

## Flow in coaching conversation

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### Abstract

Although the phenomenon of flow has been studied for over forty years there has been little focus on the application of flow theory to one-to-one enablement situations such as coaching. While 'in flow' an individual is fully focused on the task being undertaken and experiences pleasure as mastery is gained. One might expect that maximising the occurrence of flow during sessions would have benefits for both client and coach. In this study fifteen clients and twenty-seven coaches provided details of their 'subjective experience of flow during coaching conversation'. A grounded theory approach was employed. The results shed light on how individuals experience flow during coaching interactions and a model is developed which suggests how various factors might interact to produce conditions most conducive to flow.

**Keywords:** flow, psychic entropy, coaching, conversation, grounded theory, experience sampling method (ESM).

### Introduction

As finding flow has been reported as a way to achieving happiness it is not surprising that there is a widespread body of literature covering the subject. For flow to arise there needs to be a good match between an individual's perceived skill and the challenge offered by the activity, clarity of goals and unambiguous feedback; while in flow a person's attention is finely focused, to the extent that other things became unimportant (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975).

At a physiological level flow is thought to relate to changes occurring in the brain which elicit increased focusing on specific activities (Durstewitz et al., 1999) and result in feelings of pleasure, happiness and satisfaction (Ashby et al., 1999). Flow is said to have significance from an evolutionary point of view in that natural selection would have favoured individuals who enjoyed mastering and controlling a hostile and changing environment (Csikszentmihalyi et al., 2005).

It is possible to view attention allocation on a continuum - at one end attention being highly focused on one task (as when one is 'in flow') and at the other, being split between many different concerns. In 1865, the term entropy was introduced in physics as a measure of the amount of disorder in a system - the more disordered the system, the higher the entropy (Clausius, 1865). The term **psychic entropy** has been adopted to describe instances when consciousness is split and attention is not focused (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997).

Literature considering the importance of flow during one-to-one enablement interactions is limited. In relation to psychotherapy and counselling, Parr et al. (1998), based on Rathunde, K. (1988), suggest that five conditions support a client's experience of flow: (i) having clear goals; (ii) being centred; (iii) having choices; (iv) having commitment; and (v) developing the self. Grafanaki et al. (2007), in reviewing flow literature and examining its relevance to counselling sessions,

suggest elements such as an experience of bonding and connectedness, intense concentration on challenging task or topic and immediate and ongoing feedback are important.

Although flow is associated with increased focusing and opportunities for growth, I found no reports of empirical studies considering flow in context of coaching conversation.

Following a discussion of the methodology, findings are presented in three sections: characteristics of flow; factors facilitating flow and post-flow experience.

## **Methodology**

Prior to the current study I used the Experience Sampling Method or ESM (Hektner et al., 2007) to collect feeling state information during coaching sessions for three coach-client pairings (Wesson, 2007). Audible signals were generated randomly on four occasions during each hour session; on being signalled the coaching stopped momentarily so participants could complete an Experience Sampling Form. Seven sessions were reviewed in all. The results suggested that (i) coaches and clients often moved in and out of flow at the same time and (ii) high levels of perceived challenge, skill and relevance together provided a driver for flow experience.

ESM provided only snapshots of a session; although the results gave some indication of the precursors of flow, information gathered was insufficient to establish 'how flow was felt' or 'what the mechanisms were by which flow was established'. In this study I decided to gather broader information on the subjective experience of flow through retrospective reflective reports and interviewing (Wesson, 2009).

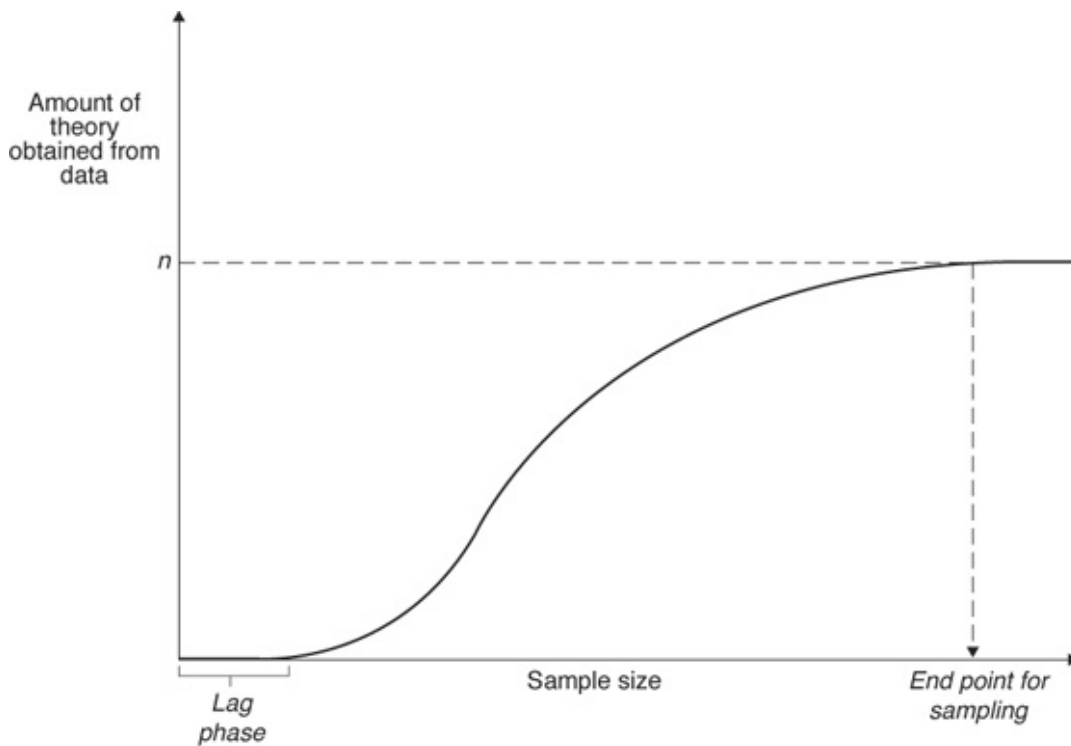
Online questionnaires for client-participants and coach-participants were produced. These were similar in design, both asking respondents to describe a time when they experienced flow in a coaching session and to answer questions relating to this incident. As the term 'flow' has different usages, the following definition was provided in order to improve the quality of responses:

*Flow is a subjective state that people report when they are completely involved in something to the point of forgetting time, fatigue, and everything else but the activity itself. It is what we feel when we read a well-crafted novel, or play a good game of squash, or take part in a stimulating conversation. The defining feature of flow is intense experiential involvement in moment-to-moment activity. Attention is fully invested in the task at hand, and the person functions at his or her fullest capacity.*  
Csikszentmihalyi et al. (2005, p.600)

A grounded theory methodological approach was utilised. This is defined by Polit and Hungler (1991, p.646) as "an approach to collecting and analyzing qualitative data with the aim of developing theories and theoretical prepositions 'grounded' in real-world observations".

Figure 1 illustrates my understanding of the relationship between sample size and the amount of theory generated. During an initial lag-phase only a little theory emerges as information is captured from the first few respondents. Later a threshold is reached when there is sufficient information for major themes to emerge. Further sampling then improves the emergence of theory until no further themes are identified. At this point theoretical saturation is reached (shown as  $n$ ) and there is no value in continuing sampling other than to aid validation.

**Figure 1** - Graph postulating the relationship between sample size and amount of theory generated



Fifteen clients and twenty-seven coaches completed questionnaires. Participants who were happy to provide further information could include their email address. Four coach participants were also interviewed (three of whom also gave feedback from the client perspective). The material gathered was sufficient to confirm emerging theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967).

## Findings and discussion

### *1. The characteristics of flow*

Reports from participants indicated that flow during coaching conversation had the classic characteristics (Table 1).

**Table 1** Examples of evidence of the classic characteristics of flow, as described by Csikszentmihalyi et al. (2005).

Characteristics	Examples
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Intense and focused concentration on the task at hand</li> <li>• Loss of reflective self-consciousness</li> <li>• Transformation of time</li> </ul>	<p><i>The conversation was all engaging and I had almost a feeling of disembodiment. I was unaware of time and base needs, for example, feeling hunger or tiredness. Client 8</i></p> <p><i>I was absorbed deeply in listening to the coachee and their experience, hope, wishes and what they wanted to do next and how to do it..... Time disappeared and suddenly it was much later. Coach 20</i></p> <p><i>I felt as though I was totally engaged in the session without the usual distracting thoughts that sometimes invade my thinking and disrupt it. Coach 17</i></p>
Merging of action and awareness	<p><i>I was using skills and ideas from different places and synthesising them to create a new technique. Although I was aware of that, I wasn't 'in my head' analysing. Instead I was present with both head and intuition and it just seemed to work. Coach 26</i></p> <p><i>Like being on a rollercoaster or in a movie where the action has started and it seem to go on for ages and you are carried away with it. Client 9</i></p>
Sense of control	<i>The discussion felt effortless; as though it was just happening naturally without too much thought or planning. It was working and I felt relaxed and really focused on the person I was with. Coach 17</i>
Autotelic experience	<i>It was memorable and every time I think about it the good feelings flood back into my mind and give me a feeling of fulfilment and satisfaction. Coach 17</i>

Flow during coaching conversation also displayed additional features. It is known that the structure and pace of a discussion can vary depending on expectations, the conversation's aims and context (Tannen, 1990; Have, 1999; Haigh, 2005). Participant responses suggest that during flow some aspects of dialogue convention may be lost, for example, slower pacing and correct wording. Modifying discussion in this way might help to optimise focus, enabling each individual to 'capture and share ideas' with minimal interruption to a task.

*You could feel the pace of the conversation get quicker. It mattered less how things were worded as we could both pick up on each other's conversation quite easily. Coach 1*

*There was a hundred percent concentration on the discussion, with no worry about how things were said. Client 5*

Coaches sometimes referred to flow instances being associated with high levels of mirroring:

*There was a 'light-bulb' moment, where the language used by the coach and client mirrored one another. Coach 10*

*I was totally engaged with the client, taking on their posture, words and experiences. Coach 26*

Mirroring could work to facilitate flow in different ways. Person 1, by mirroring Person 2, becomes more aware of Person 2's changing feeling state and with this heightened awareness can engage

more effectively. Also, as Person 1 mirrors Person 2, the feedback received by Person 2 may be more affirmative making it easier for Person 2 to interact with Person 1.

There was evidence that during flow individuals were agreeable to the 'primary-contributor role' moving back and forth:

*My coach repeated my statements correctly and said things that were interesting and which I could pick up on. We seemed to sustain each other's flow.* Client 10

*I was providing challenges that the client took on and seemed to find useful, the cycle was repeated several times – focus and involvement being maintained, by both of us, throughout.* Coach 6

As there are limitations on how much information the nervous system can process at any time (Csikszentmihalyi, 2002) one could envisage that flow could more easily be sustained if each individual could at times 'stand back' to recollect thoughts, whilst the other person moves forward in the activity. There would also be times when silence of both parties has a role in sustaining useful focus (McLeod, 2003).

*There was lots of space and silence for the client to get into the experience and I was confident holding that space, and I seemed to know just the right moment to intervene.* Coach 26

## **2. Factors facilitating flow**

The factors that affected clients' and coaches' ability to find flow fell into six categories: relatedness; commitment; facilitation; physical and mental resources; situational factors and continued successful engagement. The role of each of these factors will be considered in turn below.

### *A - Relatedness*

Individuals associated experiences of flow with times when they could relate to the other person and the subject under discussion:

*I felt confident in what the coach was saying, because what he said made sense. Not just understanding the words, but understanding the method and reason for doing something.* Client 3

*There was a sense of being 'at one' with the client, in terms of thought processes.* Coach 7

*The coach's points were significant in their content; surprisingly ordinary and straightforward but right. This gave me more confidence – in him and the process, and I became more open.* Client 12

The results suggest that clients were more likely to be open when they felt they could relate to the coach. This is in accord with Grafanaki *et al.* (2007) whose research in the field of counselling suggests that an experience of bonding and connectedness is particularly important in establishing flow.

Verbal and non-verbal clues that demonstrate congruence might help facilitate flow as indicated by Client 10:

*The coach seemed really engaged in what I was saying. I knew she was relating to what I was sharing by how she responded or nodded. My coach repeated my statements correctly and said things that were interesting and which I could pick up on. Client 10*

Coach-flow was not necessarily dependent on a coach agreeing with the client's viewpoint; satisfaction and flow can be found if a coach is happy enabling a client to work with their 'own ideas':

*There was empathy and full accordance with the coachee's construction of reality. I could let go of my own 'projects' for the coachee and my own fears and weaknesses. Coach 12*

During such times coaches might feel it appropriate to self-disclose and ask questions that arose 'in the moment':

*...at the same time I was happy to share with them what was happening for me as they talked, and to ask the questions that came to me in the moment. Coach 14*

It is interesting that the three factors that Rogers (1990) suggests characterise growth-promoting relationships (practitioner congruence, unconditional positive regard and empathy) also seem to be ingredients for finding flow during coaching conversation. As a client's trust is established and a coach feels comfortable with the interaction, psychic entropy for both individuals would be reduced, making flow, and therefore growth, a possibility.

#### *B - Commitment*

Both parties recognised the importance of 'the other' being committed to the work of the alliance. It was vital to the client that the coach worked to the client's agenda:

*My coach was listening to me. I knew that I could say anything I wanted and that my agenda took precedence. She did not butt in and take the conversation off another way. Client 10*

Where a third party had organised the coaching, the needs of the client needed to take precedence; when the client was sure of confidentiality it was easier for the participants to interact openly and to contribute fully:

*I understood that everything was confidential and nothing I said would be reported back to my employer. I could be honest and up front with no work implications. Client 1*

Coaches associated their experience of flow with clients understanding, and committing to, the coaching process and methods employed:

*Factors which I felt helped to bring about flow included the quality of the relationship, understanding of the process we were following, plus the commitment of the client I was working with, in terms of the preparation they had put in beforehand. They had spent time in preparation, as I had, and we were both on a similar wavelength, both very focused and fully engaged. Coach 17*

These findings suggest the hypothesis that flow is facilitated when there is convergence of the coach's and client's goals, in terms of 'the agenda followed' and 'the process utilised'. This would simplify the parameters in which the alliance works and again diminish sources of psychic entropy.

#### *C - Facilitation*

Flow seemed to be facilitated by particular styles of coach-client engagement. Effective observation, feedback and structuring of tasks by the coach, ranked as important factors for client-flow:

*I believe the coach constantly reinforced the importance of the task with their presence (constant observation) and feedback. I felt the need to get the task right, perform to my best ability and learn and remember what I had done. Client 8*

*The issues we were discussing were very pertinent; my coach was helping me to think through various strands in a systematic and workable manner. I found this enabled me to focus more fully and to cover more ground. Client 14*

Coach-flow could be aided by client-openness and clarity of expression:

*The client was being frank and open: responding and elaborating on the questions I asked. Coach 10*

*...the way in which they verbalised the events and brought them to life, so that it was like being at the cinema or listening to a play on the radio – deeply absorbing. Coach 20*

When the work presented as more urgent, focus was increased:

*There was pressure to move forward because of the circumstances faced by the client. Coach 21*

A further facilitating factor for coaches was being able to draw on training and experience, such that it was possible to work intuitively:

*I felt confident in my abilities as a coach – I was not worrying or analysing but being in the moment, relying on my intuition instead. Coach 26*

*I was less anxious about models and structures and had relaxed into my own coaching style a bit more... I felt comfortable with the topic and could empathise with her and draw on my own experience... Coach 9*

The above factors would all work to ensure that an individual's perceived levels of challenge and skill were high and in balance, thus facilitating flow.

#### *D - Continued successful engagement*

When participants sensed achievement or growth they continued to be absorbed by the activity and experience flow:



*When I spoke I got very involved in it all – I just found that I was working through so much I had not really thought about before. Client 7*

*The coaching was going well – which reinforced my confidence and ability to hold the client – a virtuous cycle. Coach 26*

*The coachee and the coach are experiencing synergy and the impression that the coaching reaches new, unexplored and constructive areas. The coach knows that his/her work is benefiting the client; the coachee can adapt the coach's input in a way that suits his/her own forthcoming. Both parts of such an interaction are experiencing that they are being transformed in some way, in a positive manner. It is like a dance, where you don't know who is leading and who is following. Coach 12*

#### *E - Physical and mental resources*

Coaches associated flow experience with times when they had sufficient energy and were well rested:

*I was on good form and had slept well the night before. I was relaxed and enjoying coaching. Coach 2*

Csikszentmihalyi (2002, p.156) uses the example of surgeons who go on 'automatic pilot' before an important operation; eating the same breakfast, wearing the same clothes and travelling to work along the same route. In the same way a coach can work to reduce psychic entropy, which could result in fatigue, by establishing patterns of preparation during their working week.

It was important for clients that the coach was sensitive to the level of mental and physical resource they had available:

*The coach was genuinely interested in what was said and matched my energy levels, which made me take thoughts to more in-depth levels. Client 5*

*The session was well-paced; we did not cover too much, or too little. I felt busy all the time – when I left I was surprised by what I had achieved. Client 14*

It might be necessary to 'slow the pace' if the client's energy level falls or they lack familiarity with a concept or activity. Employing a variety of learning activities (Kolb, 1984; Honey and Mumford, 1992; Gardner 2004) may also help to maintain focus and consolidate learning.

#### *F - Situational factors*

It was important that the meeting room was comfortable and there were no distractions:

*The meeting room needs to be comfortable and there needs to be sufficient time available, with no interruptions. Client 14*

*This experience of flow occurred a quarter of the way through the session and thereon, until we were interrupted by someone knocking on the door. Coach 20*



*The meeting room was not too tidy or too messy. I remember once receiving coaching in a room which was too carefully laid out. I could only put my coffee in one place and that was out of my reach. Everything was so ordered and it felt a bit clinical; this stopped me engaging with activity, at least at first. Client 13*

Jackson and Csikszentmihalyi (1999 p.70) refer to a study of elite athletes which claimed that over seventy percent of disruptions to flow could be attributed to non-optimal environmental or situational factors. They suggest that factors such as temperature, humidity, rain and wind, the crowd and opposition could affect flow, as could interactions with team-mates, family and friends, the coach or referee. Coaching conversation could be affected by a narrower range of factors; where a client is allowed more control over their environment, for example choosing where they sit, this may help them feel more at ease and able to focus on coaching activity.

### 3. 'Post-flow' experience

Descriptions of experience did not just pertain to the instance of flow as participants also described how they felt **after** the session. These 'post-flow experiences' were similar to flow in some respects (e.g. satisfaction was felt) but differed in that there was an increased rather than decreased sense of self:

*I felt exhilarated and had a change of outlook. I had found the drive and energy to complete the task. Client 9*

*I left with a feeling of peace and felt much more at ease. Client 12*

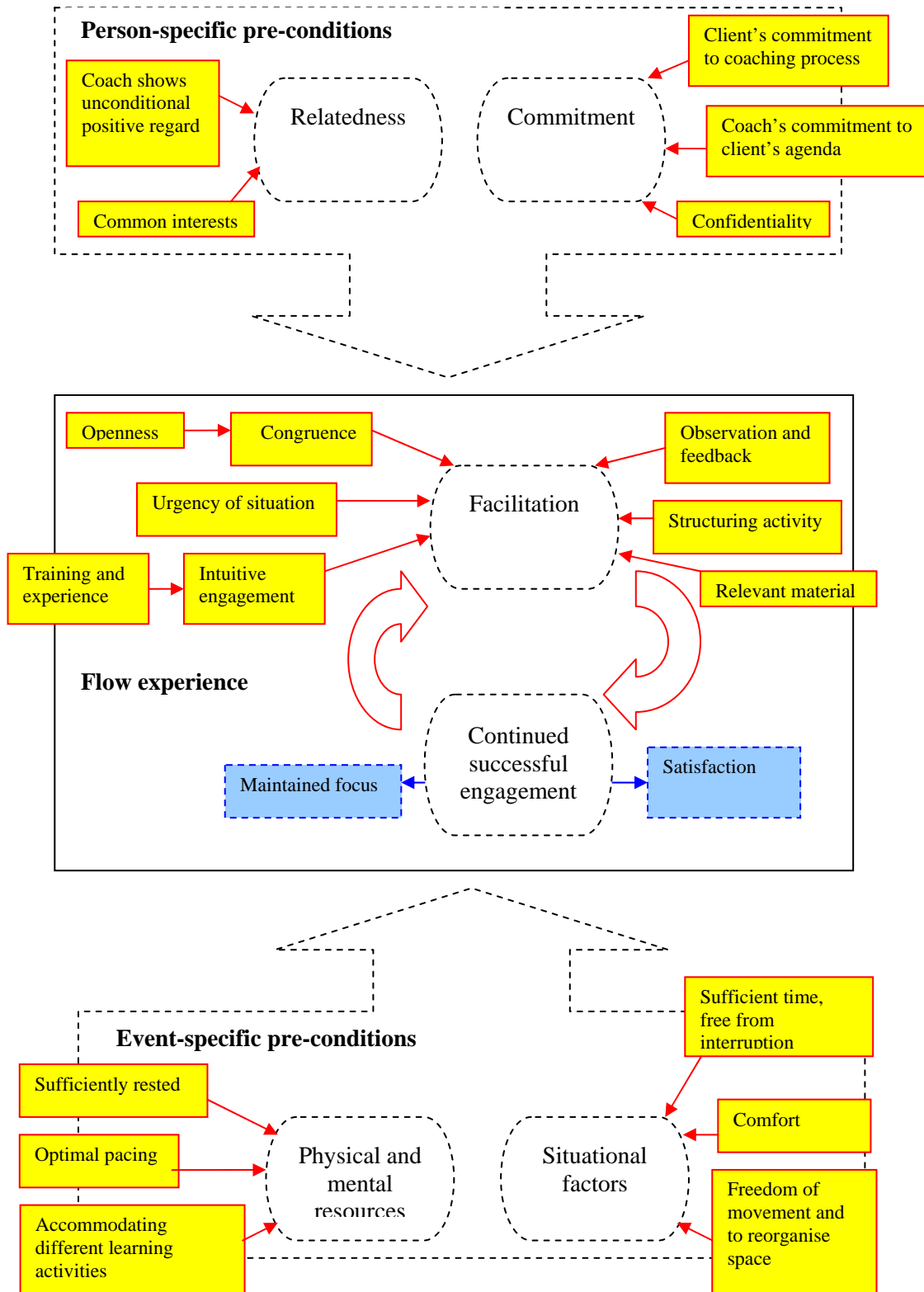
*Both of us were left with a sense of achievement, relief and tiredness. Coach 7*

The results suggest that, after 'being in flow', individuals may grapple with a new found sense of reality, perhaps relating to an increased sense of competency, leaving them feeling more energised or more at peace. Further research could ascertain whether post-flow experiences are examples of 'peak experience' which is characterised by features such as catharsis and a greater sense of one's own uniqueness (Maslow, 1998).

### Conclusion

By comparing and contrasting the six themes it was possible to see how different factors might interact to facilitate flow. Figure 2 groups the six themes into three pairs. Two pairings, (the **alliance-specific pre-conditions** at the top of the page and the **event-specific pre-conditions** at the bottom) are required before flow experience can take place. The third pairing (centre of the page) relates to flow experience itself and how it is maintained. The items in the yellow boxes relate to the main factors which, this study suggests, facilitate flow during coaching conversation.

**Figure 2** Factors interacting to facilitate flow in a coaching session.



One day it might be possible to see the interaction of flow-contributing factors in a more precise form perhaps represented by a very simple diagram or equation. Further studies could consider how the many varied methods and approaches used by the coaching fraternity might each, in its own way, work to facilitate flow.

Longitudinal studies could establish if there is a relationship between flow occurrence and 'coaching success' and identify the long-term effects of experiencing flow. In the meantime flow-favouring methodology seems to have much to offer enablement strategies, increasing the satisfaction and enjoyment of coaches and clients alike and putting a new perspective on the way people can optimally interact to facilitate each other's interests.

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