

# How We Lead

Practical Wisdom for Leaders and Coaches  
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By Amiel Handelsman

## Flow, Boredom and Anxiety An Interview with Bill Hefferman of Intel

*This month we explore a powerful way to create successful organizations and happy people: increasing flow. No, not the flow of cash (though that doesn't hurt!), but the experience of doing what we do best and loving every second of it. New research suggests that when people are in flow in the workplace, they're more engaged, and their organizations produce better results. To help me understand flow and what it means for leadership, I sat down with Bill Hefferman and chatted over smoked salmon omelets at a restaurant in Northwest Portland (Oregon) called Besaw's Cafe. Bill works at Intel Corporation, where he is highly sought by managers interested in using a strengths-based approach to elevate team performance.*

**What is flow and why does it matter in the workplace?**

**Bill Hefferman:** Flow is the state of peak performance, a state of concentration so focused that it amounts to absolute absorption in an activity. People lose track of space and time. It is a time of high productivity, high creativity, and high innovation. Flow occurs when there is a great match between a person's strengths and the challenge at hand. Strength equals competence combined with passion. There is positive affect, often deep enjoyment that goes with it but not necessarily in the moment flow is happening because flow is an emotion-less state. You're so engrossed in what you're doing that you don't feel emotion in the midst of those flow activities. It's when you step out that you say, "Wow, this is so great!"

**When are you in flow?**

**BH:** I'm in flow when I'm presenting to a large group of people on a topic I know well and care about, when I think the information I am sharing is of use to the audience, and when they are at least neutral

to somewhat receptive about the topic.

Another example is when I'm talking with a manager about a team issue and we're trying to identify the root cause and opportunity. What I do is try to listen and not jump to conclusions. At some point and pretty quickly, something will shift, things will become clear, and I'll say, "I think it's *this*."

I could do those two activities for most of my job and be happy, provided that they increased in complexity and difficulty over time so as to provide a sufficient challenge.

**How did you get interested in the concept of flow?**

**BH:** I heard Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi [author of *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*] speak as part of a class I took on authentic happiness with Martin Seligman.

**Is it fair to assume that most people are not in flow 100 percent of the time?**

**BH:** Safe to assume [smiles]. And there are some classic signs you are not in flow: anxiety and boredom. Anxiety is a term associated with a constellation of emotions like frustration and overwhelm. Neuroscientifically speaking, it occurs

when there is an amygdala hijacking and there is a flooding of negative emotions and stress hormones. On the other end of the spectrum is boredom: when your life force is sucked out of you and you're feeling inert and stuck.

**What causes boredom?**

**BH:** It happens when your strengths exceed the challenge that you're facing and/or when you disengage from the challenge because it's not a challenge that has meaning for you.

**Can you give an example of strengths exceeding the challenge?**

**BH:** I've been in situations where there is a lull in the project (and there are all sorts of reasons why that happen—bad manager, haven't seeded your pipeline).

**How about an example of the other cause of boredom?**

**BH:** When what was once challenging becomes rote. At Intel I used to teach Effective Meetings. When I first started seven years ago, it was exciting for me to teach this to a roomful of people. I knew the topic well. But after I delivered a bunch of them, it was no longer challenging. I heard the same

questions again and again. You see, flow occurs when you are called to bring the best of who you are to master a challenge. It's that state of heightened attention and awareness that produces flow. So when something becomes rote, you're not called to bring the best of who you are. You're just bringing your hard wiring. You can do this in your sleep—not literally.

**Actually some *can* do these things in their sleep.**

**BH:** It's important to remember these are not necessarily bad things. Boredom is something that happens naturally in any challenge you are in. You develop strength that makes something that was once challenging mundane. The good thing is that boredom induces us to grow because it is an uncomfortable place to be, so we kick ourselves in the butt to seek a bigger challenge.

**What's the upside of anxiety?**

**BH:** Anxiety tells you that you are in a situation where there is an opportunity for high growth. If you can catch yourself and self-soothe your amygdala hijack, you can use anxiety as a stimulus to rise to the challenge through the use of your core strengths.

Here is the interesting thing about anxiety. There is

eustress, which is positive energy-giving stress. You're given a task that causes you to say, "I don't know if I can do that," but it evokes a positive state of anticipation. For example, I was asked to give a keynote presentation on strengths last spring at the Oregon Women in Intel Network Conference. Before that I had only presented on strengths to small intact teams. When they announced the topic, within a week, 900 women had signed up. That was anxiety-producing, but it was a positive anxiety, and it was aligned with my mission and purpose.

**In what contexts are you using this at Intel?**

**BH:** I use flow as part of the business case for working with teams and organizations to define their individual members' strengths. It's the How This Works of strengths theory.

**How does what we're talking about "change the game" in leadership**

**BH:** It's at that nexus of strength and need that states of flow are produced. According to the Gallup research, this has measurable impacts on productivity, creativity, and customer satisfaction.

**For every extra hour that an employee is in flow, how much more money does a company make?**

**BH:** The Gallup books *First Break All the Rules* and *12: The Elements of Great Managing* have numbers for this. [Gallup interviewed 200,000 employees in 8000 business units within 36 companies. Employees who strongly agreed that at work they have the opportunity to do what they do best every day were 50% more likely to be in work in business units with lower turnover, 38% more likely to work in more productive business units, and 44% more likely to work in business units with higher customer satisfaction scores.]

[Having more employees in flow] also boosts employee commitment, engagement and fulfillment, resulting in lower turnover and lower absenteeism.

**In your experience, as you think of all the teams and managers you work with, do you find that people have more difficulty spelling amygdala or Csikszentmihalyi?**

**BH:** Csikszentmihalyi

**Why do you think that is?**

**BH:** Because CSIKSZENTMIHALYI looks like

something you'd read on the eye-chart at the DMV.

**Thank you**

Warm regards,

Amiel Handelsman  
CuriousLeader Consulting LLC

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email: [amiel@curiousleader.com](mailto:amiel@curiousleader.com)

phone: 503-235-8557

web: <http://www.curiousleader.com>

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