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Focus on Innovation

Focus on Innovation is a monthly electronic newsletter designed to provoke thoughts and ideas on how to bring innovation to life within the organizations in which we work.

For Those on the Run

When was the last time you experienced creative "flow"? Flow is an automatic, effortless, yet highly focused state of consciousness that is optimal for creative productivity. Although you cannot make flow happen, you can remove obstacles in its way. This month's newsletter discusses the concept of creative "flow" and how to facilitate it.

Facilitating Creative "Flow"

"The best moments usually occur when a person's body or mind is stretched to its limits in a voluntary effort to accomplish something difficult and worthwhile. Optimal experience is thus something we make happen."

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi

How many of you have had the experience of getting into your creative "zone" - a very pleasant, almost addictive, therapeutic state where the creative juices just seem to flow? Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi relates this to what he calls *flow*, or *optimal experience*, which he believed is the sensations and feelings that come when an individual is actively engaging in an intense favorite pursuit - which could be anything from rock climbing to playing the piano. He describes flow as "being completely involved in an activity for its own sake. The ego falls away. Time flies. Every action, movement, and thought follows inevitably from the previous one, like playing jazz. Your whole being is involved, and you're using your skills to the utmost." Creative people, such as Albert Einstein and Sylvia Plath, did their most creative work when they experienced being totally involved in an activity where one action flowed smoothly into the next. The fact is creativity is more likely to result from flow states.

We all move in and out of the creative zone many times a day, and depending on our state of mind and intent, effects how closely we connect to, and what we get out of our creativity. However, with our fast paced world and continual state of time deprivation, things become stressful for many of us, causing us to move out of the natural flow. Although you cannot make flow happen, you can learn to remove obstacles in its way. Here are a few ideas to get you started:

1. Csikszentmihalyi suggests, "contrary to expectation, "flow" usually happens not during relaxing moments of leisure and entertainment, but rather when we are actively involved in a difficult enterprise, in a task that stretches our mental and physical abilities." To experience flow, Csikszentmihalyi recommends picking an enjoyable activity that is at or slightly above your skill level; continually raising the level of challenge as performance improves; screening out distraction as much as possible; focussing attention on the emotional and sensory qualities of the activity, and looking for regular feedback, or concrete goals to monitor progress, even if it is a large or long-term project with delayed outcome. It is amazing what this will do to fuel creativity.
2. Borrow from the approaches of a number of sports psychologists and trainers who use a range of techniques such as progressive muscle relaxation, concentration exercises and meditation to help access the "zone". One of the consistent themes of these approaches is the need to "get around" the conscious mind to facilitate flow.
3. Put your thinking on hold. Acting teacher and consultant Jennifer Lehman notes how that quality of mind can interfere: "It's difficult to achieve a consistent openness, letting things flow through you, without your own judgments, your own personal history, or how you think it should be, interfering with that. I also have a feeling that our thinking mind is different than our feeling mind, and that if we start thinking, we shut down creative expression. Thinking is very linear and one dimensional, and we get attached to it and its 'should' and 'ought to' and 'let me go in there and fix it'. When this type of thinking occurs, we need to immediately put it on hold, or better yet trash it!
4. Leverage your most creative time. For some of us, it is when we first wake up in the morning, when our sense of self hasn't become so focused, and doesn't have a chance to get in the way of whatever creative field might naturally happen. For others, it is while participating in joyful exercise or movement activities, such as walking, running, taking a strenuous hike in the wilderness. When in productive parts of flow, write ideas down in whatever format works best for you, i.e.: in a journal, mindmaps, idea files, outlines. You can come back to them and build on them later.
5. Create a creative space for you to work that is inspirational. Make your work area or create a space in your home for you to experience creative "flow". For example, Gustav Mahler, a renowned Austrian Conductor and composer, had built "a composing cottage" in a meadow between an inn and the shore of a lake. The small building had a table, chairs, a sofa and a piano brought from Vienna. Early in the morning he retired to this space and stayed there until lunchtime. When he felt blocked, he would go for a walk in the meadow, run up the hill or go for longer walks, returning each time to 'bring in the harvest'. The cottage gave Mahler physical isolation and means of temporary withdrawal from his immediate surroundings allowing him to experience creative "flow".

In closing, we can facilitate creative "flow" by integrating it into our daily life and removing obstacles that get in its way. As we think about how to build innovative capacity in organizations two questions worth exploring are, Can and do organizations experience creative "flow"? and how can we facilitate creative "flow" within an organization?

What's the Bottom line

Creativity is more likely to result from flow states. We can facilitate creative "flow" by removing obstacles that get in its way.

This newsletter was adapted from Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's books, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*, HarperCollins, 1991 and *Creativity: Flow and Psychology of Discovery and Invention*, HarperCollins Publishers, 1996 and Douglas Eby's article, *Creativity and Flow Psychology*, <http://talentdevelop.com/Page8.html>).



Please feel free to pass this newsletter on to others.

If you would like more information about the ideas and topics listed in this issue, contact Judy Laws, Ph.D. at jlaws@foursightconsulting.com.

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