

# A Workforce in “Flow”

Research has shown that when people find themselves in a situation where their skills and experience are well suited to the challenge at hand — i.e. they have a realistic chance to “win” — they can enter a “zone” of optimal experience with a level of satisfaction so high that they would continue to do it regardless of the monetary or other abstract compensations. Some common examples are professional sports stars whose “in the zone” stories are well publicized. Hunting and brain surgery also produce reported flow stories. But plenty of ordinary work “flow” situations have also been documented.

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, a leader in workplace psychology research, wrote “Flow: the Psychology of Optimal Experience” that describes the conditions in which people can achieve a sense of being in flow, including at work. While not every business employee may be interested in that, it’s possible that a significant portion could derive considerable additional satisfaction from roles with conditions favorable for flow, and that business leaders can decide to provide those conditions as a way to support greater employee engagement and ownership of business operations.

The following are main elements of Flow situations; some are similar to the basic principles of Lean thinking.

## **1. A Challenging Activity that Requires Skills**

- Significant learning
- Practice needed to perfect skills
- Bounded by rules
- Good balance between challenges and skills

## **2. Concentration on the Task at Hand**

- No questioning about why we’re doing it; it’s clear and valuable
- Other concerns are out-of-sight, out-of-mind
- No unnecessary pace-stopping interruptions

## **3. Clear Goals**

- Observable
- Valuable to participants and their immediate customers
- Measurable, to quantify success

## **4. Immediate Feedback**

- Consistent; no lapses
- In appropriate time for the activity cycle time; short or long

## **5. Realistic Expectations of Control**

- Absolute control not necessary
- Ability to exercise significant control is adequate
- Clear opportunity to reduce the gap or error rate with practice

## **6. Merging of Action and Awareness**

- Actions take full attention and awareness
- External concerns cannot get in the way

## **7. Loss of Self-Consciousness**

- Complete attention to the task
- Full confidence; no concern for self or ego

## **8. Transformation of Time**

- Time seems to stand still in enjoyable experiences
- Time “flies” over even long days

### **Developing Flow**

In “Flow,” Csikszentmihalyi states: “To improve the quality of life through work, two complementary strategies are necessary. On the one hand jobs should be redesigned so that they resemble as closely as possible common flow activities — e.g. hunting, competitive sports, surgery, many others. But it will also be necessary to help people develop” self-motivated personalities “by training them to recognize opportunities for action, to hone their skills, and to set reachable goals. *Neither one of these strategies is likely to make work much more enjoyable by itself; in combination, they should contribute enormously to optimal experience.*”

Following the two strategies, the first, redesigning jobs for flow might start with using the first five of the flow elements above as a checklist for identifying flow inhibitors in current job designs and working to eliminate them. (Refer to the separate ‘Lean Flow Enterprise Elements’ document for other Support Systems that may need adjustments.)

The second strategy, training people to develop self-motivated personalities was beyond the scope of the Flow book, but it’s likely that methods are readily available from training resources. And, it’s also likely that they may actually be appreciated (vs. knee-jerk reactions to discount them as limited-value, training “fluff”) if the jobs (operators and leaders) have been redesigned to provide ready outlets for the emerging energies of self-motivated workers.

The 21<sup>st</sup> century has opened thinking about organizational performance improvement to include the nuts-and-bolts of continuous improvement (CI) business culture alongside Lean Sigma technical operating methods. In “Flow,” Csikszentmihalyi presents research that explains why *the technical and human elements of business processes can be fully successful only when both are addressed in concert.* That’s common only in the few industry-leading level 5 companies (e.g. Toyota) where continuous improvement is a holistic part of the business culture, not a series of program-of-the-year adoptions of the latest popular tool-sets (Lean, Six Sigma, Supply-Chain Management, et al).

And, as said by others, technologies can be easily copied, but people-based business differentiators are very difficult to copy and offer sustainable competitive advantages.