any hope of continuing the business I'd worked so hard to build. I guess you could say I was caught up in an unproductive mood.

WRIGHT

What do you mean by "unproductive mood"?

TEMPLER

I'm referring specifically to those times when things aren't working out quite the way we'd like them to and we allow ourselves to get caught up in degenerative moods like distrust, resentment, resignation, complacency, arrogance, and cynicism. When we're caught up in these moods, we often procrastinate, become quite grumpy, and find that most people don't seem to want to play with us.

I used to think I had no choice but to give in to the grumpiness. I actually felt entitled to sink into these unproductive moods. It was almost as if I'd earned the right to play a part, to fall into the "victim role." And it worked, for a while—until I realized that when I allowed myself to get caught up in those moods, I was miserable and that being miserable was a choice.

Let me be clear that when I use the word "mood," I'm describing the stories we make up—the thoughts, feelings, sensations we're experiencing—those are what determine the actions we take. They're the stories we choose to believe. So given the choice, why not see things in a more productive light.

If I believe things are going well, it's easy to make the assumption that they'll continue that way. That creates more of a positive, generative mood, which often shows up as ambition, confidence, trust and acceptance. With all those things going for you, you can't help but feel like the world is full of possibilities!

WRIGHT

When did it start to change for you?

TEMPLER

I'd say that Dr. Ncube challenging me to consider that I was the sum of my choices; that I was who, what, and where I chose to be in life, began a change process that continues today. One day does stand out though. I can give you the exact date—March 9, 2004. It was eight years to the day after my run-in with that angry hippo, and my wife, Carrie, and I were sitting in the waiting room of Children's Hospital of Michigan waiting for our four-month-old daughter, Erin, to come out of surgery. She was having a brain tumor removed. Unfortunately, the procedure didn't accomplish everything the doctors had hoped. It was a very long, difficult, and emotional day.

At first I felt many of those same emotions I'd experienced in the weeks after the hippo attack—anger, fear, sadness, self-pity. There were moments when I blamed God, my wife, myself, Erin's inoculations, the doctors—everyone and everything I could think of.

And then I remembered what Dr. Ncube had said to me eight years before: "Paul, you are the sum of your choices; you're who, what, and where you choose to be in life." Back then, I wasn't ready to fully grasp those words and apply them to my situation, but this time, they really resonated with me and kick-started a gradual shift in my outlook. Suddenly, I was able to interpret his message to mean "whatever happens next is entirely up to you." I realized he hadn't been just placating me with a cliché, he was trying to alert me to the possibilities and opportunities surrounding me.

During the next month, I spent a lot of time surrounded by gravely ill children—many of them with terminal diseases—and their families. I could see that the families were angry, frustrated, and scared, and most of them fell into the victim role. This resulted in lost possibilities and opportunities for both themselves

and their dying children, adding even more sadness and stress to an already sad and stressful situation. The compassionate side of me could justify their behavior, but the pragmatic side was appalled at the cost.

I understood that I now had the capability to manage my mood, to banish the dark thoughts, and to embrace each new day—each passing moment—with gratitude. The most miraculous discovery of all was that positivity is contagious. I learned how my newfound optimism had the power to influence the moods of those around me.

WRIGHT

Would you say this was a decision to reject the “victim role” you mentioned?

TEMPLER

Absolutely. Sitting there in Children’s Hospital of Michigan, I knew I had a choice to make. I could play the victim role; I could wallow in self-pity again, but I knew from experience that no good would come of that. As long as I was in that grumpy, grief-stricken mentality, I wouldn’t be of much support to Carrie or Erin or our older daughter, two-year-old Kate. Instead, I decided I wanted to be the kind of person who takes care of the people he loves.

And this can be applied to anyone—not just those who have been violently attacked or experienced the heartbreak of a sick child. Everyone plays the victim role at some time or another. There’s always an opportunity to feel sorry for yourself about something, whether it’s a late report, a delayed flight, an out-of-stock item at the grocery store, or a car that won’t start. The key is rising above that knee-jerk “woe is me” reaction.

WRIGHT

And how do you rise above that?

TEMPLER

Easier said than done, right? For me, the first step is acceptance. You have to just face the situation head-on and come to terms with it. I know that’s easier said than done, but until you accept where you are, you simply can’t move forward. Next, you have to understand that while you might not have the power to

change your situation, you *do* have control over how you respond to it. Whatever happens next is entirely up to you.

This doesn't necessarily mean that you're going to like or that you'll be happy about the choices you're faced with, but it does mean that you'll enjoy a happier and more productive outcome if you take action rather than wallowing in stagnant self-pity. Life is always richer when you feel empowered by your options, rather than just letting the chips fall around you.

Even when faced with an emotionally challenging ordeal, like seeing your child struggling with a serious illness, you've got an opportunity to manage your mood and serve as an example for others who are struggling with a similar situation.

WRIGHT

How does all of this translate to a corporate setting?

TEMPLER

After I began working in corporate development, coaching high-performing leaders and their teams, I quickly realized that effectively managing moods and emotions is fundamental to success in the business world as well. It also became apparent that most people—even some of the most influential executives in the world—lack the capacity to effectively manage them.

If leaders can't or won't effectively manage their own and their organization's mood, then nothing else they do is going to matter and optimal performance becomes a fantasy.

In most cases, bad managers aren't lacking in knowledge or skill—they're mired in and evoke unproductive moods that impair their ability to inspire, motivate, and lead others. So essentially, one person's unproductive mood can limit the performance of an entire team.

With my corporate coaching practice, I set out to help managers and teams effectively manage their moods and emotions. In my experience, the most effective leaders are those who master the art of responding effectively to stressful and challenging situations.

WRIGHT

You've talked a lot about unproductive moods. What about the opposite? What does a productive mood look like?

TEMPLER

I want to be clear—a productive mood isn't necessarily going to look or feel good. During particularly stressful and challenging situations like our daughter's illness, I didn't experience moods of ambition, confidence, or wonder. My productive mood showed up in my acceptance of what was going on and my resolve and commitment to do everything in my power to maximize the possibilities for Erin and the rest of my family.

WRIGHT

Are some people more easily taught than others? Do some have a better ability to manage their moods?

TEMPLER

I used to think so. For years, I'd gone through life thinking some people were better at managing their moods than others. I almost believed there was some genetic lottery—either you were born with the ability to manage chaos or you were destined to unravel in stressful situations. So I would often make excuses for myself and others, assuming I had no choice but to react with grumpiness or anger or self-pity.

But while working with Chris Majer and his team at the Human Potential Project, I learned a great deal about optimal human performance. Specifically, I learned how, through practice, anyone can learn to effectively manage his or her mood. I started to understand how tolerating unproductive moods—in both myself and others—wasn't doing anyone any favors. Only by gaining awareness of ourselves and what is going on around us can we function and interact at an optimal level.

WRIGHT

The term “self-fulfilling prophecy” springs to mind.

TEMPLER

Absolutely! With 20/20 hindsight, I can see that where my attention went, my energy followed. When I looked for the things that were wrong in my life, I found them. And then later, when I looked for the good things—opportunities and possibilities—I found those, too.

I knew without a doubt that I never wanted to fall back into the victim role if things didn't go my way. So when I realized that

proper management of my moods was the key to responding in a healthy and constructive way, I knew I had my solution.

WRIGHT

How did the people you learned from inspire you?

TEMPLER

What really intrigued me and paved the way to learning was that the people sharing their stories with me had been “in the trenches,” so to speak—they’d faced adversity, hardship, and heartbreak and emerged with newfound strength and capabilities.

The people I was learning from had success stories to back up their teachings. They’d worked with professional and amateur athletes, members of the military (including special forces like Green Berets and Navy SEALs) and corporate organizations around the world, using a simple and straightforward approach based on hard science.

WRIGHT

Some scientists assert that our reactions to stress are largely biological. Do you agree?

TEMPLER

Yes, to an extent I do agree with that. When we experience stress or danger—whether it’s real or imagined—our “fight-or-flight” response is activated.

This causes some dramatic physical reactions. The respiratory rate increases. Blood is diverted from the digestive tract to the muscles and limbs, which require extra energy for running or fighting. At the same time, the pupils dilate, sight becomes more focused, awareness intensifies, impulses quicken, and pain threshold heightens. Our perception of time seems to slow down and we prepare ourselves—physically and psychologically—to fight or flee.

This heightened state of fear and awareness causes us to think irrationally, perceiving almost everything around us as a possible threat or enemy. In this fight or flight mentality, it’s almost impossible to adopt a productive mood, explore possibilities, trust others, or make sound and coherent choices. In this state, our ability to be creative and to come up with options or alternatives

is diminished; we're more rigid, less resilient, and focused on short-term survival, not long-term consequences.

WRIGHT

There are times though, that the fight-or-flight response is necessary—actually, a good thing—right?

TEMPLER

Absolutely! After all, our fight-or-flight response was designed to protect us from the wild animals and unfriendly people that lurked in the jungles our forefathers inhabited. In situations when our actual physical survival is threatened, this is a very good protective measure. I can vouch for that personally. During the attack, as the hippopotamus was tearing me apart, the surging adrenaline and other stress hormones pumping through my body, in no small part, enabled me to survive.

That said, it's pretty unlikely that most people will experience a threat to their physical survival on a daily basis. Most of us are more likely to stress out from being caught in traffic, missing a deadline, having a flight delayed, or arguing with our boss or spouse. Nonetheless, these mini-crises still trigger our fight-or-flight response, just as if our well-being was threatened. On a daily basis, toxic stress hormones flow into our bodies as a result of events that pose no real threat to our physical survival.

The tricky thing is that in most cases, once our fight-or-flight response is activated, we can't run away and we can't fight. When faced with our "hippos"—whether they include a cranky co-worker, a stalled car, or a missed commitment—we have no choice but to face and accept them.

WRIGHT

When does stress become unhealthy?

TEMPLER

When we have a string of stressful or overwhelming situations, life becomes a series of fire drills or short-term emergencies. We lose the capacity to be present, to be open, and to connect with the things and the people important to us.

Living from one crisis to another, with no relief in sight, is a surefire way to fall into the victim role and slip into a grumpy, aggressive, and unproductive mood. For those who lack the

competence to manage their mood amid chaos, this can turn into a toxic and vicious cycle of “heroic suffering.” They may act or respond in ways that are actually counterproductive to their survival.

WRIGHT

How did you learn to deal with the fight-or-flight reaction?

TEMPLER

In the case of Erin’s surgery and hospitalization, sitting in the doctor’s office being hammered with scary information that threatened someone I loved, my fight-or-flight process was running in overdrive. But because of my prior experience with the hippo attack, I was able to recognize my knee-jerk reaction, divert it, and respond in a healthier way.

You see, I’d learned a thing or two about managing my moods. Sitting in that hospital, I knew I wasn’t in any immediate physical danger, and that my body was responding to perceived psychological threats. I looked and listened for the signals of fight-or-flight mode such as tension in my muscles, headache, upset stomach, racing heartbeat, deep sighing, or shallow breathing. I paid attention to whether I had butterflies in my belly or if my tongue was pasted to the roof of my mouth, if my jaw was clenched, or if there was pressure at my temples and behind my eyes. I was also cognizant of the more emotional symptoms of an unproductive mood such as anxiety, hopelessness, frustration, anger, sadness, fear, resignation, resentment, or arrogance.

In times of emotional strain, our fight-or-flight response can sharpen our mental acuity, help us deal more decisively with issues, and move us to action. But it can also make us hyper-vigilant and over-reactive, instead of being calm and open to possibilities. The key is to utilize the beneficial effects, like heightened awareness and mental acuity, to manage our own moods and influence the moods of others.

Instead of fighting with or running away from people who weren’t really to blame—such as the doctors, nurses, and my wife—I was able to curb my counterproductive behavior, recognize new possibilities, and provide a higher level of emotional support to my family.

WRIGHT

But you're not suggesting that it's healthy to ignore stress, are you?

TEMPLER

Not at all. A buildup of stress hormones can lead to a host of unpleasant symptoms including headaches, high blood pressure, immunity weaknesses, chronic fatigue, depression, and autoimmune diseases like rheumatoid arthritis, lupus, and allergies. The key isn't disregarding stressful or overwhelming situations—it's being aware of the signs and dealing with them in a healthy and constructive way.

WRIGHT

What actual steps do you follow to get out of fight-or-flight mode?

TEMPLER

As I've studied practical ways of detecting and shifting my moods, I've had a number of intriguing conversations with a friend and colleague, Peter Yaholkovsky, MD. He's given me great insight to the physiology of moods and mood management, including all the neurology, psychology, and endocrinology involved. And while there's nothing simple about how the brain and body work, the take-away always seems to be the same—I need to ask myself two questions:

1. What am I paying attention to?
2. What is important to me about that?

This enables me to see the story I'm in and to determine whether or not it's a story I want to commit to. The biochemistry and physiology is amazingly complex and can be quite interesting, but in simple terms, this how it works:

- First, when I find myself in a situation that my body interprets as stressful—I usually have an emotional response that includes something along the lines of “Oh crikey!”
- The next thing that might normally happen would be my fight-or-flight response kicks in and I get engaged in the

drama and the unproductive mood that often goes with that.

- So once I become aware of all this, that's the point where I have the opportunity to change things. I take a few deep breaths and feel myself becoming more relaxed and present and remind myself about what's really important here.
- At this point the adrenaline and all the other crazy neurochemicals coursing around my brain begin to settle down. The urgency that I was feeling begins to dissipate and I remind myself that I have a choice as to how I respond to this situation.
- The new story I come up with enables me to move out of the stressful narrative I was caught up in and into a more productive place where I have an expanded set of choices. For example, in that hospital setting, as a nurse was struggling to insert my daughter's IV and I was watching Erin crying hysterically, I could have lashed out at the nurse and grumbled to myself and anyone who would have listened about how incompetent she was or I could have simply asked how I could help. Which do you think would work better for everyone concerned?
- Having left fight-or-flight mode, I'll often acknowledge the negative emotions I'm experiencing and recognize their futility. I can now choose the mood I want to adopt.

This doesn't mean it's always easy or that I automatically shift into a productive mood. I've been practicing this for a long time and sometimes I'll even choose to remain grumpy or angry for a period of time! The important thing to note is that I'm in a place where I'm aware of what's going on in and around me and the neurochemicals aren't controlling my reactions, I am.

WRIGHT

You have something you call the "Five-Step Approach" to mood management. What are the steps?

TEMPLER

I first put the five steps into effect during our time in the hospital with Erin. I knew it was extremely important for me to

effectively manage my mood as that, more than anything, would open or close possibilities for me and for the people I loved. I also knew that I had to influence the moods of the others around us. Unproductive moods are toxic and contagious and during those trying times, I needed everyone who came into contact with us to be on their A Game. I was determined not to let anyone contaminate me or my family.

This is what helped me and what I recommend to others:

1. Center yourself. Other people's moods and emotions can trigger yours. If you lose your center and get caught up in an unproductive mood, you'll also lose the opportunity to make a difference.
2. Remember that you can't really afford to be in an unproductive mood, in a high-pressure situation, as it probably won't take you where you want to go.
3. Given that moods are often contagious, ask yourself, "What mood am I evoking in others? Do people want to play with me? Is the way I'm showing up, opening or closing possibilities?"
4. Ask yourself if the story you're caught up in is taking you where you want to go.
 - If it is, great! (Reminder: Ensure that there is some substance to your story. Naively telling yourself that "these things always seem to work themselves out and everything is going to be okay" may or may not work so well for you in the long run.)
 - If it isn't, find a story that will. Remember, you don't have to get it 100 percent right—the future is and always will be unknown. Useful questions to ask yourself as you put together your new narrative include:
 - i. Why am I caught up in my current story? (Usual suspects include, heroic suffering, feeling out of my depth, feeling superior, needing to be right and someone/something else to be wrong, covering my backside.)
 - ii. What are the facts?
 - iii. Just how much drama am I adding to the situation, and how's that working for me?

5. Now that you've removed the drama and can clearly just look at the facts, adjust the story you've been telling yourself accordingly and begin moving forward.

WRIGHT

This is easy enough to understand and it makes sense. That said, it seems to me that during stressful situations, there is a big difference between knowing what to do and being able to do it.

TEMPLER

There sure is, and therein lies the difference between understanding and learning. The mind understands and the body learns. When I get caught up in an unproductive mood, understanding what is going on and what to do about it isn't enough. Being able to take action, shift my mood, and influence the mood of others is what's really important.

Before I can utilize the Five-Step Approach, I first need to be able to catch myself getting stressed and knocked off center so that I don't get caught up for too long in an unproductive mood. I need to be able to bring my attention to what is going on in and around me.

That's where "Attention Training" comes in. Through regular, rigorous practice I've been able to:

- Build my capacity to catch myself before I get too caught up in the drama that I'm creating,
- Develop my capacity to be calmer and in turn more present, open, and connected.

Attention training is the most important component of this—it builds the muscles you're going to need when you're in a critical situation and there's real heavy lifting to be done.

But for the record, it helps when you're stuck in traffic, too.

WRIGHT

Let's talk more about this concept of attention training. What do we need to do?

TEMPLER

Well first of all, you need to practice, practice, practice and then practice some more. I do this at least five days per week, for

a minimum of four minutes per day. I usually do it first thing in the morning. Here's the routine that works best for me:

- Find somewhere where you can sit quietly and comfortably, feet squarely planted on the ground, back straight, neck comfortably supporting your head. Close your eyes.
- Pay close attention to your breathing. Take four deep breaths, each breath a little deeper than the last.
- Bring your attention to the top of your head and then behind your eyes, to your jaw and to your teeth. Check to see if your tongue is pasted to the roof of your mouth. Relax your neck, rolling your head once to the right and then once to the left. Transfer your attention to your shoulders, arms, and hands. Feel the air between your fingers and then take your attention back up to your arms and shoulders, making sure that they're completely relaxed. Connect with your heartbeat. Go down your back, bottom, thighs, knees, calves, ankles, and feet. Wiggle your toes around and then briefly press your feet down into the ground to engage your thighs before releasing them.
- Return your attention to your breath. Take four more deep breaths, each breath a little deeper than the last
- After four minutes (yes, you can set an alarm), listen to your body and it will tell you when it's time to stand up (I know that sounds crazy, but once you try it, you'll understand it completely.) Then just get on with your day.

The breathing aspect is most important, especially when feeling for the air between your fingers and connecting with your heartbeat. If your attention strays, acknowledge it, and then bring it back to your body and your breath. If you catch yourself getting annoyed or impatient, ask yourself, "How's that working for ya?" and then get out of your own way and continue with the practice.

If you skip your practice for a day (or a few), don't beat yourself up for it. Instead, take the opportunity to evaluate the difference in how your day unfolded when you didn't start it with attention training. For the first two months of performing this practice, it may be useful to make brief notes about your discoveries.

Within a month you'll notice an amazing difference in the way you see and react to the world.

WRIGHT

Anything else we need to keep in mind?

TEMPLER

Yes, I think it's important to recognize that managing our mood is obviously not going to change a lot of the events we experience. There are still going to be traffic jams, cranky co-workers, colleagues who miss critical deadlines, and loved ones who will still, unfortunately, become ill. What it can change is how we experience those moments when life doesn't go the way we'd like it to, and that's what it's all about. If we can manage our moods, everything in life just becomes a little simpler.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Paul Templer began his career in Africa, guiding tourists through the dangerous waters of the Zambezi River, until “a bad day at the office”—a deadly hippo attack—forced him to rebuild his life and career.

Today, Mr. Templer is the Chief Executive Officer of Templer Consulting, a global consulting practice that specializes in leadership development, conflict resolution, and guiding organizations so that they can better navigate the turbulent waters of the ever-changing business world. He is also a sought-after keynote speaker, inspiring audiences from all walks of life on how to create the lives they want—one decision at a time.

A dedicated husband and father, Mr. Templer and his family live in Michigan where they have established the Templer Foundation, a non-profit organization dedicated to supporting disabled and terminally ill children.

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