

The Power of Now

As if we had a teenager in the family, we have grown so attached to our old car that we are reluctant to let her go, even though she is becoming increasingly costly. She's not keen on moving either and we couldn't get her to start recently. We enlisted the help of a friend with a keen interest in electrical mechanics and two men spent one hot afternoon labouring to fix her. Only a spoilsport would have suggested calling out a professional mechanic. There is a hard and an easy way of doing everything.

In business, we know the hard way very well. It results in long working hours, punishing travel schedules, and sleep and food deprivation. It is often paid for at a high personal cost of damaged bodies and neglected relationships at home.

Fortunately, we also know occasions when our experience of work is quite different – when everything is going our way, we achieve results without even trying, and we seem unstoppable. Such peak experiences absorb us so fully, we almost lose track of time. So, how can we increase moments of “flow” at will and more frequently?

The answer is the key psychological principle of paying full attention to our experience in the “here and now”, of regaining our balance by being fully present in the

moment.

The need to focus and concentrate may seem obvious but we seldom achieve it. We cannot give the best of our creative energies if we direct them elsewhere. Constantly driven by agendas, preoccupied with meeting deadlines, and hitting goals that lead to bigger ones the next year, our attention is usually focused on the next activity. Rewarded for exercising professional judgement, we often act as expert analysts and observers rather than participants engaged in the process. And if we do not enjoy our work, we can find ourselves looking forwards or backwards to the pleasure of weekends or holidays, or caught up in unproductive criticism of events and colleagues.

To be successful, like athletes we need to combine both present and future time frames well. Focusing on the small task immediately at hand removes concern about the uncertainty of success, while the attraction of our long-term goals maintains our motivation.

When we are present, we are more aware of the range of possibilities and options available to us, leading to greater flexibility and confidence. When we leave off control, we allow factors to emerge in situations and people that we may not have anticipated, and it is easier to correct our course.

According to leading psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi¹, a circular causality exists between our intention and attention – when we are fully absorbed we filter out everything that is irrelevant to our goal, as we develop in our complexity and skills to achieve it. We also become more sensitive to our body's feedback and innate intelligence. In his “Inner Coach” books, Timothy Gallwey² recommends “letting go”, eliminating the mind's critical voice, and trusting our ability to act effectively automatically.

It is possible to increase opportunities for “flow” in our work by

- Paying full attention to the sensory detail of what we are observing and experiencing;
- Increasing self awareness and monitoring our thoughts for usefulness or hindrance;
- Suspending judgement we have about ourselves, others or the process;
- Steering clear of concerns or excitement about the future, which has not yet happened, or the past, which is not recoverable;
- Doing this in both pleasant and unpleasant circumstances.

Some large corporations have reaped huge benefits when their employees have regained focus in the moment. In recent years, ANZ Bank in

How to Increase Moments of “Flow”

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- Monitor thoughts for usefulness or hindrance
- Steer clear of thinking about the future or the past

Australia has undertaken a major transformation programme, which has achieved a sea change in company values and unprecedented levels of customer and employee satisfaction.

Supported by McKinsey & Company, it included a personal development programme for employees. An unanticipated result was quiet rooms that appeared on the bank's premises because staff learned the value of practising meditation.

The outstanding success of the ANZ change programme demonstrates that the power of now is sometimes the missing tool needed by individuals in organisations that want to keep motoring, maturing and moving on.

¹Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi “Flow—The Psychology of Optimal Experience” ²W Timothy Gallwey “The Inner Game of Work”