

Finding Your Flow

How to Identify Your Flow Assets and
Liabilities—
the Keys to Peak Performance Every Day



Bruce H. Jackson, Ph.D.
FOREWORD BY STEPHEN R. COVEY

Praise for *Finding Your Flow*

“Dr. Bruce Jackson is an international expert in leadership training and optimal performance. His new book offers effective and essential skills for improving human performance. I recommend it to all parents, teachers, coaches, students, and athletes. Get this book and go Find Your Flow!”

- Christopher Barden, Ph.D., J.D.

“Summitting Mt. Everest with 19 people, especially with the first blind man to accomplish the feat, is about knowing your assets and liabilities--both inside and out. In the summit of life you need to do the same analysis. Read and apply the tools in this book and begin planning for your own personal summit.”

- Jeff Evans, Everest Expedition Leader, corporate speaker, physician assistant

“*Finding Your Flow* is a book dedicated to helping anyone identify the common factors of high performance. It is a must for readers interested in beginning their self-development journey.”

- Alan Fine, CEO/President, InsideOut Development

“No fluff. No psychobabble. Just a solid, transformational guide for life and leadership.”

- Dr. Kerry Joels, International Organizational Consultant

“*Finding Your Flow* distills the qualities of personal leadership to their pure essence, teaching you an easy way to implement positive change in all aspects of life: business, personal, and spiritual.”

- Ernest M. John, Director of Research and Development/Engineering, Action Target Inc.

“By applying the tools and methods of *Finding Your Flow*, the budding high performer will possess the knowledge and skills necessary to master peak performance within any life arena.”

- Dr. Jim Loehr, Renowned performance psychologist and best-selling author

“A fully connected focus is an essential skill for performance excellence, quality learning and positive living. *Finding Your Flow* takes us another positive step forward in this direction.”

- Dr. Terry Orlick, Author of *In Pursuit of Excellence*, *Positive Living Skills and Embracing your Potential*

“Focus and being in the zone is what the Olympics are all about. If you want to be an Olympian in anything, *Finding Your Flow* will help you discover that 'one thing.'“

- Noelle Pikus-Pace, U.S. Olympian (Skeleton)

“Going far beyond theory, *Finding Your Flow* breaks down the process of high performance into steps any dedicated reader can accomplish.”

- Susan K. Perry, Ph.D., author of *Writing in Flow* and Creativity Blogger at PsychologyToday.com.

“*Finding Your Flow* provides a road map for peak performance through a straight forward approach that will benefit not only the newcomer to self-development, but also the seasoned expert who is looking for the edge to take their performance to the next level.”

- Rod B. Streets, MPA, SSBB, CMA, CFM - Manufacturing Finance Executive

“While working with Olympic athletes and performing artists from many countries, I found that getting more control over the flow state is a need among almost everyone. This book will help peak performers as well as the general public to establish a life in which flow can become a part of everyday living.”

- Lars-Eric Uneståhl, Ph.D, Swedish Olympic Team
Psychologist

“The *Finding Your Flow* model is straightforward and easy for our managers to understand and apply in both personal and business situations.”

- Jeff Weber, VP People, Ancestry.com

“Many people jump into personal development training without the self-awareness to choose the right method of practice. *Finding Your Flow* provides just this awareness.”

- Dr. Steve Wilkinson, Director of Tennis & Life Camps

“It’s a huge treat to have an extremely important, yet complex, subject such as *flow* made accessible via an insightful analysis. Better yet, this book provides a practical roadmap that enables anyone who is serious to expand their flow.”

- Dr. Jack Zenger, CEO, Zenger-Folkman, co-author of the best-selling *The Extraordinary Leader* and *The Inspiring Leader*.

“Few people have gone as far and as deep studying what liberates people from mediocrity as Bruce Jackson has. Pay attention!”

- Nathaniel Zinsser, PhD, CC-AASP, Director,
Performance Enhancement Program, United States
Military Academy (West Point)

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by

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FOREWORD

Quite simply, the main quest of humanity is to discover its potential. In every arena and stage of life the human spirit seeks to identify the unique contributions that it was designed to make. In my study and teaching of effective human behavior and relations I have discovered that the elements of success are common to all men and women, girls and boys. There are principles and practices that, if understood, can be applied by anyone to maximize their effectiveness on the job, on the playing field, and in life.

You may have discovered that throughout your life you have experienced moments—even hours, days and weeks—where tremendous focus, meaning, enjoyment, purpose graced the life-stage you were performing on. You may have discovered that these were special moments where everything just came together and gave you a glimpse of what you were made of and what you were designed to accomplish. You may have recognized these moments as “peak experiences” or moments of “flow”.

When you boil it all down, human growth and effectiveness come from our best and most profound moments—even our moments of flow. When I wrote the *7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, my objective was to illuminate and simplify the key principles of individual, interpersonal and collective effectiveness. The very elements that comprise this effectiveness are many and vast, yet they are unique and personal to each person. As you read, study, and apply the methods within the powerful book you're holding, you will come to understand yourself and your environment more deeply.

Finding Your Flow is a book with a grand goal and purpose: to help raise your level of awareness regarding the building blocks of effectiveness, then to help you sort out these building blocks in order to identify *your* most important personal development plan

of action. You might, therefore, think of this book as a pre-cursor or primer to your personal leadership training.

The motivated reader who seeks to improve his/her performance in any life arena can use this book as a starting point and framework for a life-long pursuit of self-understanding, excellence, happiness, and for living life in crescendo!

- Dr. Stephen R. Covey

Section I – Introducing Flow

CHAPTER 1: From Low to High

I once asked my father to describe a time in his life when he was at his very best. Without hesitation, he said that his four years serving as a PT boat commander in Europe and Africa were when he had his most profound and engaging personal experiences. This was a surprise, so I dug deeper and asked, “What made the war so profound for you?” It soon became clear why those years were so transforming for him.

For most people, war is a time of great personal sacrifice, uncertainty, stress, and fear. For my father, war was all of those things, but it was also something more: He felt great purpose, his days were bound by clear roles and measurable goals. He was driven by powerful motives, and he got precise feedback for his actions. Pursuing the enemy, managing other men, being ready for action at any time—these requirements took full powers of mind and body. They pushed the limits of his mental, emotional, and physical capacity, all for the greater good of his country—something bigger than himself. In essence for much of those years, my father was “in the zone.” He was, in fact, in *flow*.

The Bad Day

Because I think you'll find it enlightening and perhaps a stark contrast to the story above, I'd like to share how my personal interest in flow began.

It wasn't until I was about 16 that I really noticed it. I was scheduled to play in the Stillwater Open, a tennis tournament consisting of eight schools. As the number one player from my school, I was paired against the number one players from eight of

the leading high schools in my region. Our number two player played all of the number twos and so on down the ladder.

The day before, our team had played a small school located outside the local farming community. None of us had expected much competition that day. Dressed confidently, I met my opponent—a short stocky kid who didn't look much like a tennis player—an old racket, tan socks, that sort of thing.

It didn't take long before I began to get frustrated. I wasn't playing particularly well, and this kid wasn't missing much. His game wasn't pretty, but he ran down every ball and got it back over the net. Soon I found myself on the losing side of the match, and my emotions got the best of me. No longer was I focused on the ball, a game plan, my breathing, or anything else under my control. Rather, I was consumed with frustration and anger. In a flash the game was over, and I was left bewildered and my ego shattered. I was sure my tennis rackets were going to find their way into the nearest trash can.

After a cooling-off period, Coach came up to me and asked, "What happened?" "I don't know," I said. "I just stunk it up out there today. I didn't estimate my opponent's persistence. I got frustrated, I didn't move. I wasn't focused."

"Well, be ready for tomorrow's tournament in Stillwater. We're leaving early." Playing the next day's tournament was the last thing I wanted to do, but there was no getting around it.

From Food Fight to Flow

We were up early and met at the courts. I drove one car, and Carter, our number two man, another, and Coach a third. With each of us carrying a third of the team, we were off to Stillwater, about an hour and a half away.

About 30 miles into the trip, it happened. Carter positioned his red Buick in front of my mother's pea green wagon. I saw some

commotion in their car, followed by a rolling down of the window. “What the—!” At 65 miles an hour, a large red and white projectile found its way onto the windshield of my car. I couldn’t make it out. “It’s a strawberry!” someone said. “With whipped cream!” said another. “They’re throwing their lunch at us.” It was war! Soon another strawberry came flying, then another, two direct hits and we couldn’t do anything about it. We were boxed in. The windshield wipers were working double-time and I was about out of fluid. What a mess.

“Pull out your lunches, boys,” I yelled. “It’s payback time!” When I saw an opening in traffic, I took it. We flanked our teammates on the left, then took the lead position, all windows lowered. Bologna slices were flung, along with everything else we had in the car. We made multiple direct hits, and we could see the look on their faces. Sixty more miles to go and the party was just getting started. It was the funniest moment of our young lives! We laughed until we cried. Never had a food fight escalated to such a magnitude on the I35W highway.

We food-fighters were the last two cars to pull into the tennis complex, and we were late. All the athletes were lined up and taking directions from the tournament director. The only two parking spaces lay right in front of the entire group. Coach was already there, and he was beside himself with anger. Everyone stared at us, not because we were late, but because our cars were completely covered in food.

The chastisement was swift and harsh, but we had a tournament to play. We were all assigned to our courts and paired with our opponents. It was about 70 degrees, the sun was finding its way to the sky, and the day was beautiful. With laughter in our hearts, the mood was set.

As the matches progressed, one 8-game pro-set after another, I noticed something: I couldn’t miss a ball. My focus was spot on. I was not only having fun out there, but I was moving exceptionally well. Nothing was distracting me—nothing from

the inside and nothing from the outside. All I dealt with was the ball and where it was going to be placed. Each shot was practically perfect, and before I knew it, I had won the tournament. Eight matches to zero, with less than 20 points lost in the entire day!

The previous day, I had struggled against an unknown and relatively inexperienced player, yet today I walked off the court with the most profound sense of personal excellence and control I had ever felt. I sat down and tried to dissect the experience and tease out what I had done differently.

Was it my mood? Certainly I felt happy and calm. It was all part of the security you feel when connecting deeply with friends and those you most care about. This feeling of calm seemed to modify my mood and my thoughts. No longer was I there to justify my existence. Instead I could enjoy the moment, play the game, and simply have fun. I didn't have to prove my value to the world through my tennis playing. Letting go of the outcome and everything outside myself allowed me to focus on the only things that mattered: the ball, the court, and playing each point as if nothing else existed. With such an attitude and focus there was little that might get in my way—no unrealistic expectations, just *bounce* and *hit*. At that point, winning and losing simply took care of themselves.

Of course there was a bit more to it. For example, I later understood how much it helped that my goals and objectives were clear (to triumph over my opponent, be ranked in the top 10), there were boundaries to the game (lines and space surrounded by a fence), clear rules (scoring, time between points, etiquette), strategies for engagement (exposing the weaknesses of my opponent), feedback (statistics, shot percentages, final score), and so on. I truly enjoyed hitting the ball and moving my body to execute each shot with precision, and I always knew where I stood relative to my final objective. These same factors became even more prevalent in my college years and later as I had the chance to play world-class players. Although the intensity and

rigor of these games were unmatched, the principles and practices were the same. How fascinating that the arenas of tennis and war, so different, yet so alike when it came to inducing flow.

Those new and simple insights were very powerful. I had learned something and I was determined to capture it, bottle it up, and use it the next time I stepped onto the court.

In my life-long pursuit of such special moments, it has become clear to me that almost any activity, or meaningful life arena (MLA) as I like to call them, can become a place for the expression of personal excellence—or what many call flow, peak experience, or being in the zone. These are enjoyable states, often setting the stage for higher levels of performance or satisfaction and the utilization of one's greatest gifts or talents. This is what the esteemed psychologist Abraham Maslow called self-actualization.

Once you've experienced flow you will find it highly attractive—everything seems to fall into place. These moments and hours are so desirable that many people seek to engineer their lives around them.

There is a problem, however, one that we are going to explore and aim to resolve within this book. It's that flow can be an elusive state of mind, one that makes an entrance and an exit, usually without invitation or announcement. It is the Holy Grail of experiences, one that every athlete, astronaut, surgeon, military pilot, Formula One driver, firefighter, poet, and dancer wishes they could tap into at a moment's notice. These can be difficult moments to catch and hold on to, but I believe that's only because most of us lack the necessary insight.

The fact is, finding your flow is possible—even probable—when you become aware of and commit to certain deliberate practices.

How to Use This Book

Kurt Lewin, the well-known organizational theorist and practitioner, said, “Nothing is as practical as a good theory.” And it was Oliver Wendell Holmes who remarked, “I wouldn’t give a fig for the simplicity on this side of complexity, but I would give my right arm for the simplicity on the far side of complexity.” You might combine both comments and say that while good theories are useful, they must be simple enough to apply in everyday life.

Flow theory, in fact, derives from a rather simple premise—that deep focus is valuable. Look a bit deeper and we find a holistic framework that gives incredible insight into the nature of human potential.

Beyond theory and the hundreds of articles and books on the subject of flow, I looked deep into people’s experiences, interviewing more than 100 men and women to identify the many principles, practices, and strategies that individuals actually use to get and stay in a flow state on a regular basis. These interviewees included students as young as 15 and people as old as 95, with distinct groups that included high school students, college students, professionals, and what I will be referring to as the more “experienced” group of individuals at least 65 years old.

From controlling tension to visualization and from getting fired up to developing personal rituals, humans have an endless capacity to discover and build personal strategies for finding flow. By better understanding the major principles and concepts of flow as they relate to your own Meaningful Life Arenas, you will have the tools you need to create your own Personal Flow Formula.

As you read this book, let it serve as a starting point for your journey to personal excellence. Consider it a kind of workshop-in-a-book, as I’ve modeled it after the popular workshops and

classes I've been giving for six years to both college students and professionals in many fields.

Throughout the rest of **Section I**, which is especially aimed at readers less familiar with flow, I'll be sharing information about flow, including what it is exactly and what it feels like when you're in it so you can recognize it. You're in charge, so feel free to skim these basics, though I believe you'll learn something new no matter what your background is.

In **Section II**, you'll get an overview of flow strategies, including external, internal, and time-based strategies.

Then, in **Section III**, we'll seriously tackle how you can find your own flow. We'll begin with a thorough self-analysis, followed by identifying your personal Flow Assets and Flow Liabilities. Then you'll learn how to build your Personal Flow Formula.

And finally, in **Section IV**, we'll go even further in exploring and demonstrating how you can take action and become conscious of your own competence, eventually learning how to become your own best coach and benefit from flow whenever you choose. Enjoy the journey.

Focus and being in the zone is what the Olympics are all about. If you want to be an Olympian in anything, Finding Your Flow will help you discover that 'one thing.'

– Noelle Pikus-Pace, U.S. Olympian (Skeleton)

By understanding the principles and applying the practices of *Finding Your Flow*, you will not only develop the awareness of peak performance principles, you will put them to work in any "Meaningful Life Arena" you choose. By applying the *Finding Your Flow* personal training system you will:

- Recognize, understand and learn from the most profound performance moments of your life
- Understand the core factors that both help and hinder your performance
- Assess your Flow Assets and Liabilities
- Develop your own Personal Flow Formula
- Identify your “one thing” and begin your training journey
- Develop a personal action plan to develop unconscious competence in your most importance performance skill
- Use the *Finding Your Flow* system to self-coach and as a process for life-long learning and personal development.

Finding Your Flow will help you recognize that the principles of peak performance and flow can be learned and applied by anyone who desires to take their performance to the next level.



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