Building a High Performance Environment
-- Teamwork and Flow --

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi has put forth a model for improving individual performance that blends Challenge with Skills and helps us to frame a process for optimizing team performance. The ideas on individual performance are mostly from his book, Finding Flow, published in 1997, which is finding a place in the thinking of people involved in performance management and productivity. What I have tried to do herein is help frame some ideas for improving teamwork around my 20+ years of working with individuals, organizations and teams on optimizing performance. There are lots of workplace applications for this thinking and you should find the ideas actionable.

The concept of Flow comes from Csikszentmihalyi's interviews with people who described their experiences using the metaphor of a river current carrying them along while their performance just seemed natural. Things just flowed.

Flow might be described as becoming absorbed in an activity and moving within the energy field to perform at a high level. This resonates for many people since most can remember or relate to being in such a mental state, be it writing an article or kayaking a river, where it all just seemed to happen. One gets in "The Zone" and things just roll – this state might be described as fast or complete or perfect or seamless or some such word. It is my belief that everyone can get in the flow and accomplish more that way.

Why Use It?

A high performance state is where individuals and teams operate most effectively – you know it when you see it or feel it and if you have been there before, you find that intoxicating. If you have played my Lost Dutchman exercise, you may have experienced flow toward the end of the planning period when everything comes together very rapidly – or not, depending on how your team was working! <grin>
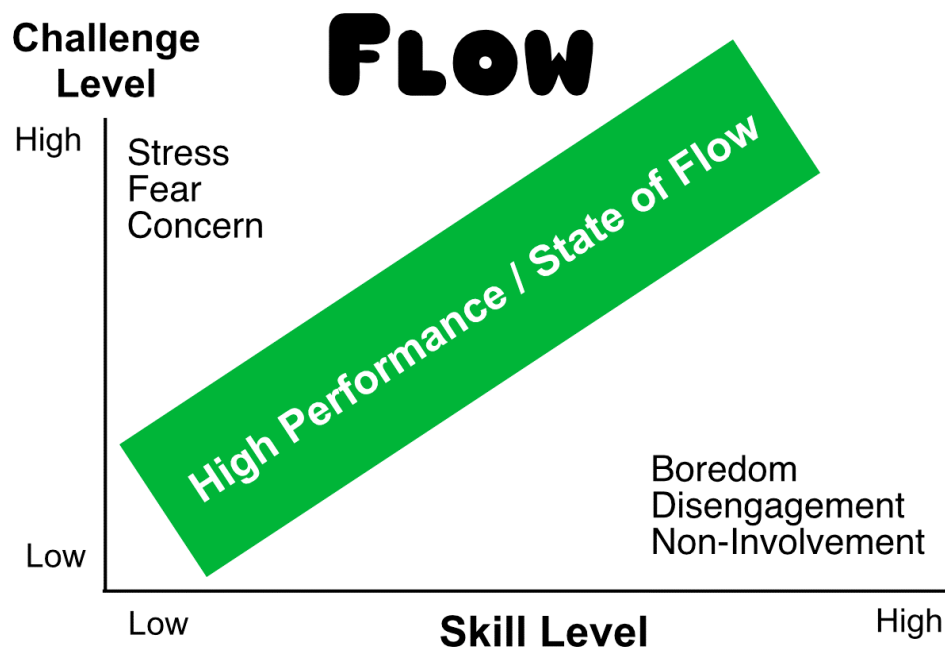
Artists sometimes get in a state whereby nothing seems to distract them and they produce at a high level. Pool players call it getting "in stroke" and find they can do everything perfectly and seamlessly and they can often remember that state for years. Scientists and college professors are well-

known for their "absent mindedness," often because they are so focused on the task at hand that they are almost unaware of other responsibilities.

This Flow state is easily recognized in athletes who are in a "groove" or "zone" where they can't miss a pitch or they seem to be playing "unconsciously." Think of Tiger Woods and a string of birdies (as opposed to Shaq on the free throw line!). Flow might be the opposite of "choke" where there are so many competing thoughts and distractions that high performance is unlikely or just not possible, as in the person who freezes in a public presentation situation.

A high performance state occurs when people are given clearly defined tasks that balance their skill level with the challenge level of the task. It also helps in stretching skills and promoting individual and team development. When the environment is challenging and the skills are sufficient, performance can flow. A key, then, to improving workplace productivity is to effectively manage a high performance environment, one that supports such positive mental states. There are also some other factors involved in creating such a situation.

Csikszentmihalyi's model is described below. It is based on an interaction of Challenges and Skills. Flow occurs in a zone where there is some matching of the above; mismatching produces other less desired and predictable outcomes.

Challenge Level

FLOW

High | Stress
Fear
Concern

High Performance / State of Flow

Boredom
Disengagement
Non-Involvement

Low

Low — **Skill Level** — High

The diagram above demonstrates his concept that a matching of skill levels to challenge helps produce flow. Highly skilled people will view some challenges as boring, where a low skilled person might find the same situation involving and engaging. Consider an expert and a novice kayak paddler on a set of moderate rapids on a river. The expert coasts through somewhat bored while the novice is white-knuckling his paddle the whole way! A high performance state occurs when there is a *matching* of challenge and skill. If a teammate at work is in "way over his head" skill-wise, the likelihood that they can contribute much to the team initiative is low. More of a match of skills to the challenge is required.

Skills and Challenges are important, but environment counts.

The overall environment generally needs to be supportive to reinforce the positives and minimize the negatives.

In Frank Herbert's novels (The Dune Trilogy), he had his heroes use a mantra that started, *"Fear is the mind-killer…"* This corresponds to Marty Seligman's research on Conditioned Helplessness. Fear is an inhibitor or even a stopper; fear is not a motivator for optimal performance. While some level of fear may produce the hormonal response of, "Fight or Flight" and be a precursor for rapid action and that adrenaline rush, people do not operate well in a situation dominated by stress. Generally, fear causes freezing. And more often, a sense of control (personal and team) is needed for flow and performance.

Not everything in the environment needs to be perfect for flow to be experienced. The right challenge matching with the right skills may just merge for certain individuals at some moment in time. While most might find 90,000 cheering people and international TV to be "somewhat distracting," Bob Beamon was able to long jump nearly 3 feet farther than the previous world record of 26 feet at the 1968 Olympics in Mexico City, an outstanding accomplishment in an environment that had many distractions including the Black Power protests, 90,000 cheering people in the stands, and intrusive videocameras telecasting to millions of worldwide viewers. But he managed this and produced a response that could only be called in the Zone. (link).

When in the flow state, people become absorbed in their activity, and the focus of awareness is narrowed down to the activity itself. When in a situation of flow, people often feel a loss of self-consciousness and

perceive a merging of action and awareness along with a corresponding decrease in environmental distractions. Distractions may be there, but they are less noticeable and of low impact. Many will describe a distorted sense of time - one's subjective experience of time is altered, generally slowed down so that more seems to be getting done in less time.

Then again, there is the old joke about the snail and the slug. It seems the snail is visiting the slug in the hospital. There was apparently an accident and the slug is now recuperating. The snail asks, *"Well, how did all this happen?"* and the slug responds, *"You know, I really don't remember much; It all happened so fast!"*

Speed is a relative thing, you know… Those in the zone can get a lot done in a short period of time. Proactively managing the environment to maximize support and minimize distractions generally makes it more likely.

How does one structure the environment to generate flow?

The key is to set up an environment that helps to engage people and drive such a state of thinking and behaving. The components of a team-based, workplace environment design might have many or most of these components:

Clear goals, missions and purpose, where expectations are specific and processes and procedures are understood. Goals need to be perceived as achievable and the individuals must feel they possess adequate skills and abilities. The involvement of the team in the situation can also support flow.

Concentration and focus with a narrow field of view. Flow is more likely to occur if focus is on a narrow band of things rather than a broad one. Think of Bob Beamon's thoughts on that record long jump in the 1968 Olympics. Avoiding distractions and disruptions is very helpful, although sometimes difficult to arrange and influenced by personal concentration skills.

Effective Performance Feedback is a critical factor, and one that many people do not well understand or implement (click here to download Scott's Performance Feedback Analysis materials). To support high performance, feedback needs to be nearly immediate, positive, demonstrate trends in

results, be narrow and specific and generally be self-measured and self-produced. When delays are introduced, it is like learning to play the piano when one cannot hear the notes for 30 seconds, a most difficult task.

Sufficient resources must be available so that external influences are felt to be minimal and a sense of "local control" exists about what is needed to succeed. Having to wait for equipment or permission is not conducive to a flowing workplace. A sense of control over the situation or activity lends itself to improved results; an internal locus-of-control generates better flow than a reliance or dependence on outside influencers.

Mental skills training is important. People should be using skills such as dissociation, meditation, visual rehearsal or projection, positive self-talk (opposed to the constructive criticism so often used as a leadership technique by management!) and other creative skills can benefit individuals. People should be able to access high performance mental states and also avoid distractions, both mental and physical. Teams using thinking processes like Six Thinking Hats and other brainstorming or mind-mapping practices can add thinking skills to a problem-solving situation. Self-generated stretch or push goals for performance can create the need to expand and improve results and productivity.

A focus on success, rather than avoidance of failure is important for most individuals. While some may employ a fear-of-failure strategy as a motivational force, it is generally not something that will drive peak performance. Having a focus on achieving success and meeting goals is much more rewarding than avoiding failure or lack of success. Intrinsic rewards support sustained performance much more than any added extrinsic rewards might generate. Achieving the goal and generating immediate positive feedback are powerful motivators and help sustain flow.

Balance between ability levels and challenges presented for the team (the activity is neither too easy nor too difficult) is a key factor and something that managers and key leaders must attend to for best results.

Engagement within the activity itself is important, especially when it is a group or team situation where there may have been some past negativity surrounding this activity. Sharing risk can help minimize distractions and

contribute to the feeling of support. Organizations DO have histories, as do individuals.

A situation of ownership can help, whereby teammates are enlisted in a shared challenge. This generates peer support for the perceived risks as well as support for the needed efforts. As I have said many times, "Nobody ever washes a rental car." Having a sense of ownership can help reduce distractions as well as providing overall support and a decrease sense of risk. Individuals who do not have a sense of ownership involvement will not often create a sense of flow.

And Remember, **Fun** is a helpful addition to almost every team building, high performance or organizational developmental situation.

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For the **FUN** of It!

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Reference: Csikszentmihalyi, M. (1997). *Finding Flow*. New York, NY: Basic Books.