

Creative Thinking Part 2: Insights and Flow

3: Creating Insights

Insights are like AHA moments. They seem to appear from nowhere. When we are thinking about a problem and feel stuck, and then step away, often the insight comes when we least expect it. This is because our brain's Reticular Activation System, or RAS, continues to seek solutions even when we are no longer consciously thinking about the problem. Insights cannot come when we're stressed because our thoughts are like static, making a stressful moment a great time to take a break.

Follow this simple 5-step process for stimulating insights:

1. **Gather knowledge** — through research, experience, observation, etc.
2. **Hard thinking** — considering knowns and unknowns, identify alternative solutions, to the point of burn out.
3. **Incubation** — when you reach a point of saturation or burn out, take a break and allow the unconscious mind to work its magic. Rather than simply doing nothing, do something that stimulates your imagination, emotions, or happiness.
4. **The Aha Moment** — ideas will come to you at random times. Always write them down.
5. **Developing the idea** — sit back down with these new ideas and expand on them, looking for possibilities and analyzing possible outcomes.

Idea: _____

Knowledge Gathered	Knowns/Unknowns, Possible Solutions, etc
<i>Take a Break</i>	
Insights or Aha Moments	Ideas and Possibilities

4. Creative flow

Being in a state of flow is one of the most sought after states for creative people of all types. Flow is when you are completely absorbed in what you are working on and time and the world seem to get lost because you are so in tune with what you are doing. The peak of creativity and performance exist in this state, and the good news is that we can learn to put ourselves into a state of flow.

The following are 9 characteristic of environments which lead to the flow state, so each should be addressed in your organization and creative team in order to give members the opportunity to get into this creative state.

1. **Clear goals:** Defining clearly, what you are trying to achieve, giving meaning and purpose to your actions. How can you help your organization and management establish clear goals?

2. **Immediate feedback:** As you work, you are getting immediate feedback to your actions so you can adjust to achieve optimum performance. (For example, actually testing your ideas.) How can you help your organization and management get feedback? See the Design Thinking section for ideas.

3. **Balanced challenge:** To reach a state of flow we have to have a balance between our current skills and abilities and the level of challenge beyond our norm. If something is too hard we may give up, but if it's too easy we get bored. How can you help individuals in your organization experience challenge and push beyond their current capabilities?

4. **Present moment awareness:** When we are in flow we are fully engaged in the present moment. We are not thinking about what we have to do later or what happened in the past. (See the activity about awareness below). How can you integrate more awareness and mindfulness into the workplace?

5. **Complete concentration:** We are able to get in a state of flow when we free from distractions and can fully engage with what we are working on without any worrying about multitasking, being interrupted, or future responsibilities. See the lecture about Creativity Blocks for more. How can you decrease interruptions for your staff?
6. **Failure is a non-factor:** When we are in a state of flow and fully engaged in the now, we are not judging our self or worrying about getting something wrong. We must feel supported to risk failure. What can you do to reduce fear of judgement or failure within your organization?
7. **Self-consciousness disappears:** When we are in a state of flow we are not concerned about what others may think or our self-image because all our thoughts and actions are fully engaged with what we are working on. Again, this requires the support of the team.
8. **Time is distorted:** When you are in a state of flow, time seems to disappear and hours can feel like minutes. This is why it's important to be given ample, interruption free time (hours) to work on creative projects. (See #5)
9. **The ultimate reward:** When in a state of flow, even difficult or otherwise unpleasant activities become deeply enjoyable and rewarding for their own sake. Work becomes fun and you feel inspired to work on it more and more, which of course benefits both the individual and the organization. How would having employees be truly satisfied with their jobs impact your company culture? Your bottom line?

Practice Awareness and Mindfulness to Get into a Flow State

Choose an activity which you would like to complete while in a state of flow, in order to practice awareness and mindfulness. Ensure you will have at least 10 minutes without being interrupted.

Step 1. Pause, take three deep slow intentional breaths. Let the mind be fully engaged in the breath for that time and nothing else.

Step 2. Focus all of your attention in the present moment. Use all of your senses. Look around and notice what you see. Become aware of any sounds going on and then let them fade into the background. Do you smell anything? Is there any light hitting you? Wind hitting your face? Vibration from electronics nearby? Can you feel the pressure between you and the chair you're sitting on? Are there sensations within your body that you can feel?

Step 3. Now, slowly, begin your activity. Maintain your awareness of the present moment while you do it.

Step 4. Remain alert and keep the mind fully attentive to what you are doing in that moment. If your mind slips off into thinking, pay attention again to your breathing and bring your awareness to the moment again. Be in a state of expectancy and curiosity, as if you're seeing it all for the first time. As you become better at sustaining this activity, you'll find that your focus will shift from what's going on around you into a full-blown focus on your activity. At this point, everything else will disappear. This is when you've entered flow.

Using Challenge to Get Into a Flow State

Step 1. Set yourself a meaningful challenge, such as a new skill you're learning.

Step 2. Make it difficult but not impossible. You want this activity to push you out of your comfort zone and not be too easy, but not be so hard that it's frustrating.

Step 3. Minimize distractions like e-mail, phone, or other interruptions. Turn off anything that can beep or ring. Schedule this time with others so they know you're busy.

Step 4. Use triggers to alter your state of mind. Make a list of triggers that you've experienced getting you into a state of heightened awareness or flow. These can include:

- times of day
- certain places
- specific people
- activities
- music
- coffee or other drinks
- rituals and warm-up routines
- exercise
- smells and scents
- specific items
- other experiences

Step 5. After you've triggered yourself into a flow state, continue the activity.