

The Optimal Experience: Achieving Organizational Flow

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Abstract

Is it possible for a non-human entity such as an organization to achieve flow? This is the driving question behind this article. Achieving FLOW has been described as a human experience. In order to achieve FLOW there are certain characteristics that need to be obtained in order to state experiencing the optimal experience. This article looks to introduce and argue that an organization can achieve this optimal experience. Utilizing the characteristics of high-performing organizations (HPOs), employee desires from their employers and FLOW, we make connections of these characteristics using motivational theory. Recommendations are also presented for the future.

Keywords: Flow, High performing organizations, Organizational motivation, Characteristics, Fortune 500 companies

Csikszentmihalyi's flow is a vastly known and discussed subject of positive psychology over the years. It is known worldwide as a human experience and has been thought of as such until now. In the midst of my duties as a Program Director at a small nonprofit organization, I began to reflect, after several months of putting the programs on the right track, on this question: "Can an entity such as an organization achieve this concept of flow and if so how long does it take to achieve optimal flow? Again, research discusses flow as a primarily human experience and has not been attributed to a whole organization. Schneider's¹² article on "Organizational Behavior" poses the question "... how does one study a whole organization when we have enough difficulty studying individuals? (p. 587) Throughout their discussions the author and his co-author, began to explore this question by attributing the characteristics of a high-performing organization to motivation theory and linking them to the attainment of flow by the entity. Since OB is concerned primarily with the human element of operations, can the correlation of employee, organizational, and environmental factors have a direct impact on an organization seeking to achieve flow?

Let's begin with exploring high performing organizations (HPOs). The literature on HPOs suggests that when you are in an HPO, you notice the difference right away. There is a sort of energy within that alerts you to being in a place that is high achieving. One way you are aware is that employees are intrinsically motivated, engaged and employee behavior is aligned with core values. Performance measures will show that this propels the organization forward. But, how can we define what a HPO is? Waal¹⁴ presented some common themes that can be used to help create a working definition of an HPO. These themes are as follows:

- Sustained growth, over a long period of time, which is better than the performance of its peer groups
- Ability to adapt and react quickly to changes
- The strategy, structure, processes and people are aligned throughout the organization
- Focuses on continuously improving and reinventing its core capabilities
- Spends much effort on improving working conditions and development opportunities of its workforce

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Based on these themes, de Waal's definition of an HPO is "an organization that achieves financial and non-financial results that are better than those of its peer group over a period of time of at least five to ten years." Kim⁸ goes a step further to elaborate by adding, "by being able to adapt well to changes and react on these quickly, by managing for the long term, by setting up an integrated and aligned management structure, by continuously improving its core capabilities, and by truly treating the employees as its main asset." With these working definitions we can now view the characteristics which make up an HPO.

There are 10 attributes of HPOs that have been identified within several pieces of literature. Beginning with *empowerment*, HPOs typically allow employees the freedom to decide and act within the clearly established boundaries and constraints. Lipman¹⁸ explains, "High-performing organizations excel in providing "open, supportive cultures that encourage new ideas and empower staff." Second, *establishing core values* for the organization is key to bring the organization together on one accord. Third, being *performance focused* is necessary to stimulate people to achieve highly within the organization. Although enforcing performance driven behavior is necessary, celebrating successes balances out that need to be performance focused. Including rewards and recognition such as compensation, benefits, etc., "increasingly satisfies" employees. According to Lipman,¹⁸ *communication, transparency, openness and trust* is needed to make employees feel safe and secure in their positions. Kim (2014) explains that "a shared understanding, openly sharing information and fostering informality...encourage[s] open and honest debate." Fifth on the list is establishing a *vision and direction* for the organization to move toward. Organizational alignment with the vision assists in providing employees an understanding of what it is collectively striving for. Sixth, *agility* in an organization allows it to change and grow. The ability to embrace change and be flexible enough to adapt to the environment is ultimately a good trait to strive for. Along the lines of agility in an organization, *innovation* plays a major role in an HPO which puts it seventh on the list. New ideas can move throughout the organization encouraging creativity among its employees. Another important characteristic is that of *services provided to customers and relationships* formed internally and externally. Organizations are judged by the services which they provide, so it is important to form those relationships with manufacturers as well as consumers alike. *Career development* also seems to be an important factor in HPOs. According to Lipman,¹⁸ "Employees in the high-performing companies were increasingly pleased with the "emphasis on valuing and fostering talent, and the availability of long-term career opportunities and training." Career development can have a direct impact on employee motivation as well as the last characteristic, *leadership*.

Leadership's ability to communicate and motivate employees is a critical component of an HPO. According to Smith,¹³ "positive leadership features the motivational and ethical characteristics and behaviors of leaders that result in positive employee outcomes and increased performance." Bhalla¹ describes leaders as those who think strategically, set the pace, allocate resources, build engagement, drive accountability, and deliver results. At high-performing organizations, leadership must work collaboratively with people at all levels of the organization.

The term *positive leadership* has become synonymous with two forms of leadership: transformational and authentic. Transformational involves influence from a leader that motivates a follower to go beyond what is expected of them. Northouse (2016) defines transformational leadership as "the process whereby a person engages with others and creates a connection that raises the level of motivation and morality in both the leader and follower....Leader is attentive to the needs and motives of follower and tries to help follower reach their fullest potential." Transformational leadership also has some influencing factors such as inspirational motivation. This describes leaders who have high expectations of their followers and motivate them to be part of a shared vision (Northouse, 2016). Avey et al., (2008) defined inspirational motivation as the leader's ability to enthusiastically convey a vision to followers and elicit a desire to perform beyond current levels of satisfaction within individual positions.¹³

Authentic leadership, on the other hand, although a newer style of leadership, is one that employees have reported a great deal of satisfaction with. In essence, leadership "practices what it preaches". They have a genuine desire to serve others, they know themselves and they lead from core values (Northouse, 2016). Authors propose that by developing transparent relationships, authentic leaders encourage employees to become more engaged and committed to the goals of the organization. Jensen and Luthans (2006) corroborated the relationship, finding authentic leadership to be a strong predictor of organizational commitment. These two styles, within positive leadership, have returned favorable results concerning employee job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and positive employee attitudes, all known results of HPOs. Smith et al.¹³ believes that positive leadership characteristics result in positive employee outcomes and increased performance. Generally, OB's leadership focus is on "...attributes of leaders of clearly defined groups [whereas] OB management concentrates on attributes and behaviors of people who manage larger systems where, who and what is being managed is not easily defined."¹² Referring to information presented earlier in the paper, leadership is considered to be "micro-OB" and management is considered to be "macro-OB". I agree with Schneider¹² that perhaps it is time to return to macro-level integration of motivation and OB

leadership/management theory. It is an area that could be explored concerning the connection to organizational flow.

Motivation

Worker motivation is at the foundation of OB. Motivation theories such as expectancy and goal setting theories dominated the research early on and tried to make group motivation a target within management. According to Kanfer, "Motivation is not directly observable. What we observe is a multidimensional stream of behavior and the products of those behaviors."⁷ Motivation theory is powerful when it comes to linking flow to the organization. Author Nancy Leonard proposed five types of motivation that support the linkage of flow in an organization. First is the Intrinsic Process Motivation which states that people engage in project they consider fun and enjoyable. Second is Extrinsic/Instrumental Motivation. These people respond best to direct incentives such as bonuses, benefits, etc. They need to feel that their efforts will yield some kind of material reward and will only sustain efforts in the presence of such opportunities. Third is External Self-Concept. They thrive on public recognition and are sustained by getting positive feedback as to their abilities and contribution. Fourth is Internal Self-Concept. These individuals are driven more by their own perceptions of success, rather than those of others. They do not want to take credit for their contributions publicly, but get satisfaction from knowing they have contributed to success. Finally, there is Goal Internalization People. They are motivated this way to seek satisfaction through the achievement of goals, because of the importance of the goals and not because they desire rewards or public recognition. These people will continue to strive toward a goal as long as they believe in it and judge that there is progress toward success.

These five motivation types provide a basis for the way leadership motivates employees and how employees motivate themselves within an organization. These five kinds of motivation can be grouped into either intrinsic or extrinsic motivation. Defined, intrinsic is the motivation to perform an activity for its own sake in order to experience the pleasure and satisfaction inherent in the activity. After reading several pieces of literature about extrinsic motivation, it can be defined as receiving rewards that are external to the job, i.e., pay, promotion, fringe benefits or tangible awards; or rewards that are administered by someone else. According to self-determination theory, differences in work effort exertion may be explained by the type of work motivation employees are driven by.³ Kanfer points out that "motivation is frequently described in work settings by referring to what a person does (direction), how hard a person works (intensity), and how long a person works (persistence)."⁷ Work-related motivation, whether intrinsic or extrinsic, is important to the success of projects and for the organization as a whole. It serves to direct

and support positive work-related behavior which in turn supports the organization achieving flow.⁵

Flow

Many people have experienced time when they are in control of their actions, experiencing a sense of extreme enjoyment and at the end long to feel that sense of joy again. These kinds of experiences are something that is universal to all humans. This sense of control and extreme enjoyment has been coined "Flow" by Csikszentmihalyi. It has been described as "the state in which a person becomes engaged in what he or she is doing to such an extent that all his attention becomes focused on the task and the rest of the world...no longer attracts attention." (Csikszentmihalyi, 2016) Usually after people experience this state, they feel the desire to repeat the experience again and again. According to Wright, individuals who have been in flow report a feeling of being as one with the movements they are making; they perceive a merging of action and awareness." (2005) Flow has been defined as, "defined it as the holistic sensation that people feel when they act with total involvement...the experience of working at full capacity, with intense engagement and effortless action, where personal skills match required challenges."⁴ Although there is some variation about how many characteristics make up flow, there are some key elements that have been identified by researchers³⁰:

- Complete concentration on the task
- Clarity of goals and reward in mind
- Immediate feedback
- Transformation of time
- The experience is intrinsically rewarding Effortlessness and ease
- There is a balance between challenge and skill
- Actions and awareness are merged, losing self-conscious
- Feeling of control over the task

Combined, these elements provide a comprehensive measure of the optimal experience. It is unclear whether all of the characteristics of flow need to be experienced before it can be stated that flow has occurred, or if certain characteristics are more important than others (Wright, 2005). According to Csikszentmihalyi (2016), the optimal experience is something that we make happen. The pursuit of a goal brings order in awareness and skills match the opportunities for action. The question becomes if we insert the characteristics of an HPO into these flow elements, is it possible for us to recognize that the organization has achieved flow? For example, if *engagement* was inserted for complete *concentration* on the task; *employee satisfaction* for the experience is *intrinsically rewarding*; *motivation* for the balance between *challenge and skills*; and insert a feeling of *organization, operation and processing* for

control over tasks can we identify the organization as achieving flow?

Take into consideration that “the experience of flow has also been frequently reported while engaging in work-related tasks as opposed to leisure activities...given that many of the precursors of flow (such as immediate feedback, commensurate challenges and skills, and clear goals) are more likely to be found in work activities.”⁴ Work flow can be just as fulfilling as flow experienced in other activities. Many of the characteristics of flow are reported as being present in work-related tasks, which can lead to employees feeling a sense of satisfaction which is one of the characteristics of an HPO. In Smith’s article, he pointed out that “Bakker argued that during the experience of flow, one should feel a strong sense of satisfaction and fulfilment simply by performing the respective task. [He also] included the component of enjoyment, related to the sense of extreme satisfaction in performing the task. Smith et al.¹³ also pointed out the assumption that employees who frequently experienced flow at work also experienced strengthened correlation between positive leadership, job satisfaction and organizational commitment as stated earlier. These assumptions can easily be attributed to the idea of organizational flow.

Expanding the concept of organizational flow which has been reported to have spread from an individual to the organization, Glovis’ article gives an example of how organizations have achieved flow and began to measure the experience.

“For example, organizations such as Microsoft, Ericsson, Patagonia, and Toyota have identified flow in the workplace as an optimizer that creates environments satisfying to employees and conducive to increasing high quality and high productivity. Similarly, the Gallup Organization monitors flow by sending an email to 1000 employees each day asking them to rank their level of positive energy on a scale from one to five – flow scores of five assume the organization has been successful in promoting worker enjoyment, and improving productivity, health, and wellness.”⁵

The area of organizational behavior (OB) encompasses many other areas such as psychology, sociology, and management. Can we look at topics within OB such as “... individual (motivation, job attitude), group and organization (groups, leadership, climate and culture), and productivity and utility”¹² to begin to formulate a hypothesis about how an organization achieves flow? If we study the cause and effect relationship of the characteristics of HPOs, motivation theory and the link to flow elements, then perhaps we can begin to understand how an organization might achieve flow.

Application of Flow in the Workplace

Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, which is grounded in motivational theory, provides a framework for forming the argument of organizational flow. As we know Maslow’s pyramid consists of five levels that explain the motivational needs for individuals. This pyramid can also be attributed to the organization as a whole and provide the framework for organizational flow. According to Sadri,¹¹ “Motivated employees work harder, produce higher quality and greater quantities of work, and are more likely to engage in organizational citizenship behaviors....” Due to this kind of motivation, companies are choosing to offer employees other benefits besides salary. Maslow’s hierarchy of needs is a well-known theory of personal motivation and when the organizational workforce is motivated they will be inspired to become creative and more productive.¹¹

Beginning with the physiological needs or basic needs of an individual, organizations provide salary or wages to help fulfill the needs of employee’s physiological needs. Many companies provide benefits such as free or subsidized cafeterias, break rooms with snacks, etc., for employees to satisfy these needs. The next level is the safety need. Many employees need to feel safe not only physically but mentally as well. Here, companies provide health benefits to ease employee sense of security and safety. The third level is the love/belonging needs. Employees looking to establish relationships and utilize social support are more likely to stay with a company if these needs are met. Many companies offer a culture of camaraderie and teamwork as part of their incentive packages. As we will see later, this is one of the listed characteristics of HPOs and Fortune 500 companies. Fourth is esteem needs. Here things like recognition and responsibility play into an employee’s esteem causing them to be motivated.

Finally, self-actualization is the fifth level of Maslow’s hierarchy. At this level, employees look to better themselves and attain self-fulfillment. After looking at Maslow’s hierarchy, we can begin to understand how these five levels of motivation can motivate employees in companies and organizations.

The author was able to research and create a list of characteristics of Fortune 500 companies that describe what employees are looking for in their employer. This list, which is fairly similar to the list of characteristics of HPOs, also provides an overview of what it takes to be on the Fortune 500 list. Below is a chart of 10 random Fortune 500 companies picked from the top 20 and a compiled list of the top 15 characteristics employees want from their employer.

Employee Wants	Wal mart (1)	Apple (3)	Exxon (4)	United Health Group (6)	CVS Health (7)	Ford Motors (10)	Amazon (12)	Verizon (14)	Walgreens (17)	Kroger (18)
Advancement/ professional development	x		x	x	x	x	x	x	x	
Supportive/ strong leader		x	x	x			x			
Recognition	x	x		x	x					
Trust							x		x	
Salary	x	x	x		x	x	x		x	x
Purpose				x					x	
Respect										
Camaraderie	x			x				x	x	
work life balance			x			x			x	x
Clear goals	x									
Communication		x				x	x			
Post-work environ				x	x					
Accountability	x	x					x	x		
Benefits	x	x	x		x	x	x	x	x	x
Technology	x			x		x				

As you can see, this table shows that those employers that are higher on the Fortune 500 list offer more of the characteristics than those who are lower on the list. Although most, if not all, offer salary and benefits, there is one thing that separates employers and that is culture.

According to – several Fortune 500 companies have a reputation of having a good/bad culture at their place of employment. When designing an organization, culture is one of the four main aspects of organizational design. Culture is the link to creating organizational flow. For example, Amazon has a reputation of having a difficult culture for employees. Their culture embraces new employees, but does not support those employees that have stayed with the company. This difficult culture leads to relatively unhappy employees and poor performance measures.²⁸ On the other hand, according to Walmart.com,²² Walmart, which is number 1 on the Fortune 500 list, has a reputation of a highly pleasing culture. Employees are generally happy with their wages, benefits, team-oriented atmosphere, etc. This cultural link shows how the characteristics of HPOs, employees desire, and flow merge together to achieve organizational flow. Company culture that is perceived to be more engaging provides opportunities for these characteristics to emerge and produce higher amounts of productivity. As stated earlier, employees are more likely to engage in organizational citizenship behaviors, which in turn causes higher productivity, hence organizational flow.

Although some are not identically matched up, the

characteristics of flow can be matched up with both the characteristics of HPOs and the list of employee desires for their employers. In comparing the lists, the author found several connections throughout. In HPOs a set of core values is established along with vision and direction. This can be linked to flow's characteristic of clarity of goals and a sense of purpose. All of these characteristics provide the starting point of organizational flow. This vision, goals and purpose lead to cooperation and communication among the leadership who provide strong, supportive relationships and feedback to employees. This support and balance helps to motivate employees within the organization and a sense of time can be distorted because of the focus and control over the tasks. Motivated employees are more trusting of their employers, are empowered to contribute and engage in the culture of the organization, also known as camaraderie. Team work produces "synergy" which makes them more efficient and creative, thus a win-win situation for everyone involved. Sadri¹¹ says motivated and empowered employees want to develop themselves and their departments, becoming intrinsically rewarded, which leads to increased knowledge and the agility of the organization to change with environment. Finally, this increased knowledge and satisfaction merge with increased productivity and performance (action and awareness) to produce organizational flow.

We can even connect these characteristics to Maslow's hierarchy of needs. By grouping them together into

categories, it is easily seen how an organization can achieve flow. The first group on Maslow's pyramid is for basic needs. The basic needs of the organization, so that it can survive, must always be met. Next, it moves into psychological needs. How can the organization attend to the needs of its employees, hence the needs for benefits and perks to motivate and keep employees happy? According to Sadri, work-life balance is considered a physiological need. Employees must find a balance between work and their own interest to remain motivated and it is becoming an increasingly important part of employee's decision to work with a company.¹¹ Finally, the top part of the pyramid is self-fulfillment needs.

How can the organization continue to learn and adapt to the ever-changing environment of business? By going through this cycle of sorts and organization can achieve flow.

Recommendations

In the midst of writing this article, my colleague and I thought about conducting an experiment to measure flow within organizations. Although we did not have the time it would take to commit to something of this magnitude, we would recommend others to conduct the experiment and publish the results. We would like to prove that flow can be achieved by organizations or departments, beginning with a higher education institution or small organization, and be applied to real-world situations. This achievement can be used to have an organization or department perform at an optimal level. The experiment would involve faculty and staff filling out the questionnaire. It may be possible to develop a procedure and questions specific to departmental experiences utilizing the Experience Sampling Method (ESM). This measurement tool is utilized by recording the experiences according to the questions at random times during the day. (Csikszentmihalyi, 2014) Once the experiment is completed, the data will be analyzed, and a comparison will be made to see which departments or organizations have flow and which do not. There are several other kinds of measurement tools that can be used in place of the ESM. The goal of this experiment is to prove that flow is something that is not just a human experience, but something that can be achieved by a non-human entity such as an organization or department. It would be necessary to show that the components that create flow also exist in an organization or department, thereby allowing the organization to achieve flow.

We feel that if the characteristics above can be utilized along with the experiment, it will be easy to prove that flow is not only a human experience, but also an organizational experience as well.

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