

Book Review

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Good Business: Leadership, Flow, and the Making of Meaning By Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (2004)

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Csikszentmihalyi (2004) is a book that examines the principle of “flow,” what the experience of flow can mean to an organization, and how leadership can encourage flow experiences in their organization. While this book is directed primarily at business organizations, it is applicable to one of education’s greatest challenges: finding ways to help students discover and maintain the motivation that is required to succeed academically. By understanding the concept of “flow” and how it is reached, instructors can help students tap into that experience in their learning environment, thereby greatly increasing the likelihood that students will become internally motivated and equipped to succeed.

Csikszentmihalyi first published his research examining the psychological concept of “flow” or “being in the zone” in his 1990 book *Flow: The psychology of optimal experience*. He further explains this concept in *Good Business*. Csikszentmihalyi describes flow as completely focused motivation. The identifying aspect of such an experience is that an individual is completely and solely focused on the activity itself. The individual is not aware

of him or herself, surroundings, emotions, or even basic survival instincts, such as the need to sleep or hunger.

Csikszentmihalyi lists eight components that are necessary in an environment in order for flow to become part of an individual's experience:

- Goals are clear
- Feedback is immediate
- There is a balance between opportunity and capacity
- This allows concentration to deepen
- The present is what matters
- Control is not an issue (meaning the individual feels a strong sense of control in the situation)
- The sense of time is altered
- There is a loss of ego

In considering the above list, this reviewer was put in mind of a remark she once heard attributed to football great, Joe Namath. Namath stated that when he played at his personal best, he was not playing the game, the game was playing him. It is this feeling of effortless achievement that Csikszentmihalyi highlights when he states that those who experience flow "...claim that it is equally true that they never worked a day in their lives as it is to say that they worked every minute of their lives. They are at their jobs while they are in the shower, while driving the car, while making spaghetti sauce; their minds are constantly struggling with problems, turning them around, examining them from new angles. But to them, this intense activity feels as effortless as breathing" (pg 89).

The author points out, though, that modern workplaces do not lend themselves to flow experiences. He states that few jobs have clear goals or adequate and timely feedback. He also contends that skill levels of workers are not well matched to the work that needs to be done, and that most workers feel very little control over their work and that time rhythms are externally imposed instead of being in tune with the worker's time rhythms. He believes as well that consumer culture has devalued the entire concept of work or vocation, and that young people are biased against enjoying work long before it is a reality in their lives.

One of the wonderful things about being in the classroom, though, is the academic freedom to adjust the learning environment in to a degree that may not be possible in other situations. Csikszentmihalyi, in addition to recommending the eight components listed above, also suggests that those in the position of leadership, i.e. the instructor, need to understand vision or goals as an "expression of a way of being that does not exist yet; it is the anticipation of a future state..." (pg. 147). He goes on to claim that vision leads an evolution through an input of positive energy from all of the environment's resources. In other words, classmates, instructor, learning materials, activities, and discussions all come together to build an environment that invites free exchange and truly engrossed - not just engaged - activity and interaction. In order for students to feel unguarded enough to allow themselves to experience "flow" in the classroom, they must feel safe, valued, and vested. Without a doubt, this is what every instructor aims for each day that they teach, yet these outcomes can seem illusive in the best of learning situations. By reviewing syllabi, course materials, and perhaps pre-existing attitudes, instructors can use the eight components of

flow as guideposts to build a learning environment that is conducive to and unique for the participants and the goals of each course experience.

Although recommended, this book is not an easy read; the material is dense. It is not a book for those who want to skim some bullet points and gain a few hints.

Csikszentmihalyi's work has been cited and made familiar by popular authors, such as Daniel Pink, in his 2009 book, *Drive: The surprising truth about what motivates us*. If limited on time, Pink's *Drive* might be a better place to start. The concepts are, however, very valuable, and applicable to all areas of an individual's life. The concept of flow and being present in the moment can add a richness to all of life's experiences, not just the classroom or workplace. The concept can help an instructor create a more meaningful teaching and learning culture for his or her whole institution and community.

References

Csikszentmihalyi, Mihaly. 2004. *Good business: Leadership, flow, and the making of meaning*. New York: Penguin books.