

Flow and the StratML Standard:

Transforming the Psychology of Optimal Personal Experience into Improved Collective Performance

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In *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi asserts optimal experience is “something that we *make* happen.” (p. 3) Yet he suggests success cannot be pursued for its own sake. Rather, it must be derived as a side-effect of commitment to causes larger than ourselves. (p. 2)

Shielding members from chaos is a primary function of every culture but cultural hubris causes problems when it generates a sense of entitlement. (p. 11) Indeed, while material well-being has increased tremendously, Mihaly observes the quality of personal experience has improved relatively little. Moreover, he argues the only way to achieve such gains is for individuals to take control of their own consciousness. (p. 16)

More specifically, he says, “The solution is to gradually become free of societal rewards and learn how to substitute ... rewards that are under one’s own powers.” (p. 19) With respect to how to do so, he addresses the concept of intentions, which “arise in consciousness whenever a person is aware of desiring something or wanting to accomplish something.” Intentions keep our minds focused on some stimuli to the exclusion of others. (p 27)

The vision of the Strategy Markup Language (StratML) standard (ISO 17469-1) – *A worldwide web of intentions, stakeholders, and results* – is supportive of such focus. In the parlance of planning and performance reporting, it is called “strategic alignment,” meaning that all of an organization’s people and resources are effectively directed toward realization of its goals.

Mihaly argues the existence of individuals who depart from the norms demonstrates that consciousness can be ordered to support different goals, and he asserts we have the freedom to manage our own subjective realities. (p. 28) He suggests the information we allow into consciousness “determines the content and the quality of life.” (p 30) Yet most of us fall far short of our peak capabilities for processing information.

Information processing technology is advancing rapidly and Donald Norman has noted [things make us smart](#). By that he means much of the necessary information has been built into the tools we use to accomplish our objectives, thereby freeing our minds from having to deal with distractions and overwhelming complexities. However, lacking an open, machine-readable data standard like StratML and supporting services, the linkages between our objectives and the means to accomplish them are immature at best, in the sense of the [Capability Maturity Model](#) (CMM).

For example, not only E-mail but also all of the existing “social” networking services are highly immature for business-quality purposes. While good things can and do happen as a result of usage of systems at the [lowest, chaotic level](#) of maturity, individuals and organizations aspiring to improve and grow will seek to take more effective control of their own futures.

Toward that end, Mihaly says, “The mark of a person who is in control of consciousness is the ability to focus attention at will, to be oblivious to distractions, to concentrate for as long as it takes to achieve a

goal, and not longer.” (p 31) Indeed, he asserts, the self is primarily defined by the hierarchy of goals we have established for ourselves, step by step, over our lifetimes. (p. 34)

With respect to why some people are more able to control their consciousness than others, he raises the concept of *psychic entropy*, when information conflicts with our intentions or distracts us from pursuing them. (p. 36) Entropy is the opposite of flow, which can be achieved when we are successfully engaged in the pursuit of **goals we have established for ourselves**. (p. 40, emphasis added)

Even as society has become more complex and thus psychologically more challenging, Mihaly makes the following observations about us as individuals:

Following a flow experience, the organization of the self is more complex... It is by becoming increasingly complex that the self might be said to grow. Complexity is the result of two broad psychological processes: *differentiation* and *integration*. Differentiation implies a movement toward uniqueness, toward separating oneself from others. Integration refers to the opposite: a union with other people, with ideas and entities beyond the self. A complex self is one that succeeds in combining the opposite tendencies...

Complexity is often thought to have a negative meaning, synonymous with difficulty and confusion. That may be true, but only if we equate it with differentiation alone. Yet complexity also involves a second dimension – the integration of autonomous parts... (p. 41)

To differentiate ourselves, we must make our goals explicit, and to effectively integrate ourselves with autonomous others in the cyberage, we must document our objectives in an open, standard, machine-readable format like StratML. As we begin to do so, value-added intermediaries can apply machine-intelligence and the emerging Internet of Things (IoT) to help us form “[more perfect](#)” unions to deal with increasing complexity and become far more productive than ever before possible, individually and collectively.

Not merely to simplify complexity but also facilitate timely feedback, Mihaly notes the importance of having near-term objectives supporting our longer-term goals. (p. 180) The StratML standard provides for the nesting of as many objectives as appropriate under each goal, and each objective may have multiple performance indicators by which progress and success can be evaluated as frequently as necessary.

Mihaly also observes that when we invest psychic energy in interactions we become parts of systems larger than ourselves. (p. 65) However, he also cautions the consequences of any particular instance of flow may be good or bad in the broader sense and must be evaluated in terms of inclusive social criteria. Moreover, he asserts, “we must constantly reevaluate what we do, lest habits and past wisdom blind us to new possibilities.” (p. 70)

Not only should we consider what we’ve done but also the results our actions engender, for ourselves and others. We should try to do so as objectively as possible, by making the results explicit and sharing them openly with those who may be affected. When we do, value-added intermediaries can facilitate the kind of feedback we need to achieve flow on a mature, routine, timely, and ongoing basis.

Turning to the personal values undergirding our goals, Mihaly notes:

We have come to accept that our morality simply no longer has currency outside our own culture. According to this new dogma, it is inadmissible to apply one set of values to evaluate another. And since every evaluation across cultures must necessarily involve at least one set of values foreign to one of the cultures being evaluated, the very possibility of comparison is ruled out. (p. 78)

On the other hand, he suggests, if the desire to achieve optimal experience is assumed to be the foremost goal in every culture, the issues associated with cultural relativism are diminished. Along those lines of thought, Mihaly suggests two criteria:

A starting point would be to say that one society is “better” than another if a greater number of its people have access to experiences that are in line with **their goals**. (emphasis added)

A second essential criterion would specify that these experiences should lead to the growth of the self on an individual level, by allowing as many people as possible to develop increasingly complex skills. (p 78)

While there are any number of indices comparing the performance of nations against each other, thus far none of them directly applies those two criteria, much less in an open, standard, machine-readable format like StratML – thereby enabling value-added intermediaries to make salient to citizens how well their culture is helping them achieve their own goals.

It should be noted, however, that many individuals and some cultures may not accept Mihaly’s assumption. Indeed, they may view it simply as an example of the self-serving hubris of those of us born in Western societies. Moreover, some scientists are now questioning the very concept of free will, arguing that our actions are far more determined by nature and the networks of which we are parts than we might have imagined. To the degree that may be true, there is no point in reading further. Whatever is destined to happen will happen. Whether we like it or not is immaterial.

On the other hand, there is one circumstance in which that philosophy will most certainly prove to be true: if we allow it to become a self-fulfilling prophesy.

In terms similar to Jean Lipman-Blumen’s conceptualization of “[control myths](#),” Mihaly suggests there is no evidence the people of any selfish, violent, or fearful culture chose to be such. However, once negative practices and beliefs “become part of the norms and habits of a culture, people assume that this is how things must be ...” They believe there are no other options. (p. 79) In short, if we choose to absolve ourselves of responsibility for our own fate, it most certainly will be controlled by others but, ironically, we may have no one to blame but ourselves.

Moreover, while flow powerfully motivates, it does not guarantee virtue. As Mihaly understates, “when a group of people embrace goals and norms that will enhance its enjoyment of life there is always the possibility that this will happen at the expense of someone else.” (p 82) While there may crimes that are victimless, for every action there is a reaction, and if those who are affected have no say in the matter, chances seem great that the results will be less than optimal to them.

While values can and do differ across cultures, to the degree that anyone’s actions may affect anyone else, the impacted “stakeholders” have a right to know not only the actor’s values but also their

intentions, i.e., their goals, the results they intend to produce. Thus two additional criteria might be added to Mihaly's list. A society is better to the degree that it:

Reveals the intentions, actions, and results we impose upon each other, and

Empowers us to influence, if not determine such outcomes.

With respect to impacts upon others, Mihaly notes the word "politics" originally referred to anything that involved the ancient Greeks in affairs extending beyond their personal and family welfare. However, in modern society trying to optimize the goals of unrelated individuals entails tremendous complexity. (p. 190) Moreover, he asserts, "the true function of politics is not to make people more affluent, safe, or powerful, but to let as many as possible enjoy an increasingly complex existence." However, "no social change can come about until the consciousness of individuals is changed first." Thus, he argues, "Those who try to make life better for everyone without having learned to control their own lives first usually end up making things worse all around." (p. 191)

Turning to the making of meaning, Mihaly notes enjoyment derived from ad hoc, spontaneous activities is susceptible to chaos. Reducing psychic entropy requires the establishment of goals that are relatively difficult, from which other goals logically follow and harmony will result if the individual invests energy in developing the necessary skills. (pp. 214 & 215)

In terms of the StratML standard, what he is talking about is a *vision* statement, a projected view of the desired future state of the world that can only be pursued, toward which progress can be made and success may be temporarily achieved, but which can never be finally accomplished in the sense there is nothing left to be done. As the saying goes, it is "a journey, not a destination." For example, theoretically, if not practically speaking, there might be a day in which no child goes to bed hungry but there is always tomorrow.

Vision statements should be inspirational, based upon deeply held personal values. In support of such values, Mihaly avers that achievement of goals is not so important as the effort expended in pursuing them. He says, "a unified purpose is what gives meaning to life." (p. 217) With respect to how people develop their self-concepts of who they are and what they want to accomplish in life, he notes the fourth and final step is turning away from the self, toward integration with others in support of universal values. (pp. 221 & 222)

Mihaly suggests there is a reciprocal relationship between goals and efforts. Initially, goals justify effort but, eventually, efforts justify the goals. His assertion on this point sounds like a reversal of the ethical theory of [Consequentialism](#), under which the ends are taken to justify the means. That is, if the results are positive, the assumption is that the means to achieve them are morally justifiable. However, the theory begs the questions: [Results for whom?](#) As judged by whom? Presumably, his answer would be that each and every one of us must make such judgements for ourselves, based upon our own values, which in an ideal world would be universally accepted.

In any event, in contemporary societies in the real world the complexity of culture makes the necessary commitment and resolve difficult because there are so many competing goals. (p. 224) Indeed, Mihaly asserts, "The complexity and freedom that have been thrust upon us, and that our ancestors fought so hard to achieve, are a challenge we must find ways to master." Otherwise we risk the pursuit of contradictory and meaningless goals. (p. 225)

In support of that notion, he cites two issues:

The psychic entropy peculiar to the human condition involves seeing more to do than one can actually accomplish and feeling able to accomplish more than what conditions allow...

The more complex any system, the more room it leaves open for alternatives, and the more things that can go wrong ... (p. 228)

Those are fairly apt descriptions of what commonly occurs in large, bureaucratic government and commercial organizations in which individuals have little influence and receive little or no feedback on the results of their efforts. Those issues are part of the reason many people believe change is needed, change that is not merely more of the same. Toward that end, Mihaly concludes:

... we now need to learn how to reunite ourselves with other entities around us without losing our hard-won individuality... The problem of meaning will then be resolved as the individual's purpose merges with the universal flow. (p. 240)

In alignment with Mihaly's conclusion, the vision of the StratML standard might aptly be reworded as follows:

A worldwide *flow* of intentions, stakeholders, and results.

It's a journey upon which each of us must determine for ourselves whether to embark. For those of us who choose to do so, it will be in the hope and expectation of optimizing mutually life-fulfilling experiences in highly productive interaction with those who share our values and objectives, in increasingly complex webs (flows) of performance across the globe.