

CRAVING FLOW

 [huffingtonpost.com/entry/craving-flow_us_58f8d998e4b086ce58980e69](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/craving-flow_us_58f8d998e4b086ce58980e69)

Michael Perman, Contributor Head of Creativity and Innovation

4/20/2017

Eric Severson is the Zen master of Flow, creating conditions within organizations to facilitate team members' energized focus and full involvement and enjoyment of what they are doing, leading to prosperity. His mission has been to help people find joy and meaning in work and to inspire organizational harmony and growth within the talent ecosystems he builds.

During his tenure as Chief Human Resource Officer of Gap, Inc., he steered a diverse ocean liner of talent, with a wide spectrum of personalities, skills, and motivations on board. Now, he is Chief People Officer at DaVita Health, one of the nation's largest and most innovative healthcare communities. At DaVita, he leverages a passion for and commitment to clinical excellence and improving patients' health and quality of life.

Eric was my boss when I led innovation at Gap, Inc., and he was the best boss I've had in my 30-year career. He's really more like a coach than a boss. Eric believes in living a growth mindset, and he motivates people like me based on the principle that we all have untapped human potential that's fulfilled when we're working in an optimum state of mind.

Perhaps one reason that Eric and I are so in sync is that he believes in the value of mindfulness as a tool to foster flow, transcend fear, and enable creativity, thereby generating prosperity in people and in organizations. Mindfulness is principally a way pause and to perceive the realities and ideas that are in front of you in non-judgmental ways. Mindful practices are becoming more prevalent in the workplace because they lead to better collaboration, lower stress and more creativity. A wide spectrum of companies have increased productivity by implementing Mindfulness practices for employees including Google, General Mills, Salesforce, Aetna, Gap and Target.

"The connection between mindfulness and creativity is super clear to me," says Eric. "Stress and anxiety of the modern world inhibit natural creativity. From an evolutionary perspective, fear states that are controlled by our brain's amygdala have the ability to shut down our creative center 100% of the time. One way of unlocking this quagmire is to get in touch with your whole brain. You need certain keys for this. Meditation is one of those keys."

"I am passionate about mindfulness and well-being in the work place because of their humanitarian benefits. People want to enjoy their work. But when they're in a high stress state, they don't present their best thinking or reach their full potential. Integrating mindfulness into the workplace is a healthy way of retuning balance to the level that used to exist."

Achieving the overall sense of balance to which Eric refers is elusive, since so many external factors are in play. In the workplace, flow begins on a micro level with quality conversations and meetings that encourage listening, establish a desire for learning, demonstrate respect, and foster development of ideas. This micro level of empathy is what begins to trigger a state of flow.

Eric is a master at modeling flow-state behavior within each meeting and sets the pace for how other organizational conversations can catalyze flow.

A meeting with Eric is like enjoying a mysterious culinary masterpiece created by a master chef of molecular gastronomy. First, there is a soothing first course of connection as Eric sets the right climate for positive thinking. He

never complains. He rarely sighs. Clear eyes, strong heart, active listening.

The next course serves up the idea or question that's on the agenda. Upon presentation, Eric drizzles his own wisdom and perspective on the topic in a nonjudgmental manner. He infuses a dose of "what could be" and elevates your initial ideas to new levels. He offers an artfully stated and promising view of the future, providing advice about connecting and syncing your ideas with other people and initiatives.

Eric sets an inspiring tone for organizations: that you can make your ideas even better. He knows what motivates people to think and act differently. He's an advocate for leveraging potential, rather than just leveraging pedigree.

"Growth mindset psychology documents that human performance is related more to the way people manage what they come into this world with rather than some innate gift. It explains why leaders who use short term, fear-based motivators such as shaming or scaring people are not able to unlock insights or ideas from people's brains. If CEOs want more innovation in the 21st century, they have to leverage motivators that are driven by spiritual energy, such as purpose, meaning, and emotion."

This spiritual energy to which Eric refers represents one of the mysteries of creativity. It's impossible to determine the ultimate source of creativity. However, we do know about the conditions that lead to creativity, such as comfort, empathy, and trust.

Dr. Paul Zak, director and founder of the Center for Neuroeconomics Studies, Professor of Economics, Psychology and Management at Claremont Graduate University, and author of Trust Factor studies the importance and implementation of trust in organizations. In his book, he references the acronym O.X.Y.T.O.C.I.N. as a mnemonic device to signify the eight classes of management that lead to better-functioning, more trusting organizations. They include "ovation", "caring," and being "natural," all lucidly explained in his book. Dr. Zak is also an expert on the neuroscience of the hormone oxytocin, which is released when you feel safety and pure love or joy. Our bodies produce oxytocin when exposed to happy, shared experiences, which then lead to empathy, trust, and, as a result, creativity.

THE MORNING EMAIL

Start your workday the right way with the news that matters most.

Ideas flow when people are able express themselves in non-judgmental environments. That flow state enables people to activate innovation. As I see it, innovation is the ability to perceive alternate realities and have the courage to move toward those visions. My description makes sense to Eric, "because it embraces art and science together".

"The dictionary description of innovation is very left brain and analytical. This myopic view misses the magic and is the reason why most organizations struggle to create a culture of innovation. The magic comes from tapping into the right hemisphere and into emotional and intuitive ways of being in the world. It's difficult for many organizations to embrace that ideology. Creativity is difficult to measure, and typically only things that can be quantitatively measured are encouraged.

Eric is keen to note a paradox of innovation. The concept of "innovation process" is considered an oxymoron. The term "innovation initiative" comes across as a forced effort, which is a spontaneity killer. However, the "ring-fencing" of an innovation can provide the insulation that people need to think freely. Toward that end, Eric and I implemented an innovation enculturation and skill-building experience called Mindspark while at Gap, Inc., which was delivered to over 3000 people.

"As organizations grow larger, there becomes a typical pattern of becoming more risk averse. In the early days, there's spiritual energy and creativity and excitement in the enterprise. As these organizations hire more people, it

gets hard to sustain that flow”.

“Then, work becomes more systematic. Structures, rules, and discipline are established to maintain order. Unless you do that really carefully, this systematic approach can also stifle innovation and creativity because people begin to be penalized for working outside the structure and the rules. Programs such as Mindspark protect people from the forces of entropy that naturally work to undermine people’s efforts to share innovative thoughts”.

“It’s the ultimate paradox: creating discipline and structure along with skills and the right spiritual energy can unleash creativity. That was the breakthrough strategy of Mindspark. We institutionalized operating habits that enabled innovation to flow on regular basis in a way that’s very predictable and reliable.”

Mindspark was also successful because it unleashed people’s ability to think freely and imagine alternatives to reality. We encouraged physical and mental excursions that fostered the flow of new perspectives and ideas by expanding people’s spectrum of thinking, helping them make abstract connections.

Fabulous innovators get their inspiration from exploring places and ideas outside their normal sphere. Eric gets inspiration and ideas from his physical travels, such as an excursion to Africa during which he gained perspective on the sense of vitality and flow that mindful integration of life and work can, at their highest level, provide.

During my trip to Africa, I noticed that dance is integrated into all kinds of meaningful rituals. Dance pulls you out of your head and into your body so that you are present. Like improvisational acting, dance compels you to draw from intuition—to let it flow from your right brain, where creativity originates.

The Africans I met had figured out how to use dance to generate intuitive answers to important problems, such as the harvest or public health. They create synergy and connection among people around something that mattered to them all.

They also live a life that is more integrated and less mechanically segmented into the analytical buckets of “my work time” or “my play time.” To me, the danger in the modern industrialized world comes from constant intrusion into people’s lives via mobile devices and 24/7 demands. This disrupts the flow states from which innovation is born.

This is another area where mindfulness is important. If organizations don’t institutionalize disciplines around mindfulness (the equivalent of the dance), then they don’t stand a chance, over time, of being sustainably competitive or innovative.

Eric’s devotion to mindfulness has honed his listening skills, one of his greatest leadership traits. Listening with an open mind is an important innovation skill. Listening leads to empathy, which leads to creativity. Listening is also the main tool we can use to learn what people desire and how to fulfill those desires—how to enable people to get into their personal flow state.

Everyone craves something—an experience, a state of being, or an emotion. Understanding what people crave is a key to unlocking innovation. Eric craves ways to help people and organizations reach their potential through better flow.

Work is like a flow of life force to me. Part of my own personal mission is to help people find joy and meaning in work. Work does not have to be drudgery and meaninglessness. But some of the joy that used to exist in work, like craft and art, seems to be evaporating.

More than anything else, I crave answers. I'm a super curious person. I crave solutions to problems that people are faced with. I crave an understanding of the ways that people can become happy and reach their full potential.

The curiosity to which Eric refers is the epicenter of innovation. Curiosity enables the craving for solutions to be satisfied. We're fortunate that curious and mindful leaders like Eric are part of shaping the workforce and life force of the future. That craving for flow and the elements that lead to making that happen is likely to foster holistic prosperity for years to come.

###