



## Ideaspark podcast on the Flow state

Hullo, my name is Priya Hunt, and I am an executive coach whose mission is to inspire leaders like you to thrive and create a bigger impact. Welcome to Ideasparks, a short podcast to spark some ideas in you about a topic related to executive coaching and leadership. So, get your pen and paper out and let's begin. Today's topic is an introduction to the flow state.

I am absolutely fascinated by the flow state and doing research on the subject. This podcast has been recorded at the start of my research – so it will be interesting to see how my thinking evolves in the future. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, the American-Hungarian psychologist who's called the father of flow, describes this as the optimal experience, the alignment of intention and consciousness. He says that when all a person's relevant skills are needed to cope with the challenge of a situation, that person's attention is completely absorbed by the activity.

To illustrate this, let's look at a story from the Indian epic, Mahabharata, about Arjuna, the best archer in the world. Guru Drona was training Arjuna and all the other princes of Hastinapura in archery. He placed a wooden bird on a tree and set the eye of the bird as a target. One by one, he asked each prince to get ready to shoot. But before they did, he asked them a few questions. "Can you see the tree?". Yes, guruji, replied the first prince. The guru told him to set the bow down as he wasn't ready. This kept happening until it was Arjuna's turn. 'Can you see the tree?' 'No guruji' said Arjuna. 'Can you see the branches where the bird is?' 'No guruji' said Arjuna. 'Can you see the bird?' asked the Guru. 'No guruji'. 'So, what can you see?' 'I can only see the eye of the bird'. Then shoot, said Guru Drona. And Arjuna shot, perfectly hitting the target. For people who've heard this story before, they'd think, surely he was lying or exaggerating! But he wasn't, all his attention was completely absorbed by the challenge.

Archery is a great example of an activity that can evoke flow. It has a set of rules, it can be challenging, you need to develop skills to overcome this challenge and you get immediate and regular feedback on how you are doing (e.g. you hit or miss the target). But it is not the only one that can – Csikszentmihalyi talks about how any activity (mental or physical) that exhibits these characteristics can result in flow. For example, when I was young and a professional dancer, I know I have experienced the flow state of being totally absorbed in my dance and unable to realise the time or even my entity as separate from the activity. Most sports provide this opportunity as do things like yoga and even solving the cryptic crossword as my father used to do. When a high challenge meets high skill, flow occurs. Interestingly work can also provide this opportunity and when your work does that, it's a great place to be.



While difficult, everyone can experience flow, however Csikszentmihalyi says being intrinsically motivated by the activity makes it much more likely. What does that mean? This means you're doing the activity for the actual joy of doing it. Arjuna, at a young age, was very intrinsically motivated by archery. There's a myth that one day he was eating his meal in the evening when the wind blew the lights off. He kept eating and realised how his eyes adjusted to the darkness. Immediately he thought about how to apply that to archery and started practicing his craft in the darkness. His aim was to be a great archer for the sake of archery.

But this is not something that is a steady state....it changes and evolves. For example, if you set yourself a challenge and you hone your skill to overcome that challenge and it becomes too easy, then practice could become boring. On the other hand, if you set yourself too high a challenge that you move into the panic zone, then it's unlikely that you'd experience flow. Similarly your intrinsic motivation can change and become extrinsic. As it did in Arjuna's case, especially when he saw Ekalavya, a tribal boy, shoot better than him. His immediate reaction was around how could anyone else, especially a poor tribal boy, be a better archer than him. He was then triggered by jealousy and wanting to be the best. And this led to some questionable consequences and actions by Guru Drona. Extrinsic motivation reduces the chances of your being in flow. Doesn't mean that Arjuna wasn't a good archer when he was extrinsically motivated but unlikely that he would have had the optimal experience of happiness in this state.

The activity that results in flow could be both good or bad, ethical or unethical. For example, gambling or serious gaming can result in flow but there can be question marks about whether these activities help or hinder our development and progress. In the Mahabharata, there's the story of Arjuna's brother Yudhishtra, who was so involved in gambling that he gambled away his kingdom, his brothers and even his wife.

In summary, the flow state is an experience where your consciousness is harmoniously ordered, pursuing whatever they are doing for its own sake. High challenge and high skills enables flow, and it is a constantly evolving state. The flow activity could be good or bad, so it is important that we use our consciousness wisely at the start to make the right choices.

What are the tips that you are taking away from this story? Have you ever experienced flow? Do share in comments as I'd love to know.

## References and further reading

- Csikszentmihalyi, M. (2002). *Flow – The classic work on how to achieve happiness*. London: Rider (Random House Group)