

What is group flow and why is it so awesome?

Much of the success of human beings has to do with our ability to collaborate and work together. No one human could build a skyscraper, or get to the moon, or really any other monumental human achievement; we achieve these feats by working together, by combining our efforts. Therefore, much like a single human can “flow out” on a given project, a group of humans can experience a “group flow” when all their goals align and they work together as an efficient unit. However, this is not a trait unique to us humans, it is a well known fact that as a group of organisms come together, there end up being “emergent properties” that arise. A classic example of an emergent property would be a large group of birds, such as starlings, coming together to form murmurations (massive flocks of birds flying in what appears to be an intricate dance). In these clouds, no one bird is aware of the actions of all other birds, but rather of the actions of a small number of birds around them. (King, Barbara J.) Much like a human building a skyscraper, we are not aware of all the working parts and fine intricacies of every worker on the skyscraper, just the ones that we need to concern ourselves with. As one, a worker may be working on just a small subsection of the building, but as a network, their co-workers come together and form a unified group working towards a single goal; an emergent property of a large number of humans.

This concept can be taken a step further into something like music. Improvisational music groups, better known as “jam bands”, are a perfect example of emergent properties of a completely intertwined group of people. According to the book “Group Creativity: Music, Theater, Collaboration” by R. Keith Sawyer, musical group flow is achieved when the level of the extrinsic challenge is able to be met by the skills of the members of the group. In other words, the members of a group will collectively combine skills to meet the level of challenge needed and create something greater than the sum of their parts (Sawyer, R. Keith). In the case of music, the extrinsic motivation to create enjoyable music can drive a group to work together and collaborate to create enjoyable music for no reason other than the fact that it is enjoyable.

The most important part of group flow is the “greater than the sum of their parts” part. This is what makes human collaboration so powerful is that we are stronger together than we are individually. This fact is what caused tech giant Google to look for a new CEO at Burning Man of all places. The founders of the company wanted to find someone familiar with the concept of group flow, a very prominent concept in Black Rock City. By observing how the prospective CEO acted in a group flow heavy situation, they could gauge how good this candidate could be at facilitating group flow back in the workplace (Reilly, Joe Avella and Kevin). Evidently, this strategy worked; the new CEO was appointed and Google is currently booming.

The concept of group flow has been around for centuries, but only recently has any significant research really been conducted on this mysterious state. Hopefully as time goes on, we humans will be able to further understand the nature of this mindset and use it to make positive changes in the world around us. We are much more than the sum of our parts, and science is beginning to show it.

Works Cited

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