

Flow expertise at work

In the recent Cricket World Cup, Grant Elliot hit a six and took New Zealand to the final. When asked what was in his mind when he hit the ball, without hesitation he said: “NOTHING.”

On the brink of loss, he finds FLOW and transforms the hopes of a nation.

Flow is a biological state engaging body, heart and mind in a performance of advanced skill in the face of significant challenge. It is exceptionally effective and deeply nourishing. If we can work in flow we can achieve outstanding results.

Last week I had the privilege of going deeply into the concept and practice of flow with a small group of professionals on a very challenging project. No question, this team is facing immense challenge and they are well skilled for the job. Yet, it is clear from the dialogue that flow is less frequent than success requires.

For most, excess arousal, anxiety and worry leave the mind full of unhelpful thoughts, the emotions uncomfortable and the body compromised. The pressure of the challenges squeezes out self-care and preparation for performance. The harder we try the more elusive flow becomes.

Current research shows that in times of flow the thinking mind or prefrontal cortex is very quiet. We call this hypofrontality. During hypofrontality the brain works much faster in the execution of tasks and the body operates in a fluid, effortless state. The combination of serotonin, adrenaline, dopamine and anandamide is a natural cocktail that no recreational drugs can offer. For adrenaline junkies, click [here](#) to see flow in action.

So here is the question: why do so many of us struggle to find flow in work?

Studies estimate the average worker spends 50% of his or her time disengaged from the task at hand. Studies also show us that at least 40% of people struggle with chronic symptoms of distress.

My view is that there are two obvious obstacles:

1. We do too much and pay the price. We dealt with this in [Slow Down](#) (Sep, 2014)
2. We neglect performance enhancement. That is what I would like to explore here.

If you ask an elite team or performer how much time they devote to performance versus practice you will discover that a measly 20% is spent doing the job. About 80% of energy and time is devoted to performance enhancement or the flow state.

Apart from some rare exceptions, most businesses are the opposite. We bellow for performance, productivity and innovative breakthrough.

KPI's ask us to be productive at least 80% of the time. The remaining 20% (perhaps more) is spent in a state of low grade PTSD (post traumatic stress disorder).

Any high performance sports director would need only a moment to recognise this as a ludicrous situation. The way a well performing business functions would destroy a sports brand. The answers lie right in front of us yet we are too busy or too afraid to look at them.

Most of us simply cannot Slow Down but let's assume that we have stepped back, regained perspective and refocused insight. What might we do to be devastatingly effective in short bursts of transformative action?

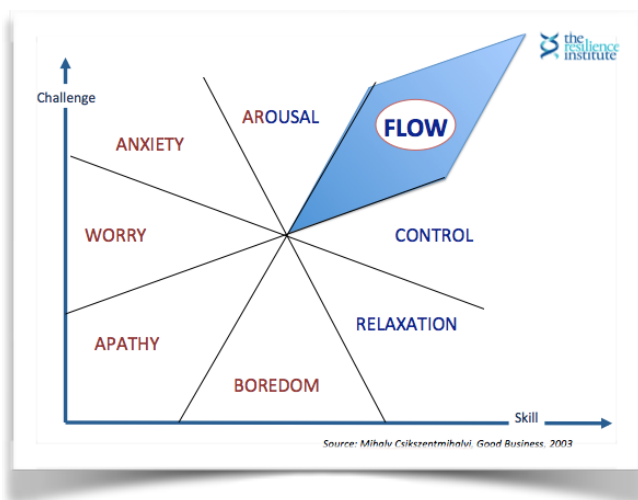
Here are the key steps you must follow:

1. Take the time to understand flow and what it means to you personally. It is usually best to start with stories of your life and remember times when you were in flow- sports, adventures or hobbies

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you were in flow - sports, adventures or hobbies are a good starting point. Then we have to address work and carefully explore where in our day, week, job or career that we are achieving flow. It can be humbling. The founder of flow, M. Csikszentmihaly suggests that only 20% of us achieve flow. In his eighties now, he is still researching and presenting at conferences around the world.

2. Take a normal day at work and spend some time categorising your day's activity into each segment of the flow diagram below. This will give you a clear understanding of what is putting you in flow and what is not. Remember that flow, control and relaxation have well engaged skills and will deliver results. Some arousal is necessary for learning. Put the tasks of your role into two columns – those you want more of and those less of.



latter, be prepared for very hard work (on skill development) and fear (unsettling challenge after challenge). It is easy to understand why so many people take the safe road and seek comfort. Flow will ask you the hard questions.

5. Chunk up the challenge. Grant Elliot entered the outer edge (top right) of macro-flow but we can edge in at the base of the flow state (50% challenge and 50% skill). We call this micro-flow. This is a safe way to start for those not willing to confront catastrophic failure. We have to coach ourselves or get some help.
6. Define the work in your job that is both challenging and meaningful. The challenge needs to be a little uncomfortable. Some suggest that it should be placed about 4% higher than your current skills allow. Where on the flow map does this work put you? If this work places you into the lower half of the map, the challenge is not high enough. If this challenge is pushing you towards the top left, your skills need work.
7. Now you need to define the skills required. What will it take to develop the skills you need to deliver a brilliant outcome? The answer is very specific training. It is helpful to play to our skills but you want to be sure that you have developed a skill mix at a level of proficiency that "hits a six". Some hack their way through 24 balls to get a few runs. The flow expert hits one ball with devastating effectiveness. This takes deliberate, focused practice. Watch the experts, define the keys to their success and practice diligently.
8. There is a lot going on in most jobs so you do need to pick your battles. Choose jobs that match your skill potential and will deliver impact and satisfaction. Pick some processes that you want to perfect and work away at. Others will quickly notice. Smart professionals learn to delegate the tasks and customer situations at which they are not brilliant. As a consequence they enjoy work and succeed.

3. Lock down a daily discipline of reflection upon where you have spent your day and begin to ask the hard question: where am I actually adding value? Further: what is making me invaluable? And finally: does this really matter to me?
4. Now you face a critical decision. Will you put your head back in the sand of the slightly uncomfortable known and "box on"? Or, will you select the scary prospect of chasing flow. If the

9. Naturally, some tasks will be less challenging. Be sure to approach them in a calm and confident way (Relaxed). There are also situations that are very difficult. Getting anxious and worried will destroy your potential. We can only enter into the uniquely powerful state of flow when we relax into it. To liberate your skills into a task requires that you slow the brain down, alter your brain chemistry and ultimately think of nothing. When the thinking mind shuts up you have entered flow and will find your talents and skills fully absorbed in the experience.

10. Be reasonable. We cannot operate in flow all day. My recommendation is to select four tasks adding up to about a third of the day for flow. Make sure you spend a little time clearing your mind, moving, relaxing and visualising these tasks. When you engage give it everything and hold your course.

Remember: Each time you are interrupted it can take up to 30 minutes to be back to flow. After flow take a break, rest and celebrate. Treat your fellow workers with respect when they are focused. Let them finish before you interrupt. Organise flow work in a distraction free environment.

Criteria for Flow

- | | | |
|--|---|--|
| Conditions for flow | { | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Clear goals 2. Immediate, direct feedback 3. Match challenge with skill |
| Variable:
<u>Microflow</u>
Vs.
<u>Macroflow</u> | { | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 4. Sense of personal control 5. Focused concentration on task 6. Deep engagement or absorption 7. Quiet mind (action & awareness merge) 8. Time distortion (compression or dilation) 9. Lack of awareness of bodily needs 10. Intrinsic reward |

(Csikszentmihalyi, various and Kotler, Rise of Superman, 2014)

References:

The Rise of Superman, Steven Kotler, 2014

Inside-Out, Dr Sven Hansen, 2015