



## Flow, Your Ego and Your Career

By [Harrison Barnes](#)

Aristotle believed that more than anything, we seek to be happy. There are some individuals who do their work and continually find happiness in this work. Work for them takes on a meaning that transcends what most of us experience. These people feel completely involved in the work they do and are completely focused. They do not experience emotional turmoil when they are doing their work. In Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's book "Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience" (1990), he described a state of "flow" where people involved in an activity "forget themselves, the time, their problems." Flow is something that athletes experience when they are "in the zone," artists experience when they are at their best, and we all are capable of experiencing when we are doing something we love.

According to the great soccer star Pele, during his best games he felt a strange calmness he hadn't experienced in any of the other games. "It was a type of euphoria; I felt I could run all day without tiring, that I could dribble through any of their teams or all of them, that I could almost pass through them physically. I felt I could not be hurt."

Flow involves a state where we are able to concentrate with little effort, and where we are able to complete a certain task with very little effort. Another important component of flow, and I would argue the most significant, is a loss of self consciousness. Instead of being conscious of yourself in relation to others, you move into another sort of state. This state Csikszentmihalyi also seems to believe, is "a loss of ego" (p. 122). According to Csikszentmihalyi, loss of ego is a rare transcendent experience.

What is this state of "loss of ego" in our work? How does loss of ego translate into our professions and lives? I know of numerous people whose careers are defined by this state of flow. They do their work in a manner that seems to not involve their ego and, instead, seems to transcend individual and self-seeking types of behavior. They are able to do their work in a way that is similar to the way many people worship. Their work isn't calculated, and people around them feel good by their presence. They are extraordinarily good at whatever they do. Their ego isn't involved in their work. Their work isn't about them; rather, it's about the work itself.

People who are able to enter a state of flow in their work become "egoless," and do it while unconcerned with:

- Power or titles
- Personal recognition
- Profit
- Their identity
- Competition

This may sound like an incredible state to be in; however, this is a state that numerous people are able to enter into when they truly love something, and can get into a state of flow. Paradoxically, it is the people who don't care about power and money, and are able to enter into this state of flow, who most often end up achieving the most, financially and otherwise. These same people often then become controlled by their egos and quickly lose whatever it is they achieved, and subsequently lose flow. It's the ability to remain in flow and egoless that I believe is one of the greatest determinants of being successful. Since so few people are able to do this, and since this is so relevant to your career, I believe understanding flow and the ego is something that can change your career and life.

One of my first memories as a child was when I was playing outside our apartment in Lansing, Michigan, and my mother called me inside for a few moments. My mother had recently purchased me a yellow Tonka Bulldozer toy, and I had been playing in the bushes of the apartment complex with the toy. Across the way, I noticed there was a boy perhaps a few years older than me also playing with some toys. I went inside for a few moments and when I came back outside my truck was missing. I couldn't have been more than three years old at the time; however, I can remember to this day how upset I was. I cried and cried, and I remember my mother comforting me. I am sure the boy across the way stole my truck.

The fact that this is one of my first memories is quite striking to me. I would argue that this was one of my first true introductions to my "ego" and the idea that I, like almost everyone on this planet, was getting a piece of my identity from forms, objects, titles, and other things that are not part of me at all. Indeed, my pain related to this little truck being stolen was there because I identified the truck as an extension of myself. As I grew older and older, I came to identify with more toys and other objects that my parents gave me. Then, I would start to see friends with better toys and objects, and start feeling a profound sense of lack because I didn't have toys and other objects that were as nice. As my life progressed, I would start to admire people who had better houses than I had, more important parents than I had, went to better schools than I did, and so on.

When I was old enough to understand advertisements in magazines and on television, I started to want things there, too. I remember when I was no more than 12 years old I saw a picture of the most expensive car ever manufactured at that time, an Aston Martin Lagonda, and I dreamed of my parents owning this car and driving me around in it. I thought this car was something that would be really meaningful. Several years ago, I purchased one of these used cars for not more than thirty thousand dollars, and spent another thirty thousand dollars restoring it. I did this, I am sure, because there was a part of me that really wanted something for my ego from this car. When you see old men driving around in old cars they have restored, this is what they are most often doing--it's related to their ego and a sense of lack they are trying to fill from the past with a material object.

My stepfather ran a small boating business and around our small two-bedroom house he always had magazines scattered with pictures of bigger and better boats that he could buy if he ever made enough money. One day, my stepfather came

home with a 1977 Chrysler New Yorker, which was the biggest and worst car I had ever seen. Within a few months, I remember a Rolls Royce dealer in Palm Beach, Florida, kept calling our house because my stepfather had indicated he might want to trade the new car in for a Rolls Royce. We never could afford any of this stuff, but my stepfather always dreamed of these things and wanted them. He was never ever satisfied. Was he any different from any of us?

When I got older, I started comparing my bicycles with other kids' and always wanted the best bike. I never felt like my bike was good enough. I wanted to have the very best bike. In fourth grade or so, when people started having girlfriends in school, it was very, very important to me to have the most desirable girlfriend in the school. I would get into fights on the playground with kids over girls. I continued fighting men in one form or another over women for the next 20+ years until I settled down. When video games came into popularity, I competed with other kids as to who could have more video games. I always wanted to have more and better video games than other kids. Soon, designer jeans came into style, and when I got into seventh grade or so, and I wanted the most pairs of designer jeans--Jordache, Calvin Klein, and Sergio Vallente to name a few. I wanted nothing more than for my mother to take me shopping each weekend to get more clothes. Soon, I wanted a moped as well. I dreamed about getting a moped incessantly.

As I got older and progressed through my life, there was one thing after another that I wanted. There was always something else. It never ended.

- The friends I had.
- The people I associated with.
- It soon became titles like "President" of my class.
- It became recognition for various achievements.
- It became where I went to school.
- Then it became what I did for a living.
- How much money I made when I started as an attorney.
- What sort of car I drove.
- Where I lived.
- How prestigious my employer was.
- How big my company is.
- What school my child goes to.

On and on and on ...

Do you see the madness in this? It is all around us and we are all part of it. There is a huge problem with this, and it's related to the drive that all of us have on both a conscious and subconscious level to somehow add to who we are by possessing or associating with something outside ourselves, such as an object, person, place, or title. Most of this drive is due to our persistent identification with people, things, and other forms outside of ourselves. We subconsciously or consciously believe that our self worth comes from outside of ourselves and not inside of ourselves. We are persistently trying to find ourselves and our identities in things that are outside of ourselves, and the struggle seemingly never, ever ends. It is a sickness, and it is something that almost all of us suffer from. We continually want more and more.

I have been around the world and visited shrines, monasteries, and other sorts of places. Even in the places that seem the most enlightened, people constantly want more and more. Throughout the years, I've become involved with various spiritual organizations in my quest to improve my mind. I have gone to groups that preach we need to be in the here and now and not look outside ourselves for value. However, within weeks of attending one of these seminars or events, my phone starts ringing. People learn I am the CEO of a company and assume I must be rich. They call and write wanting money and donations. They talk about how they need a new this or a new that. People visit me at home unannounced, seeking donations and constantly come looking for alms. These are the same people whose message often is "everything is within you."

It's almost impossible to find anyone, or any group of people, who is not constantly striving for more and more, and striving to fill some void. There is something missing in almost all of us and in almost all of our groups. You can be part of one religion or another and they may preach to you about how Jesus said we are complete with God, for example. The message is comforting, and our image of Jesus is someone who walked around in sandals and a robe, and was not concerned with wealth. However, regardless of what church you are a part of, they almost all expect you to give them money. There is nothing wrong with this; however, they often use the money to build giant and incredible monuments that boggle the mind with their size and ornateness. You wonder why these same organizations don't use their resources to support the poor. No matter how much they are given, most religious groups will continue to ask for more and more. It never stops. They will soon want a new building, a new wing to a building, and more. Their hunger will never, ever end.

This is no different from us. We soon want new cars, new televisions, the latest fashions, and more. We, too, are never satisfied. As long as we seek to be complete in objects and forms outside of ourselves, we will never be complete.

People and groups are continually trying to complete themselves by acquiring things, titles, and more. The problem with this line of thinking, though, is that it simply never works. Whatever rewards we receive through possessing one thing, or getting one title, quickly go away and we find something else that we are interested in and "need." We are living in a society that is dominated by consumerism and the need to possess things. Our measure of progress in our society is almost always related to possessing more and more. We simply spend most of our lives trying to fill a gap that we perceive we have between ourselves and people who we think are better than us.

For the past few years I have employed a driver. I live about an hour or two from my office, depending upon the level of traffic each day. For me, being productive in the car (i.e., my time) is worth more than spending three to four hours sitting behind the wheel each day. I am in Los Angeles and throughout the years, I have had a variety of drivers. I have had professional drivers who were committed to being drivers, and I have had people who didn't really seem to have any interest in driving. This never comes out in the interviews, as much as I would like it to, but it always comes out.

When I first started interviewing people to be drivers, I started seeing a lot of guys show up that really deep down wanted to be actors. You could see this from their résumé. I didn't hire these guys, and their interest in being a driver was to make money, and hopefully, connections that would lead to future acting work. I was smart enough for the most part to avoid this. Then I hired one guy I didn't think would be interested in other things, and within about a month of hiring him, I discovered he

was in a band. He started giving me CDs of his band playing, asking for days off to go play various gigs, and his work just got shoddier and shoddier in so many respects. It became clear to me that he had no interest in what he was doing.

When he wouldn't show up for work, I'd call a car service. The drivers of the car service were all guys who did this sort of work for their careers, and they were incredibly enthusiastic. They had Internet inside their cars so they could check traffic. They knew all sorts of special routes to take. Their cars were always spic and span. They wore dark suits and always held open the doors for me. Their service was fantastic and many of these guys had been doing the work for 20 years or more. These guys were also very happy. They had interests and could talk about a lot of things. They loved their jobs. They had an almost "instinctual" relationship with the road and understood how to avoid various traffic in certain locations. In a word, they were passionate about their work and in a state of "flow" as far as I could tell. When you were with them, you could tell they were "in the zone" and the drives with them seemed to go faster. The entire experience was just better.

I contrasted this with the guy I hired from the band whose interest was being somewhere else.

Most people in most jobs are interested in being somewhere else.

Then I hired a guy who was from El Salvador. He showed up and had complete enthusiasm for his work. He told the person who interviewed him for me that he wanted nothing more than to be a driver and was incredibly enthusiastic to be working in the United States. A few weeks after I hired him, however, he started asking me the "secret" to my success and all sorts of other questions. He told me this was the last thing he wanted to do. He wanted to be someone else, and one day, he was going to have a driver like I did. All he spoke about was how he was capable of so much more than simply being a driver. I noticed that he started getting really shoddy about his work, and making a bunch of stupid mistakes. He, too, didn't really care what he was doing. Then I noticed this same pattern in the next person I hired. This person, too, wanted to be somewhere else, and be doing something else. I heard them on their cell phone talking about starting businesses, doing other things and more.

None of this is to say that the people who are drivers are wrong in wanting to do whatever it is they want to do. But the point is that most people go through life not present in their jobs, feeling a profound sense of lack, and wanting to be and do something else. As a consequence, they never succeed in what they are doing. This sense of lack and a need to be something different ends up permeating their entire lives and controlling them as long as they are alive. There is always something else they need to feel good about themselves--whether it's a job, title, person, place, or thing. There is just a continual sense of lack.

This is their ego talking to them, and I don't think it's productive. I do not think it helps them.

We are not just attached to things. I know people who spend their days and nights driving around from place to place, because they feel like they need a ton of friends in order to be happy. This struggle to meet new people and be popular almost never ends. Others work all the time so they can accumulate material possessions. Others have a cadre of different lovers, hoping for a sense of completeness from each one. People need something outside of themselves and chase after this throughout their lives in order to get a sense of completeness they feel is missing inside them. It is good to have a lot of friends, but there is something wrong when all of your time is consumed by the need to have more and more friends.

One of the most persistent things among most people is our identification of self worth with objects outside of ourselves. This includes not only the material things we possess, such as cars, houses, and other things, but also things like our jobs, our titles, the awards we have received, and where we went to school. We endow things with a sense of self and our importance and feelings of self worth come from objects outside of ourselves.

In movies, television shows, and other media there is always a character it seems who is a sex addict, drug addict, gambling addict, or alcoholic or has some other disorder. Our culture is obsessed with the addictions of stars and others. One of the most interesting shows to come along in years is the show called "Intervention," which follows people with various addictions. What is so interesting about all of these cases of addiction is that what most people do with their lives with drugs, sex, gambling, or liquor is the exact same thing that most of us do with our lives: seeking a sense of fulfillment in something outside of ourselves. We watch people on shows like "Intervention" who come close to killing themselves with substances and other addictions, and we cannot help but recognize part of ourselves in them: no matter how much they get of whatever it is they are addicted to, they are never going to be complete and happy. No matter how many titles, wealth, friends--or whatever it is we seek--we will never be happy. We will always seek more and more to make us feel complete.

Most of us are no different than a skid row heroin addict who needs one fix after another. The heroin addict does some heroin, and for a time, feels good. But then he eventually needs to go and find some more. The only difference is that what the heroin addict is seeking causes visible damage to them, whereas what we are seeking is a psychological disorder.

I am continually witnessing society's desire to find fault with others. My wife subscribes to various magazines such as "Us Weekly," "People," and others. Each week, these magazines contain all sorts of incredible gossip stories about this celebrity or that celebrity. The majority of these stories are unflattering. We read about horrible break ups, public spats, and more. Consider, for example, the public's fascination with Britney Spears and the things that have happened with her. There are, of course, many such stories. Why are we so fascinated with these things? I think this has to do with the fact that when we hear bad information about others, it makes us feel superior to them. Our self identities are so fragile that just as we seek things outside of ourselves to complete ourselves, we are also obsessed with those we believe have more, or are more than us, being weaker than us on some level. We all do this. We are obsessed as a culture with people who we perceive are above us, suddenly having less.

Several years ago, when my company began to get quite large, I started hearing all sorts of rumors about myself from various employees. There would be rumors of affairs, rumors that I was involved in something illegal, rumors that I'd done this or that. The larger my company grew, the more I started hearing rumors like this. When certain employees got fired, they persisted in spreading these rumors. For a long time, I used to be incredibly upset by these rumors because they seemed to be malicious. I realized, though, after some time what was going on. Most of the people who were involved in spreading such rumors had been fired, or were people who I considered poor employees and I'd let them know I thought this. When I confronted these people, I wounded their egos and how they perceived themselves. Their revenge and way of feeling "complete" again was to find some level of superiority to me in whatever way possible. This meant an interest in rumors and whatever weaknesses I might have. Our interest in other's weaknesses often adds something to our need to feel complete. We love hearing negative stories about our enemies and people who have made us feel inferior.

When you are in conflict with anyone, it's usually due to the fact that you have somehow wounded their sense of self or vice versa. On its crudest level, you could injure this person or kill them so you can feel better about yourself and be "complete"

(and people do). On another level, you will turn against them and attack them verbally, or undermine them in order to establish your ego and how you feel about yourself. This is something we all do in one sense or another, and it's something that characterizes most of our lives. We want to be right about various conflicts because if we are right, we somehow feel validated as people. Deep down, we want to feel better than others, and we get this through being right. When we are right and the other person is wrong, we are validated as people.

When I was growing up, my mother used to sit at the kitchen table or on the couch smoking cigarettes and talking on the phone to her friends for hours at a time. All of the conversations would almost invariably revolve around some perceived insult my mother had received, or given, or something that had happened--or vice versa with one of her friends. The entire conversation would go on for hours at a time, and she would either be supporting her friend, or her friend would support her. They would talk and talk, back and forth, until some sort of consensus was reached that my mother was right about something, or her friend was right about something. My mother would feel better. If it was my mother's ego that was involved, she would then call a few other friends after the conversation to see if they thought she was in the right, too. She would always get their agreement then move on. Other conversations I heard my mother having growing up involved rumors about other friends or bad things that had happened to people they knew. These sorts of conversations dominate our consciousness and what we do because they make us feel better in relation to others and make up for this sense of lack that we constantly seek to fill inside of us.

"Sure she is beautiful, but she is not very intelligent."

"I wouldn't want to have the responsibility he does. It would be horrible to be scrutinized all the time."

"They may appear to be a happy family, but she is really a pill popper and addicted to prescription medications."

"That was a good performance, but she is also anorexic."

"They cheat on each other."

"Oh, he is rich, but he has to work all the time and is really very unhappy."

On and on and on. How many statements like this have you heard? I have certainly heard a lot of them. Why is it that we need to denigrate others around us? Why is it that our self worth is often tied up in what others do? How can this be explained? We do this because there is a profound sense of emptiness and need for us to feel better than others. This is a collective disease. Religions do this and are well known for it, in fact. Orthodox Jews, for example, feel superior to Jews who are not as observant and do not cover their heads. Extremely Orthodox Jews feel superior to other sorts of Jews who are not as observant. The same can be said for people of most religions.

It's important that in our lives we get into a state of "flow" where our ego isn't involved in what we do. We need to be detached from the ego and, instead, just concentrate on what's before us. I think this is the highest state of being in both our lives and careers. The idea that we are complete and don't need outside verification in any form in order to feel successful. We don't need to feel in competition with others.

The people who experience the most problems in their careers are those who are more concerned with being recognized, paid, and getting more and more than being concerned with the work they do. The fact of the matter is once you start down this road, enough will never be enough. An executive who asks for a raise once due to having done something well, will likely ask for a raise a short time later if he does something else right. Pretty soon, this executive will start concentrating on how much others at similar companies make and feel a sense of lack. He will ask for more and more raises then will start looking for another job. He will find a new employer who pays him a better salary then the same process will repeat itself over and over and over again. The executive may settle down at some point, or he may not. Because of this executive's continual focus on what he lacks, he wastes his energy and never is able to get in a state of "flow" in his job where he could truly reach his potential. His work is shallow and nothing more than something that leads to immediate paychecks, raises, and bonuses. The work cannot possibly ever be the quality that it would be if his ego weren't involved.

The executive never learns to truly appreciate the work he does. Others in the workplace are viewed as competitors, and not people to cooperate with unless there's a secondary motive. The ego seeks out only immediate rewards and views others as people to compete with, not work with, unless they can lead to rewards that will enhance the ego. If the employer isn't viewed as prestigious in the market, the person will feel personally hurt deep down because their ego is tied up in the employer. Their identity is in their employer and they aren't necessarily one with their work.

I would encourage you in your career to release and get in a state of flow. You need to step back from your ego and realize that no employer and no job can ever fulfill your ego. Your greatest satisfaction in your career and life will come when you are able to be one with your job and what you do. Be in the here and now.

## THE LESSON

It is important that you be totally and completely involved in your work. When you do this, you establish a flow where time and problems disappear, and you will find yourself completing tasks with very little effort. Upon entering a state of flow, you can do your work unconcerned with power, competition, or recognition, vastly improving your chances of success. Satisfaction and rewards come when you are one with your work.

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