

Teams That Flow Together, Grow Together

Have you ever experienced “flow”? You probably have. It’s when you get so immersed in a task that you lose all sense of time. You’re so laser-focused on the task at hand that everything else fades away. You “flow” in and out of your task with little thought of anything else except achieving what is directly in front of you.

In his seminal book on the subject, [Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience](#), Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi writes:

“[The experience of flow] are situations in which attention can be freely invested to achieve a person’s goals, because there is no disorder to straighten out, no threat for the self to defend against. We have called this state the flow experience, because this is the term many of the people we interviewed had used in their descriptions of how it felt to be in top form: ‘It was like floating,’ ‘I was carried on by the flow.’”

No disorder to straighten out. No threat to defend against. Doesn’t that sound wonderful?

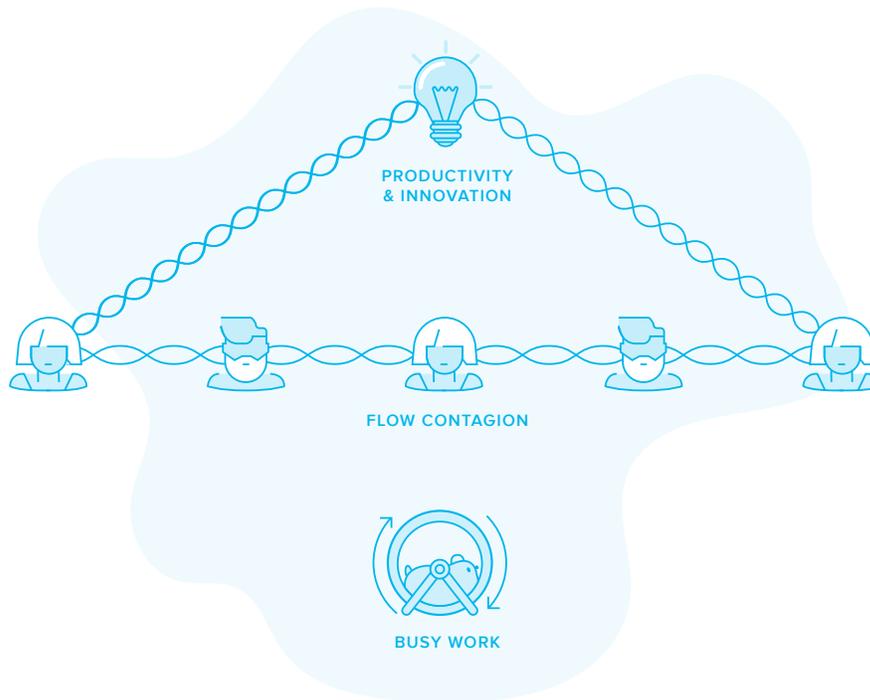
When an individual enters the flow state, their productivity skyrockets, their happiness increases, and they have a clear path for achieving their goals.

But what about teams? Can teams enter a flow state, of sorts?

In one word, yes.

In his book, Csikszentmihalyi writes about surgeons and their teams. He says, “Surgeons say that during a difficult operation they have the sensation that the entire operating team is a single organism, moved by the same purpose; they describe it as a ‘ballet’ in which the individual is subordinated to the group performance, and all involved share in a feeling of harmony and power.”

Some call this “[flow contagion](#),” meaning that team members feed off the focus of others. Whatever you call it, it’s certainly possible. When teams optimize their time through periods of intense focus without disruption, they end up working together in harmony and achieving more than they thought possible.



Making Team Flow Possible

Of course, all this raises the critical question: how can teams create flow? How can teams reach that optimal state where everyone is firing on all cylinders, laser-focused on their most important tasks

Team flow state flows out of individual flow state. In other words, in order for teams to get in the flow, every person within the team must also be in the flow.

How can team leaders make this happen? Here are two simple recommendations.

Encourage More Deep Work

Deep work (a term coined by [Cal Newport](#)) is work that is incredibly important and requires a significant amount of focus. Deep work focuses exclusively on mission-critical tasks, to the exclusion of tasks of lesser importance. It usually requires a substantial chunk of uninterrupted time and can't be rushed or hurried.

Team leaders and managers can encourage flow state by encouraging their team members to regularly make time for deep work. This could include scheduling time to focus intensely on their most important tasks. It also might include setting aside mundane or redundant tasks, such as filling out paperwork manually, so you can focus on the task or tasks that will make the most difference for the company.

Eliminate More Busy Work

Deep work and busy work are essentially the opposite of each other. Busy work keeps you occupied

with trivial tasks that don't ultimately move the needle forward much. Deep work focuses you on the one or two most important tasks on your plate. It's hard to do deep work and reach flow state when you're constantly doing busy work.

By using things like [automated workflows](#) to eliminate as much busy work as possible, you make it easier for your team members to do deep work and reach flow state. You eliminate the distractions that pull team members out of flow state and make it easier for them to have sustained focus.

[In his book](#), *Deep Work: Rules For Focused Success In A Distracted World*, Cal Newport writes:

“The shallow work [i.e. busy work] that increasingly dominates the time and attention of the knowledge worker is less vital than it often seems in the moment. For most businesses, if you eliminated significant amounts of this shallowness, their bottom line would likely remain unaffected.”

Granted, it's not quite as simple as encouraging more deep work and less busy work. Every team has some amount of busy work that must be done. But the more that busy work can be automated or eliminated, the more likely it is that your team will be able to achieve flow together.

The Benefits Of Flow In The Workplace

Teams that can achieve flow state reap numerous benefits which positively effects individuals and companies alike.

Faster-Paced Innovation

[Busy work rarely produces innovation](#). Rather, innovation flows out of flow. When teams are working in harmony, focused on big projects, not bogged down by busy work, they're able to achieve innovation much more rapidly. New ideas spring forth and new methods of doing things are created.

Employee Skill Building

When employees are focused primarily on busy work, they're not developing their skills. They're spending their time on mundane tasks that don't stretch them or force them to learn new things. However, when a team is in “flow state,” every employee is doing deep work that requires focused concentration and the use of numerous skills. The end result is more skilled employees.

Increased Employee Satisfaction

It's no secret that employees experience much greater satisfaction when they're engaged in meaningful work rather than busy work. Employees want to know that their actions make a difference. When a team regularly is in flow state, they're working on meaningful work which leads to greater employee satisfaction.

More Time For Big Picture Work

Few things hinder big-picture thinking like being constantly in the weeds of busy work. [When you're spending all your time trying to organize files or collect signatures](#), you have very little time to think about the big picture. About the overall goals that you're trying to achieve. About what matters most to you and the company.

On the flip side, when you're regularly in a state of flow, you can think much bigger. You can move away from busy work and think about what really matters.

More Productivity

When you're constantly busy with little things, you don't get much meaningful work done. Yes, you're busy, but you're not productive. When you're doing deep work, you're focused on the tasks that will drive the needle forward the most. You're truly doing productive work.

Again, to quote Cal Newport, "[An organization] should be aimed at a small number of wildly important goals. This simplicity will help focus an organization's energy to a sufficient intensity to ignite real results."

In other words, if you actually want to get stuff done, aim to get less done. Focus on doing the most important tasks and do whatever you can to streamline or minimize other tasks.

Go For The Flow

Creating a system in your workplace that promotes team flow is no small goal. You have to give employees the time and flexibility to work on the projects that matter most to the company. You have to set up systems and [utilize tools that will eliminate as much busy work as possible](#). You have to be okay with not every email being answered right away.

But the effort is worth it.

When your team reaches peak flow state, they'll unlock levels of productivity and innovation you never thought possible. Employee satisfaction will jump and your employees will steadily develop their skill sets.

So go for the flow. You won't regret it.