

# A team is a team. Really?

## Why and how to build team flow

by Justyna Józefowicz

**Apparently, if you're bogged down in the chaos, it's worth stopping squirming and taking a moment to consider what's what, where's the ground you can stand on. And what to bet on if the shifting sands of day-to-day ongoing work involve not a single person, but a team. What to do if the team is, because it is - not productive, and the people who make it up might as well be doing something else, somewhere else, with someone else.**

The theories that have grown up around leadership, team building, and team collaboration are out of step with today's world. This is a time when we sew from scraps - time, resources, experience. It is a time of planning, based on lack of information, changes that lose their power, because a significant change is a change from something permanent to something else, and it is difficult to find what is permanent today. It is a time of flexibility, but above all, listening and collaboration.

### The holy grail of productivity

From time to time, the media attack us with theories about work and people's attitudes to work. No wonder. Success in the search for the holy grail of productivity would bring relative peace, although probably only for a while because soon we would again push the boundaries of expectations. In the meantime, we observe heated discussions about the attitude to work of the next generations - wringing hands, how is it possible that an employee says he works until 5 p.m. and then has yoga, board games, or tango. *It used to not be that way.* Every now and then, there are reflections on the value or lack of value of *work-life balance*, the *four-day work week*, or modern slogans like *slow life*, *hygge*, or *sisu*. On top of all this is the pandemic legalized as a full-fledged *work-from-home* option, which - once you get a taste of it - is hard to give up.

Meanwhile, bosses dream of effective teams, composed of people who love their work and want to do great things together. The question is how to achieve it. Research shows that financial motivation is not the answer. So what is?

### Surgeons' ballets

Over thirty years ago **Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi** (1990) wrote about flow as a state in which people are completely absorbed and energetically focused on an activity they are highly motivated to perform. The next step was to verify that, since flow leads an individual to extraordinary engagement and performance, it works similarly for teams. The results turned out to be impressive. Not only does team flow allow teams to achieve extraordinary synergy and maximize potential, but it significantly increases their levels of satisfaction and even happiness. Studies of team flow, have addressed diverse backgrounds and professions. There is no shortage of sporting examples (Van den Hout, 2016). There is also ample evidence, relating to music, driving, business, and health care.

"[Surgeons] say that during a difficult operation they feel that the entire surgical team is one organism, moved by the same purpose; they describe it as a 'ballet' in which the individual is subordinated to the action of the group, and all involved have a sense of harmony and power" (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, p. 65).

### **Flow building**

According to team flow theory (van den Hout, 2016), the collective flow experience is characterized by eleven elements: seven preconditions and four characteristics. Collective flow begins with the emergence of **collective ambition**, which is a shared sense of intrinsic motivation to act and perform collectively.

It is based on shared values and recognition of complementary skills that bind the team together. It is this ambition that provides the starting point for the subsequent conditions of collective flow. These are:

2. a **common goal** that is achievable but challenging for the team
4. a set of **clear and relevant personal objectives** that contribute to the common goal
5. **integration of synergistic skills of team members**
6. **open communication**, including immediate, constructive, and goal-oriented feedback
7. **sense of security**, i.e., an environment in which each team member feels safe and not afraid of failure
8. **mutual commitment to agreed-upon goals and values**

Meeting the above prerequisites enables team members to be more productive, but also allows them to experience four characteristics of team flow:

1. a **sense of unity** with a common task and with other team members
2. a **sense that each personal contribution to the shared task is an added value to the team task**, representing a sense of shared progress
3. **mutual trust**
4. a **focus on each team member's personal task, with a full understanding of their impact on the shared task**

These four flow characteristics represent a **sense of happiness** (Van den Hout, 2016).

### **Eleven elements of the Team Flow model**

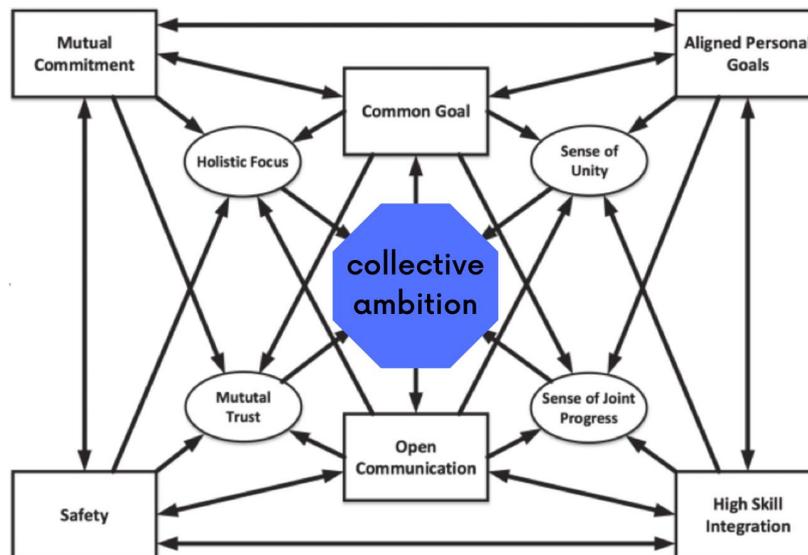


Figure 1: Eleven elements of the Team Flow model (Van den Hout, 2016)

In team flow, each team member not only has his or her own experience of flow, but also reflects the experiences of others on the team, which reinforces the interconnectedness, making all team members first and then the team as a whole achieve flow.

The importance of mutual trust among people who appreciate each other, trust each other, and, as a result, devote their energy to activities that lead to the goal rather than to proving that they work, that they can work, or that they are never wrong cannot be overstated here. For in a team-based on flow, there is room for error. An error is an information. In order to read this information safely, we need time and awareness that we are not working on infallibility but on building a system that will cope with adversity.

This is why it is important to give the team time in the beginning to build a relationship that, through an understanding of why we work and what we agree on, allows a shared team ambition to emerge organically.

### Top 10 Impediments to Flow in a Team Context

By all accounts, team flow significantly increases performance for the individual, the team, and the task itself, but despite its proven benefits, it is a unique experience.

Why?

Researchers asked 60 temporary project teams and 28 real business teams about obstacles to flow. The responses, while slightly different on some issues (see point 10), produced a consistent list of the level of priorities and experiences.

## Top 10 Impediments do Flow in a Team Context

### 1. LAXITY/NEGLIGENCE

poor delegation of tasks and responsibilities, lack of commitment or responsibility

### 2. DISTRACTIONS

noise, other distractions

### 3. NEGATIVITY

complaining, dragging out the past, predicting the future, maliciousness

### 4. DISENGAGEMENT with task

lack of personal interest, motivation, enthusiasm; delays, slow decision-making, meetings taking too long

### 5. AMBIGUITY

lack of clear common goal or unclear task

### 6. DISAGREEMENT

unresolved conflict, endless discussions

### 7. MISCOMMUNICATION

lack of insight or clear feedback on progress, open communication, timely and constructive feedback, constructive meetings and personal interaction

### 8. WORK PRESSURE/ STRESS

deadlines, peer pressure

### 9. DISORGNIZATION

confusion about team structure, tasks and roles

### 10. ABSENCE OF CHALLENGE (students)

repetitive tasks, too easy tasks

### 10. DISTRUST (business)

lack of faith in team members' abilities, fear of failure, lack of trust in team members



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Figure 2: Top 10 Impediments to Flow in a Team Context (based on Van den Hout, 2016)

### How do you take care of the flow when the team is already working?

A team that has not developed a team flow can function. With less efficiency, less happiness as a collective experience, but still quite effectively. However, if there is a chance to consciously take care of the flow, it is worth spending time and attention on it.

A good practice here is to stop and invite the team to consciously enter the process of building a different quality of functioning. What for? It is impossible to create a new work culture without applying it. Therefore, if the work of the team is to be based on collective ambition, the necessary element of which is a conscious action, which a person chooses, a person - in the case of a team a group of people must have an impact on how this work will proceed. This is not, of course, about wish-fulfillment of the ideal work, but about an adult approach to collaboration as the result of negotiations and agreements between adults who understand and agree on both the gains and the costs of working together.

### What now?

It's worth looking at your team. Preferably collectively. Check to what extent it meets the criteria for team flow. You can use a short survey. If the team answers most of the questions in the affirmative, it is worth calling the situation and inviting the team members to consciously continue building team flow. If the team answers most of the questions in the negative - it is worth creating the conditions for a joint conversation and verify where the team is now and whether it is interested in entering the path of building team flow. And act.

Thus: 1) Stopping, 2) Identifying what is important, 3) Arranging reality in a way that is possible and appropriate, 4) Acting in a new paradigm. And finally, 5 more Monitoring. To consciously build and not to lose what has already been worked out.

### Survey

1. Do all team members have the same idea about the meaning of the work of this team? What kind of ideas?
2. Do all team members see a common goal of the team's work? Is it achievable for the team? Does it present a challenge to the team?
3. Are the skills of the team members complementary? Is the team able to take advantage of its diversity?
4. Does the team communicate openly? Do team members give each other feedback?
5. Do team members feel that, when they make a mistake, they can tell their colleagues in safety?
6. Do team members commit themselves to tasks and goals based on shared values? Are team members aware of the values on which the team builds its actions?
7. Do team members have a sense of unity with the common task and with other team members?
8. Do team members feel that each personal contribution to the common task is an added value to the team task, representing a sense of shared progress?
9. Do team members have confidence in each other?
10. Does each team member focus knowledge on personal tasks, understanding their impact on the team's shared task?

### References

1. Csíkszentmihályi, M. (1990). *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*. Vol. 1990. New York, NY: Harper and Row.
2. van den Hout, J. J. J., Gevers, J. M. P., Davis, O. C., & Weggeman, M. C. D. P. (2017). Overcoming impediments to team flow. *Challenging Organisations and Society*, 6(2), 1165-1181. <https://research.tue.nl/en/publications/overcoming-impediments-to-team-flow>