



# IN-THE-ZONE: MASTERING THE ART OF FLOW IN COACHING

Is it only artists and athletes who get to experience flow or can coach and coachee access this mesmerising state? **Priya Hunt's** PhD research into how business leaders can use flow in the digital-age workplace, shows us we may be closer to it than we realise.

*'The best moments in our lives are not the passive, receptive, relaxing times... The best moments usually occur if a person's body or mind is stretched to its limits in a voluntary effort to accomplish something difficult and worthwhile.'*

- Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi<sup>1</sup>

In his seminal work on how to achieve happiness, Csikszentmihalyi introduced the concept of flow, a state of optimal consciousness where individuals are effortlessly focussed and engaged with a stretching, worthwhile activity. Linked to high functioning, improved productivity<sup>2</sup> and well-being<sup>3</sup>, flow can be helpful in coaching, aimed at unlocking a person's potential to maximize their own performance.<sup>4</sup> This feeling of effortless creativity and absolute focus is a much-desired state that could enable coaches to create

extraordinary pathways to progress their clients' goals. Coaches often see coaching as a vocation<sup>5</sup>, a cause larger than themselves to dedicate to and attaining flow in the process could foster an environment where both the client and the coach can thrive, innovate, and surpass conventional boundaries of success.

Flow, though named in the 20th century, is an age-old concept deeply rooted in history, manifested through time-honoured practices such as yoga and martial arts, as well as universally embraced activities such as sports, performing arts and music. Its essence, as revealed in Csikszentmihalyi's pioneering research, is a blend of preconditions, experiences, and outcomes. His nine key factors (Figure 1), although refined and reclassified<sup>6</sup> over time, still capture its complex, subjective nature, often blurring the boundaries between triggers and experiences.

**Figure 1: Core Components of Flow** (based on Csikszentmihalyi, 1990)

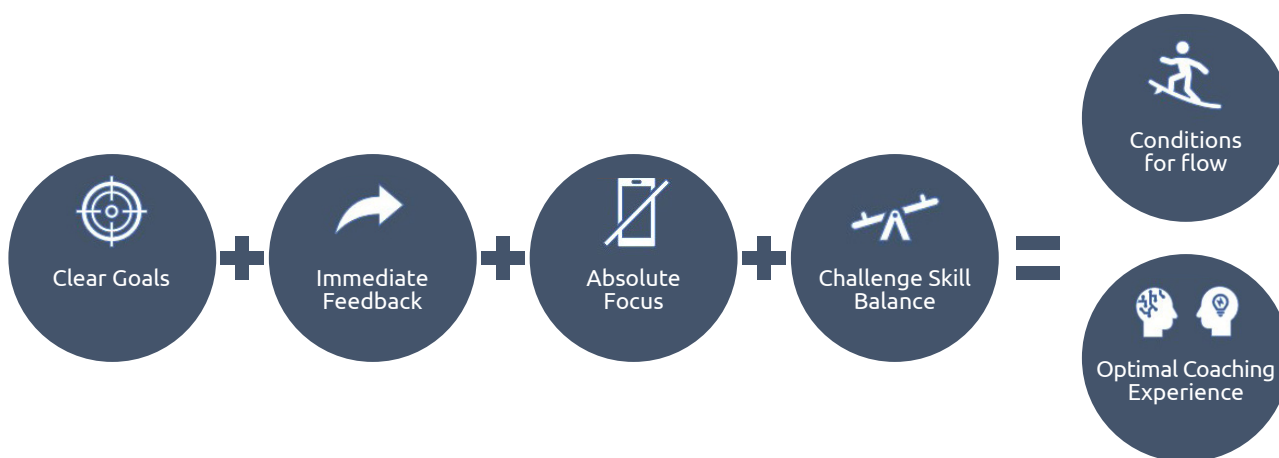


## THE PARALLEL WITH COACHING

Herein lies a striking parallel with the realm of coaching. Like flow, coaching hinges on clear, defined goals. Research has shown that specific and challenging goals enhance performance<sup>7</sup> and modern coaching models integrate goal setting<sup>8</sup>. Both flow and coaching also emphasize immediate feedback. In flow, this real-time, almost instantaneous feedback loop enables a seamless engagement in the task at hand, while in coaching, feedback is crucial for guiding the coaching process, responding to the client's in-the-moment needs and continuous improvement<sup>9</sup>. Coaching feedback can be viewed from two perspectives which are part of the ethics and standards of coaching professional bodies: on listening actively<sup>10,11</sup> and noticing the client's verbal and non-verbal cues to raise awareness. To achieve this level of presence, coaches need to manage distractions and enable total absorption in the client during coaching.

Finally, the challenge-skill balance, a pre-requisite for flow, aligns closely with coaching. Coaches are taught in training and expected through the code of ethics from professional bodies, to continually develop their skills. This continuous professional development enables them to stretch themselves, which creates ideal conditions for flow. This level of alignment between the characteristics of flow and coaching can be depicted as an equation where a combination of clear goals, immediate feedback, absolute focus, and the right challenge-skill balance can create conditions for flow while also delivering an optimal coaching experience (Figure 2). Research<sup>12</sup> connects flow with positive development, high functioning, and engagement, suggesting that being in flow can enhance the impact and experience of coaching.

Figure 2: Flow-Coaching Equation



## STRATEGIES TO MAXIMISE FLOW OPPORTUNITIES

In theory, coaches should regularly experience optimal flow in their work, yet achieving this consistently in practice is more challenging. Kotler's study<sup>13</sup> on sports suggests that flow follows a cycle, rooted in our brain's functioning. Initially, it involves the pre-frontal cortex—our centre for executive functions, also known as part of 'system 2'<sup>14</sup>. This area is responsible for complex cognitive tasks. However, during flow, parts of the pre-frontal cortex experience 'transient hypofrontality',<sup>15</sup> essentially quietening down. This shift allows us to transition to 'system 1',<sup>16</sup> our brain's more instinctive and automatic mode. In this state, we respond more instinctively to activities, pushing our limits effortlessly. Understanding and facilitating this cognitive transition can be key for coaches seeking to harness flow.

Flow is recognised as a highly subjective experience, corroborated in recent neuroscientific studies<sup>17</sup> and therefore the flow cycle needs to be adjusted to the individual personalities, coaching activity, and environment. It is also worth acknowledging that different coaches may have different approaches to achieving flow based on their own style and personality. Coaches can learn from how athletes plan their training, wellbeing and recovery and undertake a similar process to create conditions for flow more often which can be divided into habits and actions prior to, during and after the coaching session.

*Coaches can learn from how athletes plan their training, wellbeing and recovery and undertake a similar process to create conditions for flow*

## PRIOR TO THE COACHING SESSION

Preparation is crucial. As recommended by the code of practice of most coaching bodies, coaches should engage in continuous personal development, stretching themselves and creating a foundation for flow. Undertaking regular reflection and learning to evolve their practice enables the coach to hold tools lightly, an essential prerequisite to being spontaneous with their clients.

The role of sleep, nutrition and recovery is well-understood<sup>18</sup> to be able to perform at one's best in most professions and self-care in coaching<sup>19</sup> is no longer viewed as a luxury. Coaches need to be emotionally and physically well-resourced to address the needs of their clients adequately by having a clear plan for a bespoke self-care routine, including mental wellbeing.

Finally, to achieve absolute focus, one must adeptly manage the pervasive digital and real-world distractions of our modern era. This entails rigorous deactivation of all notifications, spanning mobile devices, emails, and chats to gain control over potential disturbances. Such interruptions undermine presence and efficacy of both the state of flow and coaching process<sup>20</sup>. This necessitates a mutual agreement and contracting with the client, as any distractions on the client's side can likewise undermine the coaching session. Additionally, the coach should engage in pre-session introspection, effectively disentangling from prior activities to ensure complete and undivided presence. A regular practice of mindfulness could be an excellent resource, fortifying the coach's ability to maintain unwavering focus.

## DURING THE COACHING SESSION

The first step is to evaluate and adjust the setup, environment, and mindset for both the coach and the client to be fully present. Clear goal setting at the start of the session is critical. Regular check-ins on these goals provide immediate feedback on progress. Honing skills to pay attention to feedback in-the-moment is a key coach competence. Being able to listen to and observe verbal and non-verbal cues to raise awareness in the client is vital to experiencing flow and effective coaching. Planning for an effortless signal that indicates the time spent (e.g. an easily visible clock) can reduce the anxiety of managing the coaching process to time and safeguard against any distortions created by flow.

## AFTER THE COACHING SESSION

Flow generates a cocktail of feel-good hormones, requiring active recovery to reset the neural load. Planning for recovery in the physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual<sup>21</sup> domains is essential. Physical activities, involving moving, stretching and resting the body, need to be combined with rest from constantly looking at screens. Emotional recovery needs to be evaluated against individual needs. For example, introverts may need quiet reflection time to regain emotional energy, while extroverts may get this through social connections. Mental recovery is enabled through expressing yourself creatively in diverse ways and spiritual recovery needs activities aligned with values and sense of purpose. Paying attention to each of these domains to thoughtfully recoup your energy will contribute to a comprehensive recovery which is essential to experiencing the flow state more regularly.

## FLOW IS CLOSER THAN YOU THINK

Flow provides an optimal experience that can make the coaching partnership more effective and impactful. Given the alignment between flow and coaching, coaches don't have to deviate much from their normal patterns to achieve this optimal experience. They can harness this experience more often by planning and preparing themselves, their clients, and the environment to create the right conditions for flow. Flow, like happiness, cannot be forced – but one can create the right conditions for it to ensue<sup>22</sup>. By adopting the strategies outlined, coaches can create an environment that elevates the coaching experience for their clients and also fosters their own growth and wellbeing. Coaches are encouraged to experiment with these techniques to move beyond conventional boundaries, push the limits of potential, and unlock new horizons of achievement and satisfaction for both coach and client.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Priya Hunt is an executive coach and facilitator with 30 years of corporate leadership experience in diverse sectors like Airlines, Utilities and Healthcare. Trained in Indian classical dance and yoga, she's pursuing her PhD at Henley Business School, focusing on psychological flow in today's work environment. Priya's clientele spans global leaders across multiple industries, encompassing private, public, and non-profit sectors.

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