

## Flow beyond Systems: Development through Somatic Intelligence

**Editors: Maria Spindler and Tonnie van der Zouwen**

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Maria Spindler and Tonnie van der Zouwen

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## **Overcoming Impediments to Team Flow**

### **Abstract**

Building on Csikszentmihalyi's research on flow, team flow is defined as a shared experience of flow during the execution of interdependent personal tasks that serve the interest of the team, originating from an optimized team dynamic and typified by seven prerequisites and four characteristics at the team level. Despite the noted potential for team flow to enhance team performance, subjective well-being, and a healthy team dynamic, there are potential pitfalls that can inhibit team flow that have not yet been researched. To remedy this, we collected interview and focus group data from both student teams and business teams, and we conclude that disorder, dissent, distrust, and delays, which are the inverses of the team flow prerequisites, are the primary impediments to team flow. Based on this research, we offer guidelines for preventing and/or overcoming these obstacles.

Keywords: Teams, Groups, Teamwork, Team Flow, Optimal Experience, Flow, Performance

### **1 The Unfortunate Reality of Everyday Teamwork Experiences**

For most of us, teamwork constitutes an important and prominent part of our working lives. It would be wonderful if collaborations in the workplace could be filled with passion, trust, and synergy, such that team members act and flow as one and the possibilities seem endless and effortless. Unfortunately, the reality is too often teams' crumbling under the pressure of high performance expectations and team members engaging in destructive competition despite sharing the same purpose. Instead of synergy and positivity, team members experience burnout and stress. But, with teamwork

being so critical to organizational success, businesses are in urgent need of tools that can help alleviate these problems and create conditions for teams to thrive. The experience of team flow is important for organizations because it incites the necessary efficiencies, effectiveness, and productivity for pulling off an extremely difficult mission. Building on Csikszentmihalyi's (1990, 1997) theories, we show how team flow can bring passion, trust, synergy, and success to business teams (cf. Van den Hout, 2016; Van den Hout, Davis, & Walrave, 2016).

Flow refers to an optimal experience during which people are completely absorbed in and energetically focused on an activity they are highly motivated to perform (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). In moments of flow, our thoughts, desires and emotions are in harmony, which greatly benefits our creativity, productivity, performance, and well-being (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997). Flow can be experienced individually as well as in collectives, such as in teams (cf. Jackson, Kimiecik, Ford, & Marsh, 1998; Jackson & Csikszentmihalyi, 1999; Russell, 2001; Sawyer, 2006; Walker, 2010; Van den Hout, 2016). Members of successful sports teams have reported experiencing overwhelming satisfaction, pride, and joy from pulling together and succeeding in the face of an almost impossible mission. Indeed, team flow allows teams to reach new heights of synergy, maximize their potential, and perform at their best (cf. Sawyer, 2007). Originating from Csikszentmihalyi's research on flow (for a review, see Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2009), team flow is defined as a shared experience of flow during the execution of interdependent personal tasks in the interest of the team, originating from an optimized team dynamic, while members work to advance the team's purpose (Van den Hout, 2016; Van den Hout, Davis & Walrave, 2016). The theory of team flow posits that team members may come to collectively and simultaneously experience a psychological state of flow and describes the conditions required for realizing such a shared flow experience. By harnessing team flow, organizational leaders can create an environment that allows team members to achieve effective and efficient collaboration, perform at their very best, and enjoy their work at the same time.

But, despite the noted benefits, team flow is typically considered an exceptional experience that teams get to experience only every so often. In an attempt to unravel this mystery, we set up a study among both student teams and professional teams to identify the impediments to team flow experiences. In this article, we first describe briefly how team flow emerges and how it feels to experience it, then we describe the findings of our research on what obstructs team members from experiencing team flow. Finally, we offer guidelines to prevent or overcome impediments.

## 2 How Does Team Flow Emerge?

According to team flow theory (van den Hout, 2016; van den Hout, Davis, & Walrave, 2016), collective flow experiences are typified by eleven elements: seven prerequisites and four characteristics, all at the team level. The prerequisites, once in place, enable team members to experience the characteristics of team flow. Team flow starts with the emergence of (1) a *collective ambition*, which is the shared sense of intrinsic motivation to operate and to perform as a team based on the shared values and recognition of the complementary skills that collectively bind them together. From this collective ambition, the team sets the other six prerequisites for team flow, which are: (2) a *common goal*, which is challenging but attainable for the team; (3) a set of clear and proximal *aligned personal goals* that contribute to the common goal; (4) the *integration of team members' high skills*, in such a way that during the performance each team member's personal task challenge matches his/her personal high skills; (5) an *open form of communication* that is immediate, constructive, and goal-oriented, so that every single team member is receiving clear and immediate feedback on the team's collective performance as well on each individual task performance towards the goals; (6) an *environment in which every team member feels safe to act*, such that the individual team member does not worry about failure stemming from taking smart risks or social punishment; (7) *mutual commitment* to the agreed-upon goals

and values, so that each individual team member “walks the talk” and stays attuned to the common task.

These prerequisites, once in place, enable team members to experience the four characteristics of team flow, which are: (1) *a sense of unity* with the common task and the fellow team members who are aligned to it; (2) a sense that each personal contribution to the common task is adding value to the team’s task, representing a *sense of joint progress* towards the established goals; (3) *mutual trust*: a sense that each member of the team is willing to be vulnerable to the actions of their team members, show respect to one another, feel confident both of his/her ability to fulfill his/her own task for the team and of the team’s ability to accomplish the common task together, and (4) complete concentration on each member’s personal task as it pertains to the common task representing a state of *holistic focus*, with complete alignment of each of those tasks to the common goal, and complete focus of the team as a whole on its common goal.

Whereas the prerequisites (collective ambition in the middle and the other six prerequisites framed in rectangles) together deliver a better team performance when set, the characteristics (ovals) are what bring more happiness (Van den Hout, 2016). The team flow model in Figure 1 is a simplified representation of the emergence of the prerequisites from a collective ambition, and subsequently the emergence of the characteristics from the prerequisites. The model offers team members a convenient visual reference for what they can do to achieve team flow together. We would like to comment on the fact that all of the elements are interrelated, but that the model includes the most important relationships that describe the process towards team flow, supported by a longitudinal study that investigated the emergence of team flow (Van den Hout, 2016). As noted, awareness of the collective ambition is the starting point for the team flow experience; it represents the shared intrinsic motivation to operate as a team and is therefore the key to the team flow experience. From this collective ambition, team members set common goals and reflect on what they are doing and why they are doing it. In turn, the

common goal anchors both commitment and alignment of personal goals, and the system of open communication enables the integration of high skills and creation of a safe environment. All prerequisites relate to one another, as do the characteristics, but the arrows in Figure 1 show the most relevant connections to build upon. When all prerequisites are set, the chance for an actual team flow experience is much higher, and when team members have set the seven prerequisites and experience the four characteristics we can say that the emergence of the team flow has occurred.

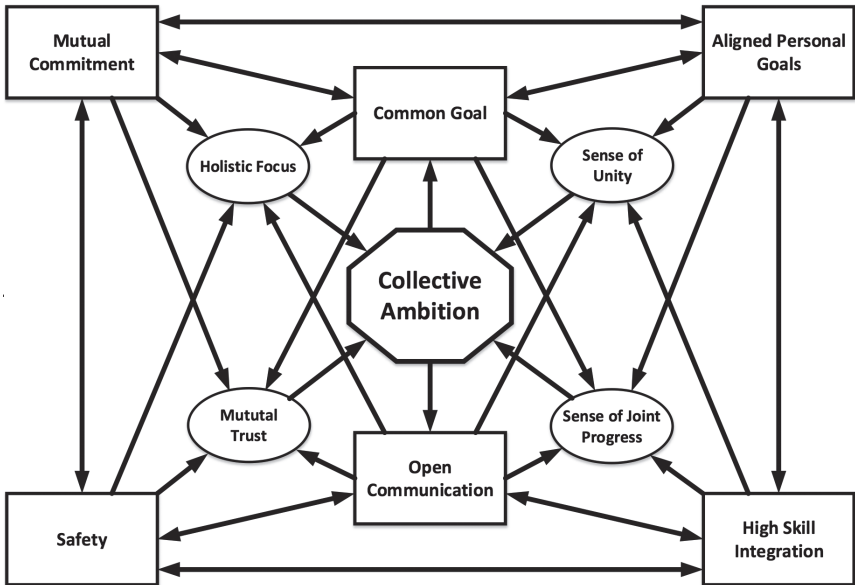


Figure 1: The Eleven Elements of the Team Flow Model (Van den Hout, 2016)

*Note: Six prerequisites (rectangles) emerge over two stages from the prerequisite of collective ambition (octagon). Once the prerequisites are established, the four characteristics of team flow (ovals) emerge, thus instantiating team flow. This, in turn, fuels collective ambition. Although all relationships are bi-directional, and all eleven elements are connected, this figure indicates only the most important relationships.*

### 3 The Experience of Team Flow

According to Weggeman et al. (2007), the experience of collective flow applies to situations in which many workers experience high-level process aesthetics while working together on the same artefact at the same time and in the same process. Flow experiences have been reported while engaging in sports, making music, painting, driving, talking with friends, working, and studying (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997; Eisenberger, Jones, Stinglhamber, Shanock, & Randall, 2005). Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi describes the experience of flow among surgical teams like this: “Surgeons say that during a difficult operation they have the sensation that the entire operating team is a single organism, moved by the same purpose; they describe it as a ‘ballet’ in which the individual is subordinated to the group performance, and all involved share in a feeling of harmony and power” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, p. 65). Further qualitative findings suggest that the interconnectedness experienced through shared progress on a shared activity is essential to the collective flow experience. In team flow, each team member has not only their own experience of flow, but the reflected experiences of their teammates as well, which reinforces that interconnectedness. Consciously or unconsciously, people’s experiences rub off on each other, as is the case for many emotions. This explains how team flow can come about from a critical mass of team members achieving flow at the same time and pulling the rest of the team into the experience with them, ensuring that first all team members and then the team as a unit achieve flow.

The importance of a shared ambition is also expressed by business leader Jos de Blok<sup>1</sup> (Personal Communication, 2014), who is founder of a health care company that consists of more than 850 teams: “[Flow in teams] should be happening constantly. I’ve never called it flow, myself. But that’s what happens when you’re working toward the same things together with people who appreciate each other, trust one another: They spend their energy

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<sup>1</sup> This quote is taken from an interview by the first author with Jos de Blok, who is the founder and CEO of Buurtzorg Nederland, an excellent Dutch Healthcare firm.



on all the right things because they don't have to waste any on irrelevant nonsense [translated from Dutch to English by the author]." Olympic gold medal hockey-coach-turned-business-coach Marc Lammers<sup>2</sup> (Personal Communication, 2015) corroborates the importance of a collective ambition by expressing the following statement for sports teams that participate in a tournament: "During the tournament, never change a winning team. At the start of the tournament, always change a winning team. Reinvent yourself at the start of a tournament by putting together a new collective ambition [translated from Dutch to English by the first author]". With this statement, he emphasizes the importance of an agreed collective ambition that matches the identity of the team. Gareth Bale<sup>3</sup> (2016), team member of the Wales national football team, expressed how he experienced his team as a unity supported by a collective ambition after Wales defeated Belgium during their participation in the UEFA European Championship of 2016 in France as follows: "The (Wales) team is the star for us. There are no stars in our team. We're all together. We all work as one. We all run for each other. We all tackle for each other and fight for each other." (K. Larson, Toronto Sun, July 4, 2016) This quote indicates that making yourself subordinate to the team's interest is an important prerequisite to achieve team flow, which is in accordance with our definition of team flow and the condition that personal goals need to align to the team's common goal to experience a sense of unity together.

An example from the business world that underlines the importance of the collective ambition is that of Rolf Weijers<sup>4</sup> (Personal Communication, 2017), previously a project leader at an IT company and currently a business coach:

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2 This quote is taken from a conversation between the first author and Marc Lammers, who is a professional coach for sport and business teams.

3 This quote is taken from a press meeting with Christian Bale, professional football player of the national team of Wales, after the match between Wales and Belgium during the European Championship of 2016.

4 This quote is taken from a conversation in 2017 between the first author and Rolf Weijers, who was a former project leader of the IT company Baan in the Netherlands.

In preparing for the project [as a project leader for the IT company Baan], I invested first of all in building relationships among everyone involved in the project, both employees and clients, so that we formed a collective ambition. That took two weeks, at which point the flywheel got up to speed and we became unstoppable. Afterwards, we looked back on what we had accomplished together with our eyes brimming with tears of pride and elation. I remember exactly what that felt like, though it was 25 years ago. These kinds of moments are rare in my work life and they are moments that you do not forget [translated from Dutch to English by the first author].”

Clearly, moments of team flow can occur during any kind of activity, and just as clearly, the various elements of the team flow experience are linked and interdependent. Given that teamwork and cooperation in business organizations are currently in high demand and the subject of much study, and that the prerequisites and characteristics of team flow have been conceptualized, tested, and validated (cf. van den Hout, 2016), it would be useful to study the obstacles or impediments to team flow. Combined with the conceptualization of team flow, the impediments to team flow could be used to develop recommendations (do’s and don’ts) that will aid in achieving team flow in the context of a business organization.

#### **4 Inquiries into Team Flow Obstructions**

To identify impediments to team flow, we asked team members to indicate to us what kept them from experiencing team flow. We inquired into student project teams and real-world business teams from various organizations. The student sample included 365 students from an academy for creative industries that comprised 60 temporary project teams aiming at completing a specific school project. The sample of real-world business teams involved 263 members from 28 different teams coming from 10 professional organizations. These included middle schools (5), an architectural firm (1), a temp

agency (1), a consultancy firm (1), a childcare organization (4), a training institute (1), an electrical engineering company (5), a construction firm (3), another construction firm specializing in gables (3) and a flooring company (4). These teams were created within their respective organizations to fulfill a specific purpose that was sometimes long-term, and sometimes short-term. In both samples, we collected data by means of a survey, which was distributed to the participants after they attended a presentation on the definition and meaning of the (team) flow experience. Among other issues, the survey presented the respondents with a simple open question asking them: “What *prevents* you from experiencing flow while performing tasks in service of this specific team?”

To delve deeper into the issue, we organized a focus group meeting with a team of mental health care professionals from a Dutch healthcare institute. The members of this team share responsibility for high-risk psychiatric patients requiring constant care. This team, consisting of 20 members working in shifts, had been working together for a long time and struggled to cooperate with each other and the surrounding organization. In the focus group, the members of this team were asked to discuss and eventually answer two questions: (1) What is obstructing cooperation in your team? (2) What would help kick-start that cooperation? The members of the team had no prior knowledge of team flow.

Table 1 presents the results from our student sample. In the specific context of student project teams, the main impediment to team flow appeared to be failure of team members to take responsibility for tasks they were given and/or rules they agreed upon. Distractions were also an important contributor to obstructed flow experiences, as were negativity and personal lack of interest in the common task. Most of the impediments to team flow described by respondents were either the absence or the opposites of the conditions that incite teams to experience flow, as described in our team flow theory. For instance, commitment or taking responsibility is a critical aspect of teamwork, which is mentioned in many different studies on teams (see Forsyth, 2009)

and as a defining feature of teams in terms of mutual accountability (Katzenbach & Smith, 1993). It is remarkable that the presence of distractions scored highly on our list, and can be explained by the busy school environment in which the students were expected to collaborate. The students reported that it was hard to find a good place to sit together and discuss progress on school premises due to the rapidly growing number of students. As noted in Table 1, the findings indicate that the impediments to the team flow experience of the student teams had to do with motivational issues, the process of collaboration, the clarity of the assignment, and the absence of a clear task division.

Table 1 also contains the results from our professional sample. Similar to the students, these employees indicated that coworker laxity impeded team flow. Miscommunication and negativity among team members, distractions, ambiguity, disagreement, work pressure, disengagement, and disorganization were also an important impediment to team members' ability to experience flow together.

More prevalent among the professionals than among the students is the factor of miscommunication. An explanation could be that for the students it was mandatory to hold weekly meetings, which were also supervised by tutors that intervened, and required students to give each other feedback. Another important difference was that the professionals rarely listed the work itself as an obstacle. This is likely because the professionals have chosen the type of work they're doing, whereas students are engaged in compulsory assignments that may or may not be of interest. The professionals also listed as obstacles their relationships and interactions with groups and individuals within the organization or outside it, such as upper management, other teams at the same level in the organization, business partners, and suppliers. Notably, outside agents can impede the flow experiences of teams in professional organizations far more than they can in student organizations. Other factors prevalent among professionals and (nearly) absent among the student project teams were such obstacles as financial worries, dissatisfaction with management, repetitive work, and insufficient workload.

Table 1  
Top 10 Impediments to Flow in a Team Context

Reason	Example(s)	Student		Business	
		Frequency	Ranking	Frequency	Ranking
Coworker laxity / negligence	Poor handover of tasks and responsibilities, and no accountability, commitment, or sense of responsibility	47	1	31	2
Distractions	Background noise and disruptions	43	2	25	4
Negativity	Nagging, moaning, stirring up the past, doomsaying, irritations, badmouthing each other	32	3	27	3
Disengagement with task	No personal interest, lack of motivation, lack of enthusiasm, delays, slow decision-making, overly long meetings, lack of progress	29	4	23	6
Ambiguity	Absence of clear common goal, or unclarity of assignment	27	5	18	7
Disagreement	Unresolved conflict, endless discussion	22	6	25	4
Miscommunication	No insight or clear feedback on progress, lack of open communication, lack of timely and constructive feedback, lack of constructive meetings and real physical interaction	20	7	32	1
Work pressure / stress	Deadlines, peer-pressure	11	8	13	9
Disorganization	Confusion about team structure and the distribution of tasks and roles	9	9	17	8
Absence of challenge	Repetitive tasks, easy tasks	6	10		
Distrust	Lack of faith in abilities, fear of failure, lack of confidence in team members	--	--	11	10

Our approach with the focus group was a bit different. Here, we wanted to learn more about how certain impediments operate to keep teams from experiencing flow, and how these may be solved. Therefore, we asked the team

members from the health care team to discuss among themselves: a) Which issues obstructed cooperation in their team; b) What would help kick-start that cooperation?

Their shared answer to the first question was:

- Insecurity: feeling that there is no room for mistakes
- Having no influence on policy
- Closed communication in the team; unspoken resentments, fear of expressing oneself, afraid to communicate
- No cohesion; needing to seek out allies
- Jittery at work: having to follow the rules exactly, following rules becomes the goal, not allowed to think for themselves
- Confusion about frameworks, manageability, development
- Vision and mission never properly explained
- Inadequate leadership

In their collective answer to the second question about how they could improve their cooperation, the team indicated:

- Atmosphere: relaxed, even jocular atmosphere within the team and an active attitude at work
- Clarity about objectives and policy
- Freedom to act
- Expressing appreciation
- Stable teams that occasionally add new coworkers with new knowledge and experience
- Progress in the work with clients

What is remarkable about this case is that the team placed the notion that they feel that the work environment is not a safe place for occasional mistakes at the top of their list. This is in line with the team flow theory (van den

Hout, 2016) in which safety is considered a crucial prerequisite for the experience of team flow. This is especially important in an environment where people are responsible for the health and welfare of people, like a ward, where it can take a lot of courage to be open about mistakes when people's lives are at stake. Moreover, in addition to psychological safety, the work of these team members does require actual physical safety, making it a prime concern. It is striking that the students as well as the professionals from the survey data hardly mentioned insecurity or unsafety of that ilk, likely because no one's life or well-being depends upon them quite as intimately as it does in a psychiatric ward. But, businesspeople and students did refer to issues of psychological safety that stem from other causes such as negativity, coworker laxity, and conflict.

Freedom to act (autonomy) within reasonable limits was also often mentioned during the discussion. In team flow theory, autonomy is crucial to the formation of a collective ambition and for deriving shared objectives, task distribution (making use of everyone's strengths), and clear lines of communication. Hence, we conclude that the results from this team's group discussion are meaningful and corroborate the team flow theory we put forward. Every element required to achieve team flow is represented in the team's answers.

## **5 Discussion**

In our search for impediments to the experience of team flow, we have seen that many factors can impede team flow experiences. Prominent factors for the student project teams were related to accountability and motivational issues (coworker laxity, disengagement), interpersonal issues within the process of collaboration (miscommunication, negativity, disagreement, conflict), task-related issues (ambiguity, disorganization, work pressure, lack of challenge) and environmental issues (distractions). The teams in professional organizations generally experience the same impediments to team flow,

though dissatisfaction with the work itself appears less common. For them, key factors involved the lack of engagement and communication in terms of receiving timely and constructive feedback, slowness, and distrust. Though we note that constructive conflicts are useful in that they contribute to higher performance quality, when conflict stems from irreconcilable differences it can become personal and cause dysfunction in the team.

The mental healthcare team listed insecurity as its foremost impediment to team flow as they experienced a culture of harsh punishment for mistakes both within the team and in the surrounding organization. This shows that a sense of security, that the workplace is a safe place both in the physical and psychological sense, is an essential precondition for experiencing team flow. Not surprisingly, all reasons given by the teams for their inability to experience team flow correspond closely with the prerequisites identified in the team flow theory (van den Hout, 2016).

The elements that are characteristic of the team flow experience (focus, mutual trust, sense of unity, sense of making joint progress) have counterparts that are often listed as impediments to team flow as well, namely distrust, disappointing results, conflicting interests, and distractions. In the team flow theory, we have indicated that the presence of the prerequisites of team flow improves the odds of encountering the characteristics of team flow, but that direct intervention to encourage those characteristics is not possible. This new study reveals that the presence of the counterparts to the characteristics of team flow (i.e., distrust, disappointing results, conflicting interests, distractions) will impede team flow, and should therefore be avoided as much as possible. When these elements are present, the team risks entering a vicious cycle that may be very difficult to escape, and team members who discover that they are in such a cycle would be well advised to make a fresh start together. This involves coming together to put into place the seven prerequisites of team flow, starting with agreeing on a collective ambition (shared intrinsic motivation) that can inspire the team to rally behind a common goal and from which the other prerequisites can be drawn.



To reduce the odds of encountering impediments to team flow, team members would do well to agree on a few operating principles based on their collective ambition. These principles have been derived from the now well-documented prerequisites of team flow and from the impediments discovered in the present study. The following set of principles will aid in the achievement of team flow if all team members agree to them:

- We participate because contributing to the team's collective ambition delivers enjoyment and/or meaning.
- We commit ourselves to challenging team goals that contribute to the collective ambition.
- We agree on clear personal goals that all align to a common team goal.
- We ensure that each team member utilizes his/her personal high skills in the team's interest.
- We communicate openly, and therefore supply each other with positive, direct and constructive feedback/feedforward towards the goals set whenever possible.
- We create an environment where everybody feels safe to act, but allow acceptable risks that go together with challenging the goals set.
- We make sure that everybody can focus on the task.
- We pay attention to each other in order to keep acting as a high-performance unit at all times.
- We collaborate from a foundation of mutual trust and respect.
- We challenge ourselves at all times to make progress.

## 6 Conclusion

The results of the present study allow us to make even better recommendations about how to foster and sustain a climate that is maximally conducive to team flow, which now includes making team members aware of what to

prevent and what not to do. If anything, our findings suggest that teams should proactively try to prevent disengagement, miscommunication, distraction, negativity, unsafety, ambiguity, coworker laxity, pressure, disorganization, unresolved conflict, distrust, lack of challenge, and slowness (i.e., finding the optimal balance between alignment and professional autonomy; van den Hout, 2016). The way to find this balance is to decide on a collective ambition that can activate the other six prerequisites for team flow; an ambition that is highly motivating to all team members and engenders feelings of effortless cooperation. The collective ambition provides a shared value or norm that validates the team's existence and unifies it by providing purpose and direction. Such a collective ambition can counteract most forms of negativity and re-energize team members to collaborate with dedication and good cheer, and it is our hope that the principles we have offered above will guide teams in this process.

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(3d)

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25 days & 1d/8h coaching for master's piece

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**Creating my Master's piece**  
Writers space \*  
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Freestyle \*

\* choose one – or more (optional)

*Craft your ideas and developments and bring them into the world. Act!*

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**Group in collective flow**  
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*Your homebase for orientation, integration & individual learning*

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Dr. Maria Spindler: [maria@cos-collective.com](mailto:maria@cos-collective.com)

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The future is an unknown garment that invites us to weave our lives into it. How these garments will fit, cover, colour, connect and suit us lies in our (collective) hands. Many garments from the past have become too tight, too grey, too something...and the call for new shapes and textures is acknowledged by many. Yet changing clothes leaves one naked, half dressed in between. Let's connect in this creative, vulnerable space and cut, weave and stitch together.

Our target group is reflective hybrids – leaders, scientists, consultants, and researchers from all over the world who dare to be and act complex. Multi-layered topics require multidimensional approaches that are, on the one hand, interdisciplinary and, on the other hand, linked to theory and practice, making the various truths and perspectives mutually useful.

If you feel you are a reflective hybrid you are very welcome to join our COS movement, for instance by:

- Visiting our website: [www.cos-collective.com](http://www.cos-collective.com)
- Getting in touch with COS-Creations. A space for personal & collective development, transformation and learning. Visit our website: [www.cos-collective.com](http://www.cos-collective.com)
- Following our COS-Conference online: [www.cos-collective.com](http://www.cos-collective.com)
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- Becoming a member of our LinkedIn group: go to [www.linkedin.com](http://www.linkedin.com) and type in "Challenging Organisations and Society,reflective hybrids" or contact Tonnie van der Zouwen: [office@cos-collective.com](mailto:office@cos-collective.com)

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