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This newsletter features topics related to managing change and improving our work environments. If there are topics you would like to see covered or feedback you have about this newsletter, please submit your ideas and feedback to the following link: <http://www.anneoffner.com/contact.htm>



"Genius is one per cent inspiration and 99 per cent perspiration," Thomas Edison said.ⁱ

Edison had three months of formal schooling. His teacher described him as "addled" because his mind often wandered. Mr. Edison gave credit for his early development to his mother because she encouraged him to experiment, read, and make the best of his way of thinking.ⁱⁱ

Had Edison learned to think in a different way or followed the prescribed curriculum, we might not have benefited from his prolific inventions, including the phonograph and the first commercially practical incandescent light.

Mihaly Csikszentmihaly (pronounced "ME-high CHICK-send-me-high-ee") says allowing inspiration, enjoyment, challenge, and self-direction into our daily lives maximizes accomplishment and productivity. These allowances bring about the experience of "Flow".



Defining Flow

Dr. Csikszentmihaly is a professor of Psychology at the Peter F. Drucker Graduate School of Management at Claremont Graduate University and Director of the Quality of Life Research Center. In his book, *Good Business: Leadership, Flow and the Making of Meaning*,ⁱⁱⁱ Dr. Csikszentmihaly describes the process of Flow as "a state of effortless concentration and enjoyment that tends to occur when a person faces a defined set of goals that require appropriate responses and can be achieved at work, at play, and in social situations."^{iv} Therefore, in order for us to experience Flow, which some might describe as being "in the zone," we need goals and a task that we really enjoy.

Aside from this, Csikszentmihaly says Flow "also happens when a person's skills are fully involved in overcoming a challenge that is just about manageable, so it acts as a magnet for learning new skills and increasing challenges."^v Flow can occur throughout our lives, across experiences and despite difficult conditions.

Interviews conducted by Csikszentmihaly's research team showed that "to be successful you have to enjoy doing your best while at the same time contributing to something beyond yourself."^{vi} His research also shows that young people who choose to hang out or watch TV during their free time report being sad, listless and anxious more often than their peers who

seek to learn and be challenged by new experiences.^{vii}

Living in a materialistic society certainly does not encourage us to seek challenges that help others prosper. It's much easier to watch TV or play video games in our free time than to develop a skill, nurture a talent or get involved in a cause. Csikszentmihaly says that in the United States, only about 20% of us experience Flow as a part of our daily lives – 80% of us are not experiencing inspiration, enjoyment, challenge, and self-direction on a daily basis!

Perhaps this lack of Flow in our own lives helps us understand why movies such as the recent, *Pursuit of Happiness* with Will Smith, or *Million Dollar Baby* starring Hillary Swank enthrall us so much – we wish to vicariously experience Flow through our celebrity favorites.

So, bringing Flow into our own lives or work environment will take effort. Happiness, says Csikszentmihaly, is up to us – our own actions, our own sweat and our own desire for personal growth and contribution beyond our own needs.

If you are intrigued by this idea of increasing Flow in your own life, make sure you include the essential elements of connecting to a larger vision, knowing your goals, participating in an engaging task that offers a manageable challenge, and contributing to a cause that is larger than yourself.



Flow and Work

Managers and Human Resource professionals share the ongoing responsibility – and often conundrum – of engaging employees in the work that needs to be accomplished. It's interesting to note that in his research, Csikszentmihaly finds that Flow is as possible (and as frequent) for the dishwasher as it is

for the manager as it is for the scientist, entrepreneur or CEO.

This may seem puzzling given that it is not uncommon for a manager to complain that his employee is unmotivated. Unfortunately, in many organizations, it seems that we've left out the possibility for Flow in our daily lives. We select the wrong employee, lead a department that does boring, menial work, or we perceive that work is just not meant to be fun. We've traded in the opportunity for Flow for what seems like the logical, rational route to efficiency, productivity and profit.

For example, I have some friends who are sales reps whose companies have instituted a tracking device that allows the company to track the employee's whereabouts and direct them to take calls as needed. While this sounds efficient, Flow would be more possible for the sales reps if the company's tracking device allowed them to make decisions about which calls to take or at least have input into their own daily calls. Logic dictates what is perceived as operational efficiency, but in the end this logic will not get the type and scope of performance from the sales rep that Flow would.

In my experience, it seems that many people think they must give up the opportunity for Flow in order to achieve their goals. The perception often is that work is a means to an end rather than a portal for growth and development.

Csikszentmihaly believes that work is a primary mechanism for helping us to evolve into increasingly complex and happy beings. He says that human beings are built for Flow and without it we disengage or become dissatisfied, unhappy or depressed. The opportunity for challenge, self-direction, and participation in something larger than ourselves builds our confidence and allows us to grow both as people and as employees.

Before we ever enter the workforce many of the experiences that mold us as we develop into more complex human beings actually discourage the experience of Flow. For example, school curriculums that are jam-

packed with rote learning and aptitude test accomplishment leave little room for Flow. Similarly, television ads and the general appeal of material possessions encourage us to focus on short-term pleasure and distract us from taking on the goals, challenges and self-determination that encourage Flow.

Csikszentmihaly teaches us that our organizations would prosper with the right amount of flow. One of the most important ingredients to producing Flow in an organization is a senior management team that believes employees should be connected to the business, value their input and regularly reinforce these beliefs through actions such as newsletters, employee forums with senior managers or actually implementing employees' ideas for improving the organization's culture, productivity or efficiency.

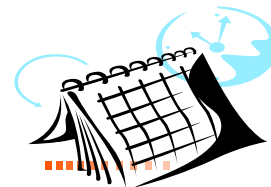
Another key ingredient involves ensuring employees clearly understand the short and long-term business goals, mission and vision of the company. Further, it's important that employees have clear performance goals and are rewarded both for completing them and for showing flexibility in making adjustments as needed to meet those goals.

Feedback from top to bottom and back up again is another hallmark of a work environment that encourages Flow. Feedback

creates a climate that is open to improving, changing and reinforcing successes. Effective staffing and selection build Flow. Employees who are hired for jobs that are well-matched to their skills have more opportunity to build Flow into their day.

Imagine a job in which all of the above requirements are met and the employee begins to develop into a happier, more complex human being. Her tasks challenge her skills and abilities and allow for the opportunity to orchestrate how she manages her time, interruptions and how she approaches her daily routine. This job enables Flow, and according to Dr. Csikszentmihaly, optimizes productivity for the organization.

Sounds logical to me.



Next Issue

In the April issue we'll discuss change and coaching – how our words, feedback and listening habits affect others.

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This newsletter is edited by Larry Offner of West Palm Beach, Florida.

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ⁱ See Wikipedia for more information on Thomas Edison's life and achievements:
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thomas_edison

ⁱⁱ Ibid.

ⁱⁱⁱ Csikszentmihalyi, M. (2004). Good Business: Leadership, Flow and the Making of Meaning. NY: Penguin Books.

^{iv} Flow by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi. Copyright 1997 by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi.

^v Ibid.

^{vi} Csikszentmihalyi, M. (2004), p.79.

^{vii} Ibid.