

# FOUNDATIONS FOR FLOW

## Benefits & Impact of Investing in Wellbeing & Flow



**430%**<sup>3</sup>

increase in  
creative problem  
solving

**490%**<sup>4</sup>

increase in skill  
acquisition

**500%**<sup>5</sup>

increase in  
productivity

**70%**

fewer safety  
incidents

1

**59%**

lower  
turnover

1

**37%**

sales  
performance  
increase

2

**42%**

lower  
absenteeism

1

# INVESTING IN WELLBEING

Empirical research shows that wellbeing is a prerequisite for sustaining success for individuals and their workplaces, not simply a happy benefit or byproduct<sup>6</sup>. We all know this experientially, after all, organisations are made up of individuals (just like us!) so we know that thriving and engaged individuals, performing at their peak are key to a thriving organisation.

Growing research on the relationship between individual and organisational wellbeing and performance reveals that employee wellbeing leads to improved workplace engagement, which increases productivity, business & learning outcomes and profit<sup>7</sup>. When leaders can create a positive culture that promotes wellbeing, these outcomes are magnified.

The word 'wellbeing' gets thrown around a lot these days. Just what is wellbeing and why might it matter to you, your team and your workplace?

In its simplest form, wellbeing is your ability to feel good and function effectively. It gives you the resources to navigate the highs and lows we all experience in our work and our lives, while enabling you to intellectually, emotionally, socially and physically 'thrive.'

Studies are finding that people who have higher levels of wellbeing reap all sorts of benefits and when people are thriving at work, on average, they:

- **Are up to 6 x time more engaged** and up to 8x when wellbeing is a priority in their workplace (New Economic Foundation, 2014; World Economic Forum, 2010)
- **Are up to 3 x more productive** – employees with higher levels of wellbeing are able to work longer and more effectively due to their improved goal attainment and levels of resilience. (Medibank Private, 2005; World Economic Forum, 2010; PwC, 2014)
- **Are 'All Round' High Performers** – employees with higher levels of wellbeing have been found to learn more effectively, be more creative, have better relationships, be more pro-social in their behavior, feel more satisfied in their jobs and perform better (Chida and Steptoe, 2008; Diener et al., 2010; Dolan et al., 2008; Lyubomirsky et al., 2005)
- **Take up to 9x less annual sick leave** – it is estimated that workplace wellbeing programs can reduce sick leave by up to 30% (Medibank Private, 2005; Dishman et al, 1998).

Researchers have found that our wellbeing – much like our body weight or genes for intelligence and cholesterol – has a genetically determined set-point but that this is only part of the puzzle. About 50% of the differences among people's happiness levels are explained by genetically determined set points. We also know that only about 10% of the variance in a person's happiness levels is due to circumstances, that is, what happens to them. The last 40% is intentional activities – these are choices we make and gives us scope to increase or decrease our levels of wellbeing when we have the information and tools available to us.

So just as when you eat well and exercise regularly, you can maintain your optimal body weight, the same applies when you consistently engage in practices that support your wellbeing. Unfortunately, this also works in reverse. Just as when you don't eat well or exercise regularly, you're likely to end up weighing a little – or a lot – more than is ideal for your body type, it's also true that when you don't prioritize practices that support your wellbeing, it becomes increasingly difficult for you to consistently *be well and perform well*. You survive instead of thrive.

Applying practices that improve our wellbeing isn't a one size fits all approach. Just as our gym wouldn't have us do squats to tone our arms, a variety of tools need to be offered and encouraged across entire organisations. Evidence-based practices and programs that improve psychological wellbeing are like a restaurant buffet, even though all the food can nourish us, some will be more nourishing, appetising (and agreeable!) to us than others and facilitating consistency is key. We don't expect to achieve a healthy physique with just a few trips to the gym or one healthy meal...improving psychological health and wellbeing is no different.

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*“Your **brain at positive** performs significantly better than at negative, neutral or stressed. Your **intelligence rises**, your **creativity rises**, your **energy levels rise**. In fact, we found that every single business outcome improves”.*

*– Shawn Achor*

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Often seen as an expense, an investment in people's wellbeing is actually an asset. As a guide, every dollar spent on promoting wellbeing in individuals and the organisation as a whole yields a return of approximately five dollars<sup>8</sup>.



## emPOWER v FORCE

### WELLBEING AS ROCKET FUEL FOR FLOW & SUSTAINABLE PEAK PERFORMANCE

Technically defined as an “optimal state of consciousness where we feel our best and perform our best,” the term Flow takes its name from the sensation it confers. **In Flow**, every action, every decision, arises seamlessly from the last. In this state, we are so focused on the task at hand that all else falls away. Action and awareness merge. Our sense of self vanishes. Our sense of time distorts. **Performance goes through the roof**. Flow is a state available to anyone, anywhere, provided certain conditions are met. Significantly, **many of these conditions (or triggers) for Flow are the very same conditions that are generated through positive psychology interventions that boost and protect wellbeing.**

Flow states have triggers — pre-conditions that lead to more Flow. Some are psychological, while others are physiological, social or environmental. Creating environments that maximise ALL of these triggers have been found to contribute dramatically to wellbeing, in both the workplace and life, too.

At the heart of Flow sits a complicated cascade of five neurochemicals which, when combined, accomplish intrinsically what most organisations fail to achieve through existing processes and incentive schemes. In Flow, the brain releases norepinephrine, dopamine, endorphins, anandamide, and serotonin. All five affect both performance and wellbeing. Norepinephrine and dopamine tighten focus, helping us shut out the persistent distractions of our multi-tasked lives. Endorphins block pain, letting us burn the candle at both ends without burning out altogether. Anandamide prompts lateral connections and generates insights far more than most traditional brainstorming sessions. And serotonin, that feel-good chemical, can connect teams more powerfully than the best-intentioned offsite.

Flow massively boosts creativity which is the driver of innovation. In a University of Sydney study<sup>9</sup>, researchers relied on transcranial magnetic stimulation (TMS) to induce Flow — using a weak magnetic pulse to create transient hypofrontality in the brain (as occurs in the Flow state). Subjects were then given a classic test of creative problem solving. Under normal circumstances, fewer than 5% of the population solves the problem. In the control group, no one got it. In the FLOW induced group, 40% solved the problem in record time.

Research done by Harvard Professor Teresa Amabile discovered that not only are people more creative when in Flow, they also report being more creative, productive and happy for up to three days after a Flow state—suggesting that Flow doesn’t just heighten creativity in the moment, it can heighten it over time.

Equally critical in an environment of rapid change and technological advances is our ability to learn faster. When neuroscientists at DARPA and Advanced Brain Monitoring used TMS on soldiers in training to alter their state to that of Flow and then measured how long it took them to get from beginner to expert - they did it in 490% faster time than normal<sup>10</sup>.

It’s for this reason that when the global consultancy McKinsey did a ten-year global study of companies, they found that top executives — those called upon to solve strategically significant and complex problems - reported being up to 500% more productive in Flow<sup>11</sup>. **In fact, according to these same McKinsey researchers, if we could increase the time we spend in Flow by just 15-20%, overall workplace productivity would almost double.**

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*“Everywhere we look in business, timetables once measured by calendars can now be clocked by egg timers. So **how can we keep up?** In a word — and according to an ever-increasing pile of evidence — **Flow.**”*

– Steven Kotler

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By turbo-boosting learning, motivation, creativity and performance, Flow amplifies core competencies required to keep pace in our VUCA world (marked by volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity). These dividends don’t come without investment, but with statistics like McKinsey’s finding that **Flow can boost productivity up to 500%**, failing to invest might be the difference between maintaining or gaining that competitive advantage in rapidly changing and increasingly uncertain environments.

Restructuring businesses around Flow means being prepared to genuinely invest in wellbeing and sometimes alter the DNA of an organisation to facilitate Flow - shifting emphasis from mechanistic efficiencies to deep human engagement. In an era of relentless change and uncertainty, harnessing Flow to propel instead of push or pull the performance of your people, is key to thriving in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.



# CREATING CONDITIONS FOR FLOW

*Analogous to planting a seed in nutrient dense versus sandy soil...*



## Physiological

- Complete Concentration
- Immediate Feedback

Brain Basics and the Mind Body Connection

Mindfulness and Meditation

The Neuroscience of Attention & Focus

### Physiology for Fueling Flow

(incl sleep, chronotypes, movement & exercise, hydration & nutrition, HRV & Breathwork, Biofeedback & Technology)



## Psychological

- Passion/Purpose (Intrinsically rewarding)
- Autonomy
- Clear Goals
- Challenge/skills ratio

Meaning, Mindset & Motivation  
(incl values, strengths, goal setting, learned optimism, growth & thriver mindsets)

## Neurobiology of Emotions

### Gratitude Growth & your Brain

Connection, Communication & Collaboration  
(incl active listening, active constructive responding, PN Ratio/Positive Communication/Feedback & SCARF model)

Reflection and Practical Application



## Group

- A Sense of Control
- Shared Clear Goals
- Shared Risk
- Active Listening
- Positive Communication
- Equal Participation (Blending Egos)
- Familiarity (Relatedness)



## Environmental

- Rich Environment
- High Consequence
- Deep Embodiment

Practical Application of Flow requires more than just knowing what the triggers are. If it were that simple, more individuals and organisations would already be experiencing high Flow and all the benefits that ensue from it.

Creating conditions for Flow is about providing actionable information and practices that when embedded into workplaces and life, enable Flow triggers to be consistently, authentically and automatically satisfied. Analogous to planting a seed in nutrient dense versus sandy soil ....this is an essential component of creating the conditions for increased Flow in workplaces and life.

# WELLBEING & FLOW AS 21<sup>st</sup> CENTURY LEADERSHIP CAPABILITIES

Pick up any article on leadership, or blog talking about the skills required for success, at both the individual and organisational level, and you'll find the same "Twenty-First Century Skills" listed... creativity, critical thinking, courage, cooperation, grit, innovation, collaboration, emotional intelligence, resilience the list goes on...



When you take a closer look at some of these Twenty First Century *Skills*, something becomes apparent. Yes, these are all essential if we are going to set our businesses, our communities and ourselves up to not just survive but to thrive in the 21st century.....but many of these are not actually skills but human states....courage, creativity, collaboration, motivation...

To thrive in the 21st century – in addition to the technical skills for the various roles we fill in life, what we need is to be able to tap into (or indeed out of) different human states. Everything from peak states like Flow and thriving through to sub-optimal states like anxiety, apathy or even depression. To do this, we need to better understand our own physiology.

Training a state is a more systemic performance intervention - because if you get the state right then a wide variety of more specific skills are going to be amplified as a result of that. You can be technically brilliant in your chosen field but if your state is suboptimal or your wellbeing compromised, this is going to impact your performance regardless of how hard you've worked to develop your technical skills. Being better able to shift states allowing you to use your own biology to power instead of force your performance, is not only instrumental in preventing burnout, but being better able to access peak states enables you to more effectively and consistently draw on all those core technical skills you've worked tirelessly to develop over the years.

Another reason training states specifically is becoming increasingly important is because as technology accelerates, the diversity of skills we need to be able to be good at something is constantly expanding too. The degree to which we are in high, medium or low state of consciousness affects how susceptible we are to persuasion, how clear our judgment and decision making is, how much detail we can recall. Being able to alter our state is therefore at the heart of how effectively we learn, decide, remember, innovate, communicate and many other vital processes required for life. So getting the fundamental underlying piece right - the ability to drive yourself or your teams into the right state, becomes really important.

The scientific evidence is overwhelming, what we're really talking about when talking about driving performance is getting our biology to work for us, rather than against us. We need to befriend our brains because at the heart of it, that's what performance is. Our brain controls every thought we have and every action we take – so learning more about how our brain functions and importantly what it needs to function optimally, is key to optimising our performance and experience in every aspect of our life.

Over the past decade, scientists have made enormous progress in the science of Flow. Advances in brain imaging technologies have allowed us to apply serious metrics where once there was only subjective experience and now leaders need to be provided with actionable information and tools that put this science into practice. Investing in this will help not only create cultures that fuel increased access to the peak performance state of Flow but in embedding the conditions for Flow, organisations will improve workplace wellbeing to access the proven performance enhancing benefits of this too.

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*“We need to support a new breed of leaders who evolve beyond the outdated leadership styles and management strategies that enabled - and sometimes actually encouraged - leaders to leave our humanity at home.”*

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## Develop Positive Leadership Practices

*“Positively energizing people – those who uplift and elevate others during their interactions – trump people with formal power by a factor of x4 when it comes to performance.”*

**- Prof. Kim Cameron**

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# INVESTING IN FLOW & WELLBEING INITIATIVES TO ADDRESS 21st CENTURY BUSINESS CHALLENGES

## Issue

## Impact

In this era of rapid change, organisations are requiring new capabilities to succeed in volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous (VUCA) environments.



Wellbeing & Flow programs build resilience and optimise cognitive function and health<sup>12</sup>. They are systemic interventions that empower individuals to get their biology working for instead of against them to achieve sustainable peak performance and drive the creativity, collaboration and agility required to succeed in a VUCA world. The speed of learning is also accelerated in Flow as the brain enters a state known as transient hypofrontality – where parts of the prefrontal cortex shut down allowing individuals to tap into expanded levels of human potential.<sup>13</sup>

Hierarchical organisational models are giving way to networked teams who need to work more collaboratively and flexibly in unpredictable environments.<sup>14</sup>



Higher levels of wellbeing increase collaboration, teamwork and agility. Group Flow triggers when effectively embedded and facilitated in teams further improve collaboration, communication and connection boosting productivity and wellbeing to create high performing teams and organisations where leadership and contribution is developed at every level.

87% of the workplace is unhappy or disengaged and every unhappy employee represents significant costs in unrealised productivity.<sup>15</sup>



High levels of wellbeing drive positive emotions which in turn improves engagement which increases productivity, business outcomes and profit<sup>16</sup> Flow triggers also work to align challenge to skill level, improve focus and increase engagement levels. According to a McKinsey study on Flow, if we could increase the time we spend in Flow by just 15-20%, overall workplace productivity would almost double.<sup>17</sup>

Innovation is increasingly vital to competitive advantage. Leaders are under growing pressure to generate creative output from themselves and their teams.



Interventions to cultivate a positive emotional climate and high levels of wellbeing where failure is not feared or frowned upon are key to increasing innovation in organisations. Creativity and innovation are also massively amplified in Flow as we get more done in less time and often to a higher quality in Flow, further fueling competitive advantage.

Healthcare expenditure in high-stress companies is 53% greater than other organisations.<sup>18</sup>



Increasing employee wellbeing and improving working conditions and cultures can reduce healthcare spend as well as losses incurred due to absenteeism and turnover.

Today's mobile and remote workforces require an evolving social contract between employer and employee.<sup>19</sup>



Equipping leaders with the tools to build a positive culture and boost employee wellbeing enables them to engage and energise people to get the best from them regardless of location. Training employees on the science of Flow enables them to maximise performance and productivity wherever they are and help them to create the environments and harness the benefits that remote working can provide to boost Flow.

Becoming an effective leader often requires changing behavior (particularly given promotions are usually awarded based on technical skills not people management skills). This often means adjusting underlying mind-sets.<sup>20</sup>



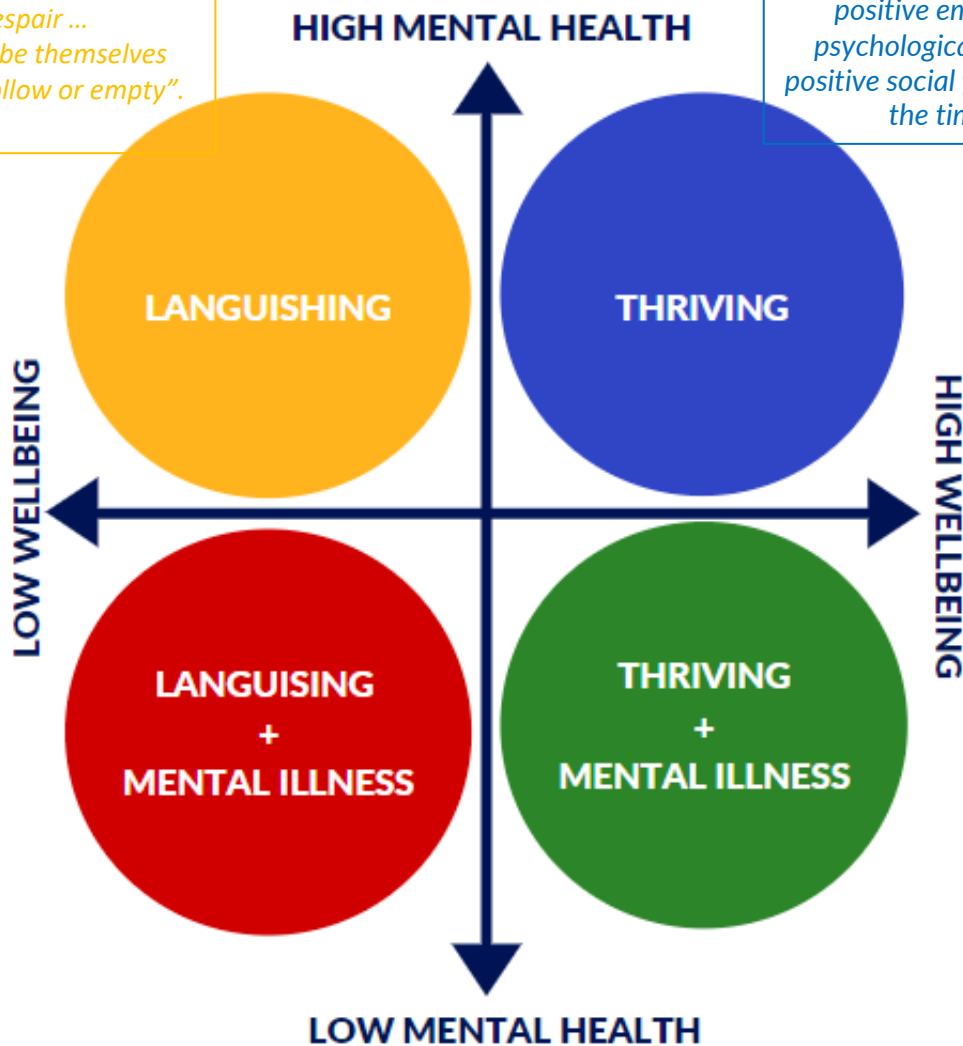
Leaders who understand how to facilitate wellbeing and Flow are more able to successfully transition from technical expert to leader and manage people in a way that can help shift mindsets (their own and their team's) to achieve sustainable peak performance, wellbeing as well as contribute to positive cultures.

# INVESTING IN WELLBEING & FLOW

## POSITIVE INITIATIVES IMPACTING ALL INDIVIDUALS

*“emptiness and stagnation, constituting a quiet despair ... individuals who describe themselves or aspects of life as hollow or empty”.*  
– Keyes

*“a state where people experience positive emotions, positive psychological functioning and positive social functioning, most of the time”.* -Keyes



Research has shown that mental health is different to wellbeing and that you can be living with mental illness but still be thriving, or living with no mental health issues but still be failing to thrive, or languishing<sup>21</sup>. Recent studies involving Australian workplaces found that there are more people in the languishing quadrant than either of the quadrants involving individuals experiencing mental health challenges and that only 14.7% of Australian workers are consistently thriving.<sup>22</sup>

Languishing has been associated with poor functioning, including absenteeism and disengagement at work and being unable to manage life's daily activities (eg completing exercise or household tasks).

Unfortunately, people who are languishing often “fall through the cracks” as their symptoms aren't “clinically significant” enough to access much support and intervention. Medication like antidepressants may be prescribed but as the person isn't clinically depressed, these medications may result in little noticeable improvement.

Wellbeing interventions, including Flow training which has as its foundation, the creation of conditions and environments that positive psychology and neuroscience have shown significantly and positively impact wellbeing, have the potential to help all individuals, regardless of which quadrant they find themselves in at different points in life, to move from surviving to thriving.

Organisations are made up of individuals so helping the individuals in the organisation thrive is key to a thriving organisation.

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*“Health is not merely the absence of disease.  
It is a total state of physical, mental, emotional and social wellbeing”.*

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# RECOMMENDATIONS

Investing in workplace wellbeing and creating high Flow environments means investing in your people and being prepared to challenge what we think we know about ourselves, about each other and how we thrive. Restructuring businesses around Flow means being prepared to genuinely invest in wellbeing and sometimes alter the DNA of an organisation - shifting emphasis from mechanistic efficiencies to deep human engagement.

Making wellbeing a BAU item in your workplace and creating cultures and environments that facilitate Flow provides tangible value to organisations and makes good business sense. Positive outcomes from wellbeing and Flow initiatives such as greater employee engagement, higher productivity, increased creativity, collaboration, agility, resilience and peak performance are increasingly required for organisations to prosper in today's economy. Reduced sick leave, staff turnover and absenteeism that result from increased levels of wellbeing in the workplace can also help organisations realise significant savings.

To realise these benefits organisations need to:

- Be willing to look for what might be working *against* the creation of high wellbeing and high Flow environments in their organisation – and to take genuine action to address any findings
- Move beyond a narrow focus on just physical wellness to encompass all aspects of wellbeing. While physical health initiatives can certainly reap benefits, focusing only on the physical is not as effective or comprehensive as addressing wellbeing (emotional, psychological, social & physical). By enhancing all these factors, organisations can realise more value from their initiatives and people.
- Make wellbeing a valued and BAU part of your culture and an integral driver in business strategy including career progression/leadership promotion.
- Create positive environments and leadership programs that establish the necessary conditions and triggers (psychological, physiological, social and environmental) to optimise both individual and group Flow more consistently
- Promote positive practices and activities that benefit employee's wellbeing both in the workplace and life generally. Research shows that the wellbeing of employees can have a significant impact on business wellbeing, and a thriving workplace can in turn positively impact employee wellbeing.
- Engage leaders in cultivating a positive emotional climate and leading by example through active participation in programs and active facilitation of Flow triggers
- Challenge and change processes and 'rules' that might be blocking Flow within their organisation.

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*To be well and perform well, is not to live in a state of perpetual safety and calm, but to move fluidly from states of adversity and risk, adventure or excitement back to safety and calm and out again.*

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Contact us at [info@relativity4.com.au](mailto:info@relativity4.com.au) to discuss how you can build a culture of wellbeing and embed Flow into the DNA of your organisation.

Relativity4 is a leading consulting and training provider.

We partner with organisations to achieve strategic goals, embed Flow into the DNA of business and genuinely boost and protect workplace wellbeing helping to drive engagement and sustainable peak performance. Our evidence-based approach is built on the practical application of the science of Flow, positive psychology and neuroscience.

We simplify the science to help individuals and organisations thrive.



# FOSTER FLOW IN YOUR WORKPLACE



## Environmental

### Rich Environment

Create environments where you're surrounded by a lot of novelty, unpredictability and complexity allowing you to constantly challenge yourself and grow.

### High Consequence (Shared Risk is also a trigger for Group Flow)

Don't be afraid of failure – take risks! This is not restricted to just physical risks either. Emotional, intellectual, creative, and social risks work just as well.

### Deep Embodiment

This is all about putting yourself into a multi-sensory immersion. For example, don't just read about a new idea, but also start putting it into action at the same time. How we train our bodies directly informs our brains and those two things together directly inform our minds and hearts. We are not just three pounds of gray matter between the ears thinking, executing and ruminating, we are actually a whole system. Get out into the sunlight for a walk in nature regularly. Take breaks. Hydrate. Eat well. Sleep well. Practice deep breathing and mindfulness techniques daily.



## Physiological

### Complete Concentration

Flow follows focus. To achieve the kind of focus that leads to Flow, you have to reduce the cognitive load of all potential distractions.

Auditory: anything you can hear (people around you, phone calls, etc)

Visual: anything you see (open browser tabs, your cell phone, notifications, etc)

Kinaesthetic: anything you can feel (room temp, chair, etc)

Schedule time for your MITs daily and make sure you have a way or place to block all distractions.

Practice Mindfulness and/or mediation daily to strengthen your neural pathways for focus. Even 10 minutes a day is better than nothing but remember, the more you put in – the more you will get out of it!

### Immediate Feedback

Create feedback loops that can help improve your performance in real-time. This way your mind is focused in the now. The smaller the gap between input and output, the more we know how we're doing and how to do it better.



## Psychological

### Passion/Purpose (intrinsically rewarding)

This is all about creating a sense of meaning and purpose in what we do. Knowing our core values and looking for ways to use our strengths help us live in alignment with what brings us alive, creating powerful intrinsic motivation. Practice Gratitude daily.

### Sense of Control (Individual and Group)

This is all about combining autonomy and mastery. Choose your own challenges and have the necessary skills to surmount them. Give people options to choose how they tackle tasks wherever possible.

### Clear Goals (Shared Clear Goals for Group)

When you understand exactly what your immediate goal is, your mind does not need to worry about what to do next and your focus naturally tightens. A clear goal is something you can control and measure. It gives you a target so you know whether or not you hit the target.

### Challenge/Skills Ratio

If the challenge far outweighs our skills, fear seeps in. If it's too easy, we get bored. Find that sweet-spot between anxiety and boredom, and Flow will kick in.



## Group

### Active Listening

Be fully present in the now when engaging in conversation. Quell the brain's biological need for efficiency, prediction, and planning and become truly open to the input (both verbal and non verbal) of others.

### Positive Communication

Make your interactions additive. Build momentum by continually expanding each other's ideas instead of contracting. Focus on solutions instead problems. Ask questions instead of telling and aim for a 5:1 ratio of positive to negative communications.

### Familiarity

If you're working in a team, get everyone on the same page so you can establish a common knowledge base and communication style. Use the SCARF model to help ensure people's psychological needs are met as opposed to threatened.

### Blending Egos

Described quite succinctly as, "a collective version of humility" where no one is hogging the spotlight and everyone is involved. Apply the 30-30-30 Rule.

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*We all have a brain, heart, mind and body - when we understand how to **optimise** the tools we already possess - we can optimise all aspects of our life and the lives of those around us.*

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