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Change in Flow: How Critical Incidents Transform Organisations

Editors: Nancy Wallis and Maria Spindler

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Arousing Flow Using Critical Incidents: Cultivating Creativity for Transformative Work in the Second-person Space

Abstract

In this article we examine second-person interactions between coworkers in a creative pair, partnered for the task of co-authoring this journal article. In these interactions, we identify critical incidents that aroused states of flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 2014) that cultivated creativity in the work and relational intimacy in the partnership. We describe disciplined, second-person practices of inquiry, critical reflection, and play that when undertaken deliberately or permitted spontaneously, supported and initiated optimal experiences of flow. In addition, we distinguish those practice outcomes that contributed to article content, the task, as well as increased satisfaction in working together. We offer this article as a contribution to the literature on the theory and practice of flow from the second-person perspective and its application for creative process in organizations and society.

Keywords: Flow, Creativity, Innovation, Second-person Perspective, Critical Reflection, Organizational Transformation, Critical Incidents

1 Introduction

Much has been published about first-person, individual experiences of flow as well as third-person, social experiences of flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 2014a; 2014b; 2014c; Walker, 2010). In these works, the ancillary organizational benefits of individuals experiencing states of flow individually and together have been identified. Optimal flow experiences according to Csikszentmihalyi (2014a, 2014b, 2014c) may initiate creativity and creative process, increase joy and play, enhance ethics, bring meaning to leadership activities, and encourage innovation and invention, all of which can be shown to serve

organizational purposes across professional sectors. Second-person, interpersonal experiences of flow that transpire in the shared experiences of pairings and smaller teams have not been so prominently explored. And yet, many of the significant difficulties, creative opportunities and adaptive challenges we, as coauthors, have faced personally and professionally and which exist globally begin or undertake their life cycle within these second-person interactions. We both have the desire to work creatively and innovatively to complete our tasks, while experiencing more joy and meaning while doing so. This personal desire compels our professional and academic efforts in this article, to walk the bridge between flow theory and practice and back again, as scholar-practitioners in the context of our working pair.

If entering experiences of flow together promotes overall effectiveness in accomplishing the organization's goals, as well as increases our feelings of joy and meaning in the process, how do we activate or accommodate for them? Pragmatically, what practices or shared activities foster the conditions for optimal flow experiences that may lead to joyful creativity and meaningful innovation to serve the organization and the established task? To accomplish this task, we implemented the second-person practices of creating norms, critical reflection and engaging in play while examining the impact of these practices on our second-person space. We made interpretations about their relationship to the completion of the task and recorded observations about the relational and personal effects of carrying out our co-work in this manner.

2 The Second-person Space Between

In this article we examine our own second-person interactions between us as coworkers in a creative pair, or that which happens in the "space between" partners that belongs to neither of them individually but instead to the "us" of the partnership, a shared relational entity. Our use of the term *second-person* reflects Torbert's first-, second- and third-person perspectives in the practice of Action Inquiry (Torbert & Associates, 2004). In this

theoretical framework, *first-person* describes interpersonal interaction from the individual perspective, undergirded by the value-explicit aim of integrity, striving to bring alignment between our espoused and enacted values. According to Torbert, *second-person* identifies the shared perspective on interaction with an "other" or between us and others supported by the explicit value of mutuality. Second-person perspective is expressed in the commitment to sharing investment, power, strategy, communication and reflection on the dynamics between us, in contrast to those that are simply amongst us. This second-person perspective on interaction is by its very nature and value commitment a call for collaborative ways of creating, deciding and conversing. *Third-person* perspective is the dispassionate organizational or systems level viewpoint on interaction that assumes the explicit value and stated purpose of sustainability of the learning achieved. The application of this learning ideally results in organizing structures, policies, and systems capable of continuing desired outcomes over time in a manner that benefits the organization. The concept of *shared leadership* (Pearce & Conger, 2003) as "the dynamic, interactive influence process among individuals in groups for which the objective is to lead one another to the achievement of group or organizational goals" (p. 1) may be helpful for understanding our second-person perspective in relation to our task.

3 Key Terms

The term *flow* represents the concept from positive psychology championed by Csikszentmihalyi (2014b). The theory of flow describes people's feelings of intense engagement while participating in activities where they perceive that a high challenge exists, and simultaneously perceive that their skill may meet the challenge. These habitual experiences and the resulting joy lead to the task becoming an autotelic activity, or a self-motivating pursuit undertaken for its own sake. Csikszentmihalyi derived the concept of a flow state from his study of individuals participating in a myriad of personal and professional activities including school, work, and the arts. Csikszentmihalyi identifies flow as the response to unambiguous and immediate feedback,

which propels the individual through a continuous loop, whereby the person may lose self-consciousness to a point where their vulnerable "ego" disappears. Time becomes distorted, as hours may seem like minutes. Csikszentmihalyi used the term "flow" because the participants used it to describe how it felt to be in an optimal experience. Csikszentmihalyi identifies nine characteristics of flow states; goals are clear, feedback is immediate, skills match challenges, concentration is deep, problems are forgotten, control is possible, self-consciousness disappears, sense of time is altered, the experience becomes autotelic (2014b).

In this article we identify *critical incidents* as events that intervene in or interrupt working inertia, that are significant enough to transform the perspective held about or action upon the task at hand. We were able to identify critical incidents as opportunities for us to balance perceived levels of challenge and skill bringing us closer to entering into a flow state. Those instances, meeting most if not all of Csikszentmihalyi's (2014b) nine defining characteristics of flow advanced our thinking, cultivated our creativity and enjoyment of the endeavor. Disciplined, though not always scheduled, second-person practices such as critical reflection, play, cultivating empathy and vulnerability, creating norms, valuing conflict, defining boundaries, suspending the task, embracing spontaneity, allowing for rabbit holes, and sharing meals, allowed us to regularly move toward a state of flow and into a realm of innovative and creative imagination. For example, by virtue of our engagement with intentional perspective-taking and disciplined inquiry practice, our working conversations were punctuated by experiences of flow amidst a conventional instance of work and interaction. We identify these punctuations as critical incidents that created opportunities for flow in our work together and often constructively transformed our ability to access creativity and innovate within our partnership. Similarly, those engaged in second-person work inside of organizations may begin identifying as critical incidents, those events that serve to disrupt the existing processes. Further, individuals engaged in this work may recognize these critical incidents as

having the potential to catalyze an organizational transformation from their current state to an innovative organization.

While working, we identified and attended to the anxiety related to the various challenges incurred when writing (e.g. the deadline, saving face, finding agreement). For example, during a synchronous discussion proposing the idea of writing the article together, we both found moments to appreciate one another's strengths and insights to establish a more informal rapport. Such discourse led to the development of the second-person space which would later allow for entry into a flow state. This development included a growing perception of relational intimacy which allowed for more effective and implicit communication, shifting the focus of work from task completion to an autotelic activity. Though the task and the impending deadline remained empirically rigid, our shared perception of our skill and the challenge altered to reflect an increase in confidence. This transparent and disciplined attention to perspective changes led to an overall decrease in anxiety, thereby moving us closer to a flow state. This critical incident also increased, through our proficiency with second-person practices, our relational intimacy and joy, and thus the likelihood of our entering into flow, which allowed for the emergence of creativity.

We focused on the learning process located in the shared, *second-person space* "between" us while attending to our task. Second-person space identifies the shared reality that comes into being at the intersection of two subjective worlds, the dynamic character of the external interaction of two internal worlds (Yu, 2013). This symbolic space is where intimacy was cultivated and trust was established, creating a holding environment that provided emotional safety for encouraging intellectual risk-taking. We intentionally privileged the shared process (the how) of learning over the task (the what), though more cumbersome and time consuming. This commitment to shared practices and purpose (the why) constructed a second-person space where implicit communication was more clearly understood, immediate feedback served to remove self-consciousness, and we encouraged each other to take innovative steps, even risking failure, as we moved toward our goal". This

cycle of connection between perceived intimacy, implicit communication, immediate feedback, flow occurrences and the resultant experience of joy in relation to the task can be applied to second-person spaces inside organizations seeking increased creativity and innovation from embedded partnerships and teams.

4 Creativity and Innovation

Organizations often express a desire for or commitment to employee *creativity* (the process of seeing and solving in new ways) and *innovation* (the action of producing something new), as an integral component of their organizational sustainability or survival. For example, in an organizational culture that maintains a disposition of valuing the status quo (existing thinking and existing product), creativity (new thinking) and innovation (new product) may be perceived as rebellion or opposition to established patterns of thinking or technologies. Oftentimes, forces within the organization resist creative, innovative or revolutionary behavior in unintentional or unconscious ways (Senge, 1990). An employee who wishes to further develop an idea by reaching across institutional functions may also "know" that working outside of their organizational silo violates recognized norms in the institution (Schein, 1992). An institution may espouse values of creativity and innovation, but if their organizational culture is either unable to or ill equipped to enact this desire, they may even actively inhibit the aspiration.

We assert that an organization's willingness to invite an intentional and appropriate standard of permissiveness for divergent and sometimes contradictory thought, may initiate organizational transformation. This type of productive organizational disruption in a second-person space will allow organizations to transform their resistance to change, to a culture of creativity and innovation. Organizations, pairs, and individuals seeking their own sustainability might assume an orientation toward innovation and creativity that actively allows for rabbit holes – changes in topic mid-conversation or tangents that emerge during focused interactions – to lead them toward

solutions and development. Those who perceive that the creative lifecycle is an evolutionary and at times revolutionary one might openly commit not only to permitting these deviations but also to purposefully anticipating and recognizing their emergence. In our roles as co-authors we held an intentionally positive and value-explicit orientation to such creative, evolutionary phenomena. In our communication, we allowed each other individually and the pair as a whole to entertain incidental and indirect departures from task or agenda where it existed following up with reflection when the exploration organically decelerated.

Especially for the stated theme of this edition of the journal, transformation in organizations, it befits our purposes to link the desire to initiate states of flow that allow for creative process, to larger organizational purpose. Approaching a working partnership with this in mind may unleash states of flow and open up opportunities for creativity and innovation relative to the task. In co-authoring, we were open to experiencing flow, trusting that they might allow us to create (this article) more meaningfully, freely and joyfully. Learning to care for one another well and increasing relational intimacy made space for creative process and pushed existing thought to derive more innovative product. The increased relational intimacy encouraged flow by allowing our second-person space management to become unselfconscious, allowing us to focus uninterrupted on the task at hand. Intentionally inviting flow states may support organizational transformation – or the point to which previously implemented innovation becomes ubiquitous.

5 Disciplined Inquiry and Reflective Practice

As scholar-practitioners seeking forms of reliability and trustworthiness, we offer our experience as a case study for the premise of the article. We began with the shared practice of "interrogating the task," by having an unstructured but disciplined inquiry conversation about what a working relationship around this topic might be. Later, following the initial decision to co-author this article, we agreed to experiment with the concepts by translating them into existing or original practices during our task. We set out to write

about what we would discover, and reflected on that conversation as a critical incident already occurring to transform and shape our agreed upon task, and our relationship. Through this intentional and open reflection, we could use the nine characteristics (see Figure 1) to identify moments of flow state already occurring without being named in real time. Moments when the circumstances provided for exceptionally clear, mutual, free thinking that allowed our work to progress. This practice of reviewing our work and play together generally followed the Universal Intellectual Standards for critical thinking: clarity, accuracy, precision, relevance, depth, breadth, logic, fairness (Paul & Elder, 2010). These intellectual standards allowed our reflective sessions to delve deeper into our interactions, giving way to more open forms of working creatively and the formation of more complex, innovative connections.

The reflective sessions did not just offer the opportunity to reassess experience, but also reframed our orientation to perceiving, knowing, feeling, and acting (Mezirow, 1990; Schon, 1983). This type of reflection, critical reflection, leads to "by far the most significant learning in adulthood" (Mezirow, 1990, p 13). Such critical reflection is often only possible in the second-person space. We experimented with questioning techniques associated with the intellectual standards to gain a deeper, clearer, and broader perspective of the other, the theory, the application and ourselves.

6 Playful Practice

Even in a more formal context, the process of creativity may be enhanced by irregular methods (e.g. arts, physical activity) and may initiate movement towards a flow state. Engaging in play can bring about a critical incident that may reduce anxiety or stoke the creative fire that breaks boredom, bringing about a flow state (see Figure 1). Challenging each other, losing oneself in the action, and focusing on the space that is the organization provides opportunity for flow. These cycles of playing and reflecting to serve our co-authorship at times become play for play's sake and may open up opportunities

for flow that will inadvertently or upon reflection serve our organizational task. With this understanding we allowed and often invited playful practices with one another, to later reflect critically on the effects. We began by acknowledging and affirming the continuation of our own individual playful practices like yoga, martial arts, spiritual disciplines, and running, reflecting together on them for insight or leveraging them to promote flow states. In addition, over the course of our pairing we visited an art museum, viewed a film, shared meals, wrote poetry, and discussed our historical and current family circumstances. The term "play" customarily carries an overtly saccharine connotation, but we also considered our challenging conversations and interactions as play. One might consider a sparring match as a play activity where the deep satisfaction of achievement emerges from the seemingly combative exchange. The challenging (or relaxing) practices of play that allowed us to traverse the flow model (Figure 1) included determining the scope of a task, managing boundaries, ongoing inquiry about expectations and goals, division of labor and duties, handling conflict, exploring feedback decorum, expressing what is "off limits", noticing the use of humor, clarifying understanding, uncovering deeper unconscious dynamics, and more.
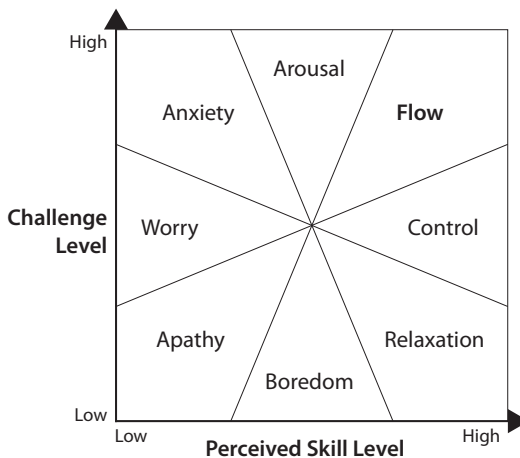

Figure 1: The FLOW Model Accessed from www.mindtools.com/ pages/article/flow-model.htm

Some practices were purposefully constructed, scheduled and explicitly oriented toward the shared task, while others occurred when convenient through asynchronous means, often using mobile devices. The virtual space was an invaluable tool for our partnership. Tools like video calling, social media, and Google Docs provided the space for play, reflection and the work required to craft this product successfully together. The line between play and production became purposely blurred even when applied to the premium limited resource of synchronous discourse. Established goals and periods of reflection paved the way for instances of flow, which both initiated as well as resulted in this product. Goals and agenda items were integral for completing our play, reflection and work tasks, though we actively resisted caving in any rabbit holes that might have stopped the creative or relational interaction as it unfolded. Regardless of whether they were undertaken with planning or spontaneity, we did not consider these play practices an interruption of the work but rather an integral part of it and a contribution to the progress toward our goals.

7 Conclusion

With this article, we offer our theory-inspired, second-person practice of participating in meaningful work, where critical incidents contributed to flow and instances of flow emerged as critical incidents capable of transforming our organization, the co-authoring pair. We hope this will serve as a contribution to the field of literature on flow and second-person working partnerships. It is our hope that our scholar-practitioner approach is received as a helpful illustration of the creativity and innovation generated by harnessing flow in organizations. Our extension of flow theory into the second-person space, we believe, provides particular applications for creative processes in diverse organizations and society.

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