

COACHING, CLIENTS, AND COMPETENCIES:  
HOW COACHES EXPERIENCE THE FLOW STATE

A dissertation submitted

by

BARRETT W. MCBRIDE

to

FIELDING GRADUATE UNIVERSITY

in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for the  
degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in

HUMAN AND ORGANIZATIONAL SYSTEMS

This dissertation has been  
accepted for the faculty of  
Fielding Graduate University by:

Judith Stevens-Long, Ph.D.  
Chair

Committee Members:

Katrina S. Rogers, PhD, Faculty Reader  
Charles N. Seashore, PhD, Faculty Reader  
M. Brian Emerson, PhD, Student Reader  
David Kaiser, PhD, External Examiner

# HOW COACHES EXPERIENCE THE FLOW STATE

Coaching, Clients, and Competencies:  
How Coaches Experience The Flow State

By

Barrett W. McBride

Abstract

This qualitative exploratory study examines how coaches experience the flow state, as defined by flow research pioneer Csikszentmihalyi. It further looks at the relationship between coaching competencies and coaches' experience of flow. For this study, in-depth interviews were conducted with experienced coaches who are certified by the International Coach Federation. As a result of the study, five distinct themes emerged that led to the development of a *model of coach flow experience* and a *model of the coach flow entry process*. The first model was then expanded as a *model of flow experience for the helping professions*. These models serve both experienced and inexperienced coaches, as well as others in the helping professions. This study provides a roadmap for mastery of the coaching skills and recognition of client attributes that potentiate the flow experience and its benefits, including, greater perceived effectiveness, greater sense of self-efficacy, and affirmation of purpose.

**Key Words: Coaching, Flow, Coaching Competency, Coach Development**

HOW COACHES EXPERIENCE THE FLOW STATE

Copyright by

BARRETT W. MCBRIDE

2013

### **Acknowledgements**

There are many people to thank for their participation and support on my journey to this dissertation.

I first and foremost would like to thank my mentor and Dissertation Chair Judy Stevens-Long, for her inspiration and support throughout my studies, culminating with this dissertation. Judy's great wisdom, excellent guidance, sharp intellect, wonderful sense of humor, and advocacy on my behalf have been invaluable. Also, although a writer for much of my professional career, I have continued to learn ways to hone my craft through Judy's great editorial expertise.

I thank Katrina Rogers for her keen insight. Each time Katrina read a paper, concept, proposal, or my dissertation, her comments prompted me to think more deeply about my subject and expand relationships between ideas and concepts that have proven invaluable to me.

I thank the late Charlie Seashore for his support throughout my dissertation process. I will not forget his support and particularly a dinner we shared following a challenging dissertation meeting regarding my very broad early concept. Charlie was the epitome of a skilled coach: warm, insightful, and sharp.

I am also deeply appreciative of the time and depth of sharing demonstrated by each of my 13 research participants. Their contributions made it possible for me to achieve the rich results of this study.

I have been fortunate at Fielding to develop relationships with colleagues who have been supportive throughout my Fielding experience and through my dissertation. I would especially like to acknowledge Brian Emerson, Barry Rubin, and Patrick Smith.

## HOW COACHES EXPERIENCE THE FLOW STATE

Brian and I bonded at a memorable Fielding retreat in West Virginia, during which the Eastern Seaboard was blanketed with record snow. We have since worked together, contracted for courses together, and supported each other through our dissertation processes. As my student reader for this dissertation, Brian's contributions have helped me produce a work of excellence. I thank Brian for his support and friendship, and for hosting Patrick Smith and I at his Bay House as a haven in which we all completed our comprehensive exams.

Patrick Smith, Barry Rubin, and I formed a mutually supportive relationship during our first course at Fielding that has continued throughout the last 3+ years. I thank Pat for his friendship, support and assistance with the dissertation process and for so generously sharing his experience. Barry continues to be a great source of inspiration for me as I have observed him create a balance between a demanding career, family, and school. I thank him for being a great listener when I have needed one and for sharing his thoughtful perspectives on education and learning. I thank him for his astute observations regarding my dissertation and preparation of my FOR, which helped to make my presentation a smooth one.

Beyond Fielding, I first thank my mother, Lillian Blanche Burrows for sharing her love of learning with me in many ways throughout my life. As the only one of her 14 siblings to graduate from college, I watched her laser-like focus as she earned her bachelor's degree in midlife with little outside support. She has applied that same energy and determination to writing and publishing fiction as well as painting and exhibiting her work. She is a true Renaissance woman whom I am grateful to have in my life.

I thank my best friend, LeSanne Lindborg, for continuing to be a constant part of my life, even as I went into the cave of doctoral studies. It is a gift to have a continued connection with her. I also thank my assistant, Catie Turner, for her extraordinary efforts to help me keep up

## HOW COACHES EXPERIENCE THE FLOW STATE

with all the facets of my life, and especially for providing organizational and administrative support throughout my dissertation process.

# HOW COACHES EXPERIENCE THE FLOW STATE

## **Dedication**

This dissertation is dedicated to my mother, Lillian Blanche Burrows, whose courage and dedication to lifelong learning continue to be profound inspirations for me.

## HOW COACHES EXPERIENCE THE FLOW STATE

*For all the work that has been done to illuminate the subject of coaching in the past 15 or 20 years, what actually happens in coaching engagements remains quite mysterious.*  
(Richard Kilburg, 2004, p.203)



# HOW COACHES EXPERIENCE THE FLOW STATE

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>CHAPTER ONE. INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY</b> .....	<b>1</b>
INSPIRATION FOR THIS STUDY .....	2
BACKGROUND.....	4
PURPOSE AND SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY .....	6
RESEARCH QUESTIONS .....	7
ASSUMPTIONS AND BIASES .....	7
SUMMARY .....	8
<b>CHAPTER TWO. REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE</b> .....	<b>9</b>
DEFINING FLOW.....	9
THE CONCEPT OF FLOW .....	11
THE ORIGINS OF FLOW THEORY .....	11
PREDISPOSING CONDITIONS TO FLOW.....	19
ENTERING THE FLOW STATE.....	22
EXPERIENCING FLOW IN A DYAD.....	22
FLOW AND COACHING .....	23
INTRINSIC MOTIVATION AND COACHING .....	27
ALTERED SENSE OF TIME AND COACHING.....	27
BENEFITS OF THE FLOW EXPERIENCE.....	28
LIMITATIONS OF FLOW THEORY .....	28
SUMMARY OF THE LITERATURE REVIEW .....	29
<b>CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY</b> .....	<b>32</b>
RESEARCH SETTING .....	32
RESEARCH DESIGN .....	32
PARTICIPANT SELECTION.....	34
RECRUITMENT CHALLENGES .....	35
DATA COLLECTION .....	36
DATA ANALYSIS .....	37
DATA MANAGEMENT.....	39
PROTECTION OF HUMAN PARTICIPANTS.....	39
RESEARCHER .....	40
DELIMITATIONS .....	41
VALIDITY.....	41
SUMMARY.....	42
<b>CHAPTER FOUR: KEY FINDINGS</b> .....	<b>43</b>
PARTICIPANT PROFILES.....	43
OVERARCHING THEMES, KEY FINDINGS, AND MODEL DEVELOPMENT.....	45
SUMMARY.....	61
<b>CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION</b> .....	<b>62</b>
SUMMARY OF THE RESEARCH .....	62
IMPLICATIONS FOR THEORY AND PRACTICE.....	69
IMPLICATIONS FOR COACHING PRACTICE .....	73
IMPLICATIONS FOR HELPING PROFESSIONS .....	75

# HOW COACHES EXPERIENCE THE FLOW STATE

LIMITATIONS OF THE RESEARCH STUDY .....	76
CONCLUSION.....	77
RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH .....	78
SUMMARY .....	79
<b>REFERENCES.....</b>	<b>81</b>

**LIST OF APPENDICES**

<b>APPENDIX A: ICF CORE COMPETENCIES .....</b>	<b>87</b>
<b>APPENDIX B: INFORMED CONSENT FORM.....</b>	<b>91</b>
<b>APPENDIX C: LETTER OF INVITATION .....</b>	<b>95</b>
<b>APPENDIX D: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS.....</b>	<b>97</b>

**LIST OF TABLES**

Table 1: Flow, Peak Experience and Peak Performance.....14

Table 2: Behaviors Associated with Cloninger’s 7-Factor Model of Temperament and Character.....21

Table 3: Comparison of Csikszentmihalyi’s Flow Model to Geller and Greenberg’s “Presence”.....23

Table 4: Coaching Competencies as Related to Flow.....26

Table 5: Summary of Participants’ Characteristics.....44

Table 6: Individual Participant Characteristics.....45

Table 7: Coach Preconditions for Coach Flow Experience.....47

Table 8: Client Preconditions Necessary for Coach to Experience Flow.....50

Table 9: Perceived Coaching Competencies in Effect Pre-Flow.....59

Table 10: Perceived Coaching Competencies During Flow State.....60

Table 11: ICF Core Competency Coach Flow Preconditions.....66

**LIST OF FIGURES**

Figure 1: Original Flow Model (Csikszentmihalyi).....10

Figure 2: Skills/Challenge Grid.....10

Figure 3: Summary of Key Findings.....46

Figure 4: Coach Flow Entry Process.....52

Figure 5: Bidirectional Relationship of Flow and Self-Esteem.....64

Figure 6: Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs.....64

Figure 7: Model of Coach Flow Experience.....71

Figure 8: Revised Model of Coach Flow Experience.....73

Figure 9: Model of Flow Experience for the Helping Professions.....77

### **CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY**

The coaching profession is a growing one. This growth is evidenced by the sheer number of coaches and the numbers of coaches seeking professional certification. The 2012 International Coach Federation (ICF) Global Coaching Study (2012) estimates that there are 15,800 coaches in North America and 47,500 globally. ICF membership grew from 11,000 in 2006 to nearly 19,000 in 2011 – a growth trajectory of nearly 45% (ICF, 2012). ICF is the oldest and largest coaching certification body in the world.

As the profession has grown, numerous coaching certification programs have emerged and hundreds of articles and books have been written to provide coach training and development. Much of this training and development has focused on the practical skills coaches need to effectively coach clients toward achieving their goals. Little empirical research or literature has been produced, however, on the personal experience of coaching or coaching development.

In order to fully understand the nature of coaching, as with any profession, it is vital that we begin to look more closely at the coaching experience from the coach's perspective. By understanding the coach's perspective, we will be able to further understand what makes coaching successful and what makes coaches successful. From this understanding, it may be possible to incorporate discovered themes into coaching development programs, in turn producing more highly skilled and highly evolved coaches.

In this study I focus on the flow state of coaches. For purposes of this study, flow refers to an altered state of consciousness that occurs while engaged in a meaningful activity that produces a sense of gratification for the activity itself. (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996, 1993, 1990, 1997, 1975a ; Csikszentmihalyi, Rathunde, & Whalen, 1993). Research on the effects of positive experiences has shown that positive experiences contribute to work satisfaction,

success, and positive life outcomes (Losada & Heaphy, 2004; Lyubomirsky, King & Diener, 2005). In addition, by focusing on patterns and themes that emerge from studying the most positive experiences coaches have with clients, some insight may be gained into what coaching competencies produce these experiences.

### **Inspiration for this Study**

This study is important to me for a number of reasons. I have been coaching professionally for nearly 20 years. I am dedicated to providing the most meaningful and productive experiences I can for my clients. I have personally experienced flow in my work as a coach many times. Often, during or following sessions in which I have experienced flow, my clients have reported experiencing breakthroughs in their own understanding of self, circumstance, or desires. I am interested in exploring the experiences of other coaches who enter into the flow state during coaching sessions as a step toward discovering how to potentiate the flow state in coaching.

I also believe in the power of coaching based on my own experience. I have considerable personal experience with both coaching and psychotherapy, which are often compared. I have found both approaches helpful in my quest to know myself and to achieve my goals in life. I first became interested in coaching after a 2-year engagement with a psychotherapist, following a major life change. Initially, I found psychotherapy very helpful as I adjusted to my new circumstance, examining the emotional baggage I brought with me along the way. At some point in the second year, however, the process seemed to stall. I no longer felt as if I was growing.

I quit seeing my therapist though still feeling somewhat lost. Shortly thereafter, I was invited by a friend to go to a development workshop that focused in part on coaching techniques. I was hooked from my first experience, recognizing that this was what I needed to continue to grow in

my life. The diagnostic approach of the therapist and the work at looking at influences in my life that brought me pain was helpful to a point. However, after a certain amount of time, I felt like I was constantly revisiting a pain just as it was healing. Coaching was refreshing. My coach was not there to diagnose me, but to see me as whole and capable and to help me through the process of getting what I wanted in life. As I embarked on coaching education, I felt a great affinity for the profession and the people I met in the profession. I also found great satisfaction in facilitating the process for people to achieve their dreams. That continues to be the center of my satisfaction in coaching.

From a professional development perspective, I am also on the faculty of a coach training organization. In my capacity as an instructor, I am dedicated to ensuring that my students receive an educational experience that goes beyond the technical aspects of coaching. From this perspective, the results of my research may provide an opportunity to develop tools for coaches as part of their professional development experience.

Finally, the flow state provides me with a number of benefits. I often experience a great sense of wellbeing that lingers beyond a coaching session in which I enter flow. It enhances my sense of self-efficacy as a coach. Self-efficacy is defined as “beliefs in one’s capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to produce given attainments” (Bandura, 1997, p. 3). The experience also has a somewhat spiritual component for me in that I am often left with the feeling that I have somehow channeled what the client needed from me in that moment. However, to this point, I have only identified the flow state in my coaching in reflection on a coaching session. I do not have a way to prepare for it. I do not have a set of steps I take to achieve it. I have no method for prolonging it. It is my hope that my research might begin to provide insight into consciously entering or potentiating the flow state in the context of



coaching. Also, it is my hope that this understanding might contribute to helping coaches develop greater self-efficacy regarding their coaching skills, in turn creating enhanced coaching practice.

### **Background**

**Coaching.** As the coaching industry has grown, so has the literature that focuses on coaching practice and process (Bacon & Spear, 2003; Fitzgerald & Berger, 2002; Kilburg, 2009; Peltier, 2010). Coaching textbooks focus on coaching theory to assist coaches in developing skills, and applying techniques (Stober & Grant, 2006; Zeus & Skiffington, 2008; Whitworth, Kimsey-House, Kimsey-House, & Sandahl, 2009). A review of coaching literature (Kampa-Kokesch & Anderson, 2001) and an annotated bibliography of coaching (Grant, 2008) support the notion that the literature focuses on the practice of coaching over the personal experience or development of coaches.

Csikszentmihalyi (1975a, 1975b, Csikszentmihalyi & Csikszentmihalyi, 1988) and other researchers have studied flow in the context of many populations and professions. Flow is a familiar concept in coaching from the perspective of client experience. A goal of coaching is sometimes to help clients identify flow states. For clients, identifying past flow states is often productive in helping them to create vision, discover purpose, and set effective goals (Kauffman, 2006; Wesson & Boniwell, 2007).

However, as noted, there appears to be little empirical research on how flow is experienced by coaches in the nature of their work. As the profession continues to expand, understanding the experience of flow could maximize the potential effectiveness of coaching for the client, as well as the learning and growth experience for the coach. My goal with this research is to provide a contribution to the body of research on the flow state as it relates to

coaches and the profession of coaching. This research explores their experience and the possible coaching competencies that are integral to their experience.

**Flow.** In the context of professional life, we have the opportunity to experience work in a variety of ways. Many of our daily interactions are mundane. Some experiences, however, stand out because they tap our own potential, leave us feeling good for no reason other than the experience, and reinforce our self-efficacy. They often also promote learning, growth and positive change. These are the experiences that I have chosen to focus on for this study.

Over the last 50 years, researchers have called these outstanding experiences by a number of names, including peak performance (Privette, 1983) and peak experience (Maslow, 1968), majestic moments (May, 1975), ideal performance states (Orlick, 1992) and flow or optimal experience (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975a, 1975b, 1990, 1996, 1997). Much of what has been studied has focused on outstanding experiences in sports and in business, with the goal of maximizing performance in a competitive forum. The work of Csikszentmihalyi, however, stands out in that he has shown that his concept of flow is achievable in many facets of life. It is his theoretical work that will form the foundation of my study.

**Adult Development.** There is a growing base of literature incorporating theories of adult development into coaching (Fitzgerald & Berger, 2002; Wildflower, 2008). But again, the focus of this literature is primarily on the development of the client. Although growth and development of coaches has not been a focus for scholars, some practitioners have written on its significance, calling for coach development to move beyond skill and process development (Bachirova & Cox, 2009). “It’s important what the coach can do, but it’s more important how he or she is being” (Heckler in Silsbee, 2008, p. xii). Still others have been critical about the failure to consider an adult developmental perspective for coaches (Laske, 1999).

Understanding the framework and concept of flow from a coach development perspective may contribute to the adult developmental perspective in coaching. The framework of flow examines the internal and external conditions of the phenomenon. It also looks at personality development and change over time. In addition, flow theory suggests that people who engage in flow over time experience an evolution of consciousness (Csikszentmihalyi & Csikszentmihalyi, 1988). In an increasingly complex environment, the ongoing development of consciousness, or how we know versus what we know, is seen by many as vital to our ability to thrive (Kegan, 1994; Washburn, 2000; Wilber, 1997; Csikszentmihalyi, 1993).

### **Purpose and Significance of the Study**

As outlined generally above, the purpose of this research is to explore the experiences of professional coaches who enter into the flow state during coaching sessions with clients. In addition, this study examines perceived coaching competencies related to the flow state. For purposes of this study, professional coaching is defined as “a distinct service which focuses on an individual's life as it relates to goal setting, outcome creation and personal change management” (ICF, 2012).

The significance of this study is important. This research serves to fill a gap in the empirical literature on coach development. It also serves to provide insight into the experience of coaches, for which there is little research. It also contributes to the understanding of the nature of flow as it applies to coaches. As detailed in Csikszentmihalyi's research of people in other professions, understanding the flow of experience of coaches provides a new perspective on the coach development and competence. This research also provides a *model of coach flow experience* and a *model of coach flow entry process* that facilitate the developmental perspective.

The *model of coach flow experience* is also expanded for application to the larger universe of the helping professions.

### **Research Questions**

The primary question this research addresses is,

*What is the experience of coaches who enter the flow state within a coaching session?*

Along with the primary question, this research also addressed the following supporting questions:

- 1. What perceived coaching competencies are related to coaches' experience of flow?*
- 2. What are the triggers of flow and what keeps the state of flow ongoing in a coaching session?*

### **Assumptions and Biases**

I came to this study with the assumption that other coaches experience flow during coaching sessions. As the review of literature shows, several components of flow are also found in core competencies for coaching, suggesting that other coaches do experience it. I also assumed that coaches who experience flow have a memory of their experiences and will be able to articulate their experiences.

I am aware of a few biases that I brought to this project. First, I used coaching descriptors and statistics from the International Coach Federation (ICF). ICF is one of a growing list of coaching organizations. I chose ICF because it is one of the largest coach organizations in the world and its certification is widely recognized. ICF is not without its critics, particularly with respect to its certification requirements. ICF's certification requirements are viewed by many as

overly burdensome in an unregulated industry, as evidenced by the growing number of competing coach certification organizations with less rigorous requirements.

I also brought biases to this project regarding coaching philosophy and practice. While much of my coaching practice is devoted to executive coaching, I believe that all coaching is ultimately life coaching. As a result, I take a holistic approach to my clients, often bringing wellness coaching and personal coaching considerations to my work. I also take a humanistic, appreciative approach to coaching, with roots in positivity. I see my clients as whole and capable and my role to facilitate the process of their development.

I did not observe any way in which my biases interfered with my research in this project as I was focused on the experience of flow that coaches experience, not the philosophy nor the specific types of clients they bring to their practice.

### **Summary**

This chapter introduced the concepts of coaching, flow, and adult development from a coaching perspective. This chapter also outlined the purpose and significance of the research study. The inspiration for this study was detailed and included my own experience as both a coach and a client. I also addressed assumptions and biases in this chapter. The research questions were introduced in this chapter. And finally, the significance of focusing on flow from a developmental perspective was also discussed. As the Review of Literature will outline, the flow state offers several benefits for coaches and the coaching profession.

## CHAPTER TWO. REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The following review of literature will further define flow, address the experience of flow, provide a review of flow studies and the value of flow. In the absence of literature on flow in the specific experience of coaches, this review will focus on professions with some similar characteristics. Further, the review will cover personality as a predisposing condition of flow.

### Defining Flow

Flow refers to an altered state of consciousness that can occur in any meaningful activity of life (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996, 1993, 1990, 1997, 1975a ;Csikszentmihalyi, Rathunde & Whalen, 1993). The flow experience has nine primary characteristics (Csikszentmihalyi & Csikszentmihalyi, 1988):

1. The activity has clear goals and objectives requiring response.
2. The activity provides immediate feedback.
3. The individual's perceived skills are suited to the challenge.
4. The individual feels completely absorbed in the effort – a high level of concentration, minimal distractions.
5. The individual's awareness and actions merge.
6. The activity feels effortless.
7. Intrinsic motivation is present – the engagement is self-rewarding.
8. The individual experiences an altered sense of time.
9. The individual experiences a loss of ego-awareness or self-consciousness and has the sense of expanded consciousness and expanded strength.

Csikszentmihalyi's original concept of flow, as the optimal state between anxiety and boredom, when perceived skill matches the challenge, is illustrated in Figure 1. As an expanded

understanding of flow developed, Figure 2 represents states in the flow channel, in terms of skill and challenge. As the figure illustrates, the flow state is most likely to occur when skill level and challenge are both high. Flow is a precursor to growth in part because a creative tension is produced between arousal and control, according to Csikszentmihalyi. Conversely, apathy is most likely to occur when challenge and skill level are both low. Boredom and anxiety tend to impair learning (Quinn, 2000).

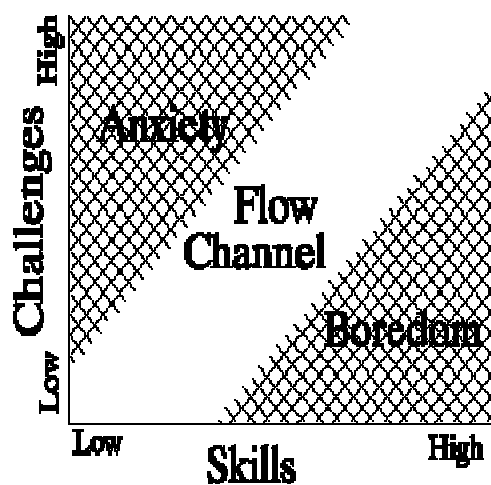


Figure 1. Original flow model  
(Adapted from Csikszentmihalyi  
1975)



Figure 2. Skills challenge grid  
(Adapted from Massimini & Carli,  
1988 )

### Flow and Mindfulness

The term “flow” is often used synonymously with “mindfulness” in practitioner literature. However, Csikszentmihalyi (1990), Nakamura and Csikszentmihalyi (2002) and Bryant and Veroff (2007) note that intense self-awareness, a tenet of mindfulness, disrupts the process of flow. Also, Siegel (2007) asserts that flow, being “non-self consciously immersed in the sensations of an experience” (p. 79), lacks mindful awareness. Following the concept of flow

as detailed by Csikszentmihalyi and colleagues, this study considers flow different from mindfulness.

### **The Concept of Flow**

As noted in the introduction, the theory of flow suggests that it is an altered state of consciousness. Individuals in the flow state are completely engaged in activities that are intrinsically rewarding. When in the flow state, one has

a sense that one's skills are adequate to cope with the challenges at hand, in a goal-directed, rule bound action system that provides clear clues as to how well one is functioning. Concentration is so intense that there is no attention left over to think about anything irrelevant, or to worry about problems. Self-consciousness disappears, and the sense of time becomes distorted. An activity that produces such experiences is so gratifying that people are willing to do it for its own sake, with little concern for what they will get out of it, even when it is difficult or dangerous. (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, p. 71).

Further, awareness and action merge and one has the sense of effortless engagement (Csikszentmihalyi, Rathunde & Whalen, 1993) and the individual has a sense of joy about the experience. Individuals in flow states are also often performing at their best (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996, 2003).

### **The Origins of Flow Theory**

Influenced as a young man by Carl Jung's focus on the positive aspects of existence, Csikszentmihalyi (Csikszentmihalyi & Csikszentmihalyi, 1988) began his interest in what he eventually termed "flow" while working on his doctoral dissertation in the 1960s. In his research, he focused on male artists at work. He observed how many artists were totally immersed in their work and had a sense of joy about it. He further noted that once artists finished a painting, they



were no longer interested in that particular piece and the joy experienced while immersed in the work disappeared as well.

Extrinsic motivation was not likely the reason for the immersion, as the art students were not being paid for their work, or publicly recognized. Csikszentmihalyi (Csikszentmihalyi & Csikszentmihalyi, 1988) further rejected the psychodynamic explanation that the artists were exhibiting sublimation. "If one observes the artists at work for any length of time, the sublimation hypothesis wears thin fairly soon. There is just too much genuine excitement and involvement with the emerging forms and colors to explain it all in terms of a substitution for something else" (p. 4). Csikszentmihalyi (1988) hypothesized that the work itself was bringing joy to the artists and that the challenge of increasingly complex work was a contributor. Thus, he began to look more closely at the experience of the artists and their intrinsic motivation.

### **Maslow: Self-Actualization, Peak Experience, and Transcendence**

Csikszentmihalyi was strongly influenced by Maslow's concept of peak experience. "His distinction between *process* and *product* orientations in creative behavior, which led him to identify 'peak experiences,' was the conceptual framework closest to the phenomenon [he] was trying to understand" (Csikszentmihalyi, 1988, p. 5). Maslow (1954) suggested that people who are motivated toward satisfaction from the activities they do are seeking "self-actualization." Viewed as an ongoing process throughout life, Maslow (1987) defined self-actualization as "the full use and exploitation of talents, capacities, potentialities, etc." (p. 150). Self-actualization sits atop his hierarchy of needs pyramid, suggesting that it is the highest level of consciousness, achievable after all lower-level needs are met. He believed the motivation for self-actualization is the discovery of one's potential and limitations through intense immersion in activities and experiences.

In his research, Maslow found 15 characteristics of self-actualized people. One characteristic was that they had “peak experiences,” which he defined as “transient moments of self-actualization” (Maslow, 1971, p. 48). “All peak experiences may be fruitfully understood as completions-of-the-act ... or as the Gestalt psychologists' closure, or on the paradigm of the Reichian type of complete orgasm, or as total discharge, catharsis, culmination, climax, consummation, emptying or finishing” (Maslow, 1968, p. I).

Maslow (1971) also differentiated between two types or “degrees” of self-actualizers: those who he defined as healthy, but with little experience of transcendence or peak experience and those for whom peak experience/transcendence was a vital experience. He argued that self-actualization is not a requirement for transcendent experiences. “I find not only self-actualizing people who transcend, but also nonhealthy people, non-self-actualizers who have important transcendent experiences” (p. 280). Relatedly, Csikszentmihalyi (1993) suggests that individuals in the flow state experience transcendence and that flow experiences over time contribute to the ongoing development of the transcendent self.

### **Flow as it Relates to Peak Experience and Peak Performance**

Maslow’s definition of peak experiences has been expanded over the years and applied to many activities, perhaps most notably, sports. The term “peak experience,” as well as “peak performance” has been used synonymously with “flow” experience. While the three share some characteristics, when viewed in their most basic form, they also represent very different experiences (Privette, 1983; Privette & Bundrick, 1989, 1991). For purposes of clarity, Table 2 provides a brief overview of similarities and differences between the three concepts.

Table 1

*Flow, Peak Experience and Peak Performance*

	<b>Flow</b>	<b>Peak Experience</b>	<b>Peak Performance</b>
<b>Defined</b>	Intrinsically Rewarding Experience	Experience of Intense Joy	Superior Functioning
<b>How they relate to each other</b>	Flow, an “intrinsically pleasurable experience” (Privette, 1983), “shares the enjoyment or valuing of peak experience and the behavior of peak performance. . . [It] does not imply optimal joy or performance, but may include either or both” (p. 1361).		
<b>Common Qualities</b>	Absorption, attention, clear focus, joy, valuing, the spontaneous, effortless, “letting-be of the process and the graceful, integrated, Taoistic nature of the person in the event” (Privette, 1983, p. 1366); person experiences personal identity		
<b>Unique Qualities</b>	Fun	Transpersonal	Clear Focus
<b>Triggers</b>	Play; games; creativity; research at the frontier; transcendental, peak, or religious experiences; collective ritual; Zen, yoga and other meditative states	Music, sex, art, nature, religion, exercise and movement, creative work, beauty, childbirth, scientific knowledge, recollection and introspection, poetic knowledge	Death crisis, aesthetic events, intellectual events, sporting events, personal-interpersonal interactions
<b>Experience of Self</b>	Loss of ego	Loss of self	Strong sense of self
<b>Orientation</b>	Lost time and space	Outside time and space	Overwhelmed other senses
<b>Exclusive Examples</b>	Something is exclusively flow only at the lower levels of joy and performance	An exclusively peak experience is one that does not specifically involve superior behavior	An exclusively peak performance is one in which superior performance does not include joy or enjoyment
(Adapted from Privette, 1983)			

**Play as the Prototype for Flow**

Primarily interested in “the quality of subjective experience that made a behavior intrinsically rewarding” (Csikszentmihalyi & Csikszentmihalyi, 1988, p. 5), Csikszentmihalyi

undertook the study of children and adults at play in the late 1960s for additional insight. The major theoretical underpinnings for his work at this time came from Johan Huizinga. A Dutch historian considered one of the founders of modern cultural history, Johan Huizinga lived between 1872 and 1945. He studied play in the context of culture (Huizinga, 1950) and defined play as

a voluntary activity or occupation executed within certain fixed limits of time and place, according to rules freely accepted but absolutely binding, having as its aim in itself and accompanied by a feeling of tension, joy and the consciousness that it is “different” from “ordinary life.” (p. 28)

Huizinga’s influence can be seen in two of Csikszentmihalyi’s characteristics of flow, outlined earlier in this proposal:

- The activity has clear goals and objectives.
- Intrinsic motivation is present – the engagement is self-rewarding.

The result of Csikszentmihalyi’s study of Huizinga (Csikszentmihalyi & Bennett, 1971) was a model of play that represents the beginnings of Csikszentmihalyi’s flow model.

### **De Charms’ Theory of Personal Causation**

Csikszentmihalyi and Bennett’s (1971) definition of play in this context was influenced by de Charms’ (1968) theory of personal causation. According to de Charms, experiences that involve self-control and that originate with individual (called “origin”) experiences, produce a sense of greater well being than life experiences in which individuals do not play an active role (called “pawn experiences”). In the origin state, a person is totally immersed in an activity and feels no anxiety or worry. A play episode begins once awareness and action merge. An outstanding aspect of the state of play is the lack of self-consciousness (de Charms, 1968).

De Charms' influence on Csikszentmihalyi's research of play, then provided additional influence on the following characteristics of Csikszentmihalyi's later flow model:

- The individual's awareness and actions merge.
- The individual experiences a loss of ego-awareness or self-consciousness and has the sense of expanded consciousness.

Using de Charms' concept of "origin" and "pawn" experiences, Reich and Zautra (1981) confirmed a link between active engagement in an activity and wellbeing. Their study focused on student engagement. In this study, three groups of college students were pretested for level of life satisfaction. They were then asked to either participate in 12 activities from a self-selected list of enjoyable pleasurable activities, participate in two activities from the list, or return in a month for retesting. Upon retesting all three groups, the researchers found that positive "origin" experiences related to greater contentment and less emotional instability than either positive or negative "pawn" experiences.

Throughout the 1970s, Csikszentmihalyi continued to study the subjective experience, looking to find why intrinsically motivated experiences were rewarding (Csikszentmihalyi & Csikszentmihalyi, 1988). He had his students interview more than 200 people who were identified as spending a substantial amount of time doing activities that brought no recognition or money. Their interview subjects included amateur athletes, rock climbers, dancers, chess masters, and musical composers. Their goal was to learn how such people characterized an activity when it was especially successful.

The results of these studies produced what Csikszentmihalyi described as his first coherent statements about flow (Csikszentmihalyi 1975a, 1975b, 1988). Specifically, he found that respondents commonly felt that the particular activity they were engaged in was rewarding

in and of itself. Csikszentmihalyi (Csikszentmihalyi & Csikszentmihalyi, 1988) defined this experience as *flow*. His research further found a common set of structural characteristics that distinguished the flow experience from the rest of an individual's daily experience. His work suggested that flow was not just a possible state when one is engaged in play. He found that the intrinsic reward of flow could be created in any activity. He found that flow was present when an activity has clear goals and objectives requiring response. Also, flow-generating activity provides immediate feedback. When in the flow state, one's perceived skills match the challenge. When in the flow state, one feels completely absorbed in the effort. There is a high level of concentration with minimum distractions. In addition, when in flow, one's awareness and actions merge, the activity feels effortless, and one experiences an altered sense of time. Intrinsic motivation is also present. The engagement is self-rewarding. And finally, when in the flow state, one experiences a loss of ego-awareness or self-consciousness and has the sense of expanded consciousness and expanded strength (Csikszentmihalyi, 1988).

### **Concepts Related to the Intrinsic Nature of Flow**

The work of several other researchers illuminates aspects of flow theory. Among them are White's theory of competence motivation, Harter's model of intrinsic mastery motivation, Bandura's theory of self-efficacy, and Deci and Ryan's self-determination theory.

### **White's Concept of Competence and Competence Motivation**

Finding that "there is widespread discontent with theories of motivation built upon primary drives," White (1959, p. 328) introduced the concept of competence motivation. He suggested first that competence be defined as a behavior that allows one to interact effectively with the environment. Competence in an activity is not motivated by primary drives alone, but by engagement which he described as competence motivation. The activity is done for the sake

of mastering the activity. White's theory relates to Csikszentmihalyi's concept of flow in that flow is achieved when there is a balance between the challenge of the activity and an individual's skills, and further that pleasure is derived from the activity itself. White (1959) also argued that competence produces a "*feeling of efficacy*" (p. 329).

Decades later, Harter (1981) developed a more complex model of intrinsic mastery motivation. Working with children, Harter (1981) demonstrated that individuals focus on activities at which they feel they are competent and avoid areas they are less sure of mastering. Further, she suggested that successful and unsuccessful attempts at mastery reinforce their choices.

### **Bandura's Theory of Self-Efficacy**

Bandura (1997) expanded on, and to a degree contested, the work of White and Harter. Bandura wrote that "striving for competence is not driven by an omnibus mastery motive but rather is motivated by the varied benefits of competent action" (p. 15). He contended that self-regulation plays an important part in ongoing motivation. He argued that time spent developing and maintaining knowledge and skill led to perceived ability to succeed at a task. This is the core of his definition of self-efficacy: perceived ability to succeed at a task (Bandura, 1997). Bandura's work supports Csikszentmihalyi's observations of the artists he studied. "To be successful, one not only must possess the required skills, but also a resilient self-belief in one's capabilities to exercise control over events to accomplish desired goals" (Wood & Bandura, 1989, p. 364).

### **Predisposing Conditions to Flow**

In the last 25 years, many researchers have worked to uncover the predisposing conditions of flow. Two categories of antecedents have been identified: personality and motivation. Researchers have found a variety of antecedents of flow outlined in this section.

#### **Flow and Concepts of Personality, Temperament, and Character**

**Csikszentmihalyi's experience.** A number of studies have been conducted that link temperament, personality and character to ability and ease of entering the flow state (Csikszentmihalyi, & Csikszentmihalyi, 1988; Teng, 2011). In his early work, Csikszentmihalyi (Csikszentmihalyi & Csikszentmihalyi, 1988) suggested that people with attention deficit disorder may find it challenging to enter the flow state as it requires complete absorption in an activity. In addition, schizophrenics may be incapable of entering the flow state by virtue of their inability to control what they are thinking.

Csikszentmihalyi (Csikszentmihalyi & Csikszentmihalyi, 1988) also suggested that genetics may play a role, and that there may be individuals with a genetic advantage in controlling consciousness. People who are excessively self-conscious or self-centered might experience flow less often. Csikszentmihalyi (Csikszentmihalyi & Csikszentmihalyi, 1988) contended that both self-conscious and self-centered people may lack the ability to gain satisfaction from activities for their own sake. He suggested that there is so much focus on the self that the attention on an activity is enveloped in the needs of the self. Environmental and social factors can also play a role in the likelihood of experiencing flow. Slavery, oppression and exploitation may all suppress flow. (Csikszentmihalyi & Csikszentmihalyi, 1988).

Csikszentmihalyi (1997) also found that people who are able to enter the flow state have a greater ability than the general population to develop an autotelic personality. That is, that the



joy of doing something is in the activity itself – whatever the activity. He suggests that autotelic people are less dependent on extrinsic rewards for motivation, and tend to behave more independently and autonomously, as they are not easily threatened by outside forces. He further found that people could become more autotelic the more they experience flow. Quinn (2000) has suggested that people with autotelic personalities are more likely to be empathetic, to be empowered and empowering. Empathy and the ability to be empowering are both highly desirable coaching characteristics, as is the ability to focus on the other.

**Flow and Cloninger's 7 Factor Model.** Teng (2011) studied how temperament and character affect the likelihood of experiencing flow. Researchers selected 372 online gamers for the study. Cloninger, Svrakic, and Przybeck's (1993) seven-factor model of temperament and character was administered. Cloninger and colleagues (1993) suggest that four fundamental temperament factors manifest early in life: novelty seeking, harm avoidance, reward dependence, and persistence. They argue that self-directedness, cooperativeness, and self-transcendence in adulthood are a function of temperament. Table 2 illustrates the behaviors associated with individuals at each extreme of the temperament and character factors.

Table 2

*Behaviors Associated with Cloninger's 7-Factor Model of Temperament and Character*

<b>Temperament Factors</b>	<b>High</b>	<b>Low</b>
<b>Harm Avoidance</b>	Pessimistic Fearful Shy Fatigueable	Optimistic Daring Outgoing Energetic
<b>Novelty Seeking</b>	Exploratory Impulsive Extravagant Irritable	Reserved Deliberate Thrifty Stoical
<b>Reward Dependence</b>	Sentimental Open Warm Appreciative	Detached Reserved Cold Independent
<b>Persistence</b>	Industrious Determined Enthusiastic Perfectionistic	Inert Spoiled Underachiever Pragmatic
<b>Character Factors</b>		
<b>Self-directedness</b>	Responsible Purposeful Resourceful Self-accepted Disciplined	Blaming Aimless Inept Vain Undisciplined
<b>Cooperativeness</b>	Tenderhearted Empathic Helpful Compassionate Principled	Intolerant Insensitive Hostile Revengeful Opportunities
<b>Self-transcendence</b>	Intuitive Acquiescent Spiritual	Contrived Controlling Materialistic
*Source: Svrakic, et al, 2002		

Teng (2011) found that individuals who are novelty seekers, persistent, and/or self-transcendent are likely to experience flow, while self-directed individuals are not likely to experience flow. Teng found no relationship between the remaining factors and flow.

### **Entering the Flow State**

Beyond predisposing conditions to flow, there are immediate factors that enable it. Enjoyable activity itself appears to trigger a flow experience, as well as challenges presented in an activity and the concentration required. Positive moods, a pleasant environment, and adequate skills have been shown to potentiate it and all of the factors mentioned above help sustain it (Massimini, Csikszentmihalyi, & Delle Fave, 1988).

### **Experiencing Flow in a Dyad**

Research on the experience of flow in dyadic situations is quite scarce. In a related study of psychotherapeutic presence (Geller & Greenberg, 2002), researchers sought to identify and understand therapists' experience of presence in psychotherapeutic encounters. Presence here was defined as "bringing one's whole self to the engagement with the client and being fully in the moment with and for the client, with little self-centered purpose or goal in mind" (p. 72). Some components of their "presence" model are similar to some of Csikszentmihalyi's characteristics of flow. It should be noted that presence is also a coaching competency identified by ICF. ICF defines presence as the "ability to be fully conscious and create spontaneous relationship with the client, employing a style that is open, flexible and confident" (ICF, 2013).

The left column of Table 3, below, provides descriptors of psychotherapists' experience of presence. The right column provides characteristics of flow that are similar to the descriptors of presence.

Table 3

*Comparison of Csikszentmihalyi's Flow Model to Geller and Greenberg's "Presence"*

<b>Psychotherapists' Descriptions of Experiencing Presence*</b>	<b>Flow**</b>
<b>Immersion</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Absorption</li> <li>• Experiencing deeply with non-attachment</li> <li>• Present-centered</li> <li>• Aware, alert, focused</li> </ul>	<p>The individual feels completely absorbed in the effort.</p> <p>The individual's awareness and actions merge (possible).</p>
<b>Expansion</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Timelessness</li> <li>• Energy and flow</li> <li>• Innerspaciousness</li> <li>• Enhanced awareness, sensation, and perception</li> <li>• Enhanced quality of thought and emotional experiencing</li> </ul>	<p>The individual experiences an altered sense of time.</p>
<b>Being With and For the Client</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Intention for client's healing</li> <li>• Awe, respect, love</li> <li>• Lack of self-conscious awareness</li> </ul>	<p>The individual experiences a loss of ego-awareness or self-consciousness and has a sense of expanded consciousness.</p>
<p>Source: Geller &amp; Greenberg, 2003</p>	<p>Source: Csikszentmihalyi &amp; Csikszentmihalyi, 1988</p>

Flow components absent in the study include a sense of effortlessness, intrinsic motivation, skills and challenge compatibility, and clear goals and objectives are not addressed in the presence model. Nonetheless, the study indicates that presence includes some of the aspects of flow, indicating the possibility of flow in dyadic interactions.

### **Flow and Coaching**

As the discussion of flow earlier in this Review of Literature suggests, there are personal and professional benefits for people who experience flow. Since Csikszentmihalyi's

research suggests that flow is available to a wide variety of individuals, it appears possible that coaches experience flow. However, until this study, no one has examined the coaches' experience of flow. As with other professions studied by Csikszentmihalyi and others, it is valuable to understand coaches' experience of flow in order to learn not just their unique experience, but also what factors relate to coaches' experience of flow. This understanding contributes to the literature on both flow and coaching and provides developmental pathways for coaches.

**Coaching competencies and flow.** According to Csikszentmihalyi (Csikszentmihalyi and Csikszentmihalyi, 1988), competence is a prerequisite of flow. Although no research was found on the experience of coaches in flow, a number of coaching core competencies suggest the opportunity for coaches to enter a flow state during coaching sessions. The International Coach Federation (ICF, 2012) lists the following core competencies it believes are necessary for competent coaching:

1. Meeting ethical guidelines and professional standards
2. Establishing a coaching agreement
3. **Establishing trust and intimacy with the client**
4. **Coaching presence**
5. **Active listening**
6. **Powerful questioning**
7. **Direct communication**
8. **Creating awareness**
9. **Designing actions** □
10. **Planning and goal setting** □

### 11. Managing progress and accountability

The highlighted competencies above each contain components that suggest the opportunity for flow during a coaching session. Table 4 provides a breakdown of the highlighted coaching competencies and the related characteristics of flow that may be present in a coaching session. This table was created based on an examination of the components of each coaching competency. The full list of competencies may be found in Appendix A.

Table 4

*Coaching Competencies as Related to Flow*

<b>*Flow Components</b> <b>**Coaching Core Competencies</b>	<b>Clear goals requiring response</b>	<b>Provides immediate feedback</b>	<b>Skills suited to challenge</b>	<b>High level of concentration</b>	<b>Awareness and actions merge</b>	<b>The activity feels effortless</b>	<b>Intrinsic motivation present</b>	<b>Altered sense of time</b>	<b>Loss of ego awareness/self consciousness</b>
<b>Establishing Trust &amp; Intimacy with Client</b>	●	●	●	●	●				●
<b>Coaching Presence</b>	●	●	●	●	●	●			●
<b>Active Listening</b>	●	●	●	●	●	●			
<b>Powerful Questioning</b>	●	●	●	●	●				●
<b>Direct Communication</b>	●	●	●	●	●				
<b>Creating Awareness</b>	●	●	●	●	●				●
<b>Designing Actions</b>	●	●	●	●	●				●

\*Source: Csikszentmihalyi & Csikszentmihalyi, 1988 \*\*Source: ICF Website, 2012

As noted in Table 4, several characteristics of flow are represented consistently. However, indications that the action feels effortless, that intrinsic motivation is present, and that an altered sense of time exists are absent. Their absence suggests only that they are not core competencies of coaching as identified by ICF. The prevalence of core coaching competencies that contain elements of flow indicates that coaches who possess these competencies are likely to experience flow during coaching sessions.

### **Intrinsic Motivation and Coaching**

Coaching development research to date has not focused on the ways intrinsic motivation is demonstrated in coaching. Generally, focused research on intrinsic motivation suggests that it is present and enhanced when autonomy and a sense of competence are present (Ryan & Deci, 2000). As Table 4 indicates, there are several core aspects of coaching that focus on competence and the freedom associated with choice and self-direction, indicating that the conditions for intrinsic motivation are present.

### **Altered Sense of Time and Coaching**

The myriad studies conducted on flow suggest an altered sense of time to be a characteristic of the experience (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996, 1993, 1990, 1997; Csikszentmihalyi, Rathunde, & Whalen, 1993). On its surface, this characteristic of flow may appear to be impossible as coaching sessions generally occur over a fixed time period. “When consciousness is fully active and ordered, hours seem to pass by in minutes, and occasionally a few seconds stretch out into what seems to be an infinity. The clock no longer serves as a good analog of the temporal quality of experience” (Csikszentmihalyi & Csikszentmihalyi, 1988, p. 33). However, it would seem that a coach could experience a state of altered time during a coaching session and still be cognizant of the clock. Research on chess masters and surgeons experiencing flow



(Csikszentmihalyi, 1975b) are examples of activities that have an associated time component and yet allow individuals to experience the sense of altered time passage.

### **Benefits of the Flow Experience**

The benefits of flow appear to be both personal and performance-related. From a personal perspective, when people are engaged in flow, they are able to experience a deep sense of enjoyment (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997). Beyond joy, the research of Csikszentmihalyi (Csikszentmihalyi & Csikszentmihalyi, 1988) and others documents that people engaged in flow often do their best in the activity in which they experience flow. The state of flow has also been shown to promote both personal and professional growth (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997). In order to repeat the flow state, one must seek greater and greater challenges. As one succeeds at increasingly complex challenges, self-efficacy increases, expanding one's abilities and often influencing self-esteem (Bandura, 1997).

Flow has also been shown to enhance creativity, reduce stress, and may promote healing from illness or injury by improving quality of life (Csikszentmihalyi, 1993; Perry, 1999). Csikszentmihalyi also suggests that the experience of flow may be linked to human survival. People who experience flow are likely to take risks, explore, and develop new skills. In our evolution as a species, Csikszentmihalyi (1985) suggests that overcoming difficult obstacles became genetically linked with pleasure. When experiencing frustration or boredom, Csikszentmihalyi, Rathunde, and Whelan, (1993) suggest that people are motivated to become more emotionally complex through action and initiating changes.

### **Limitations of Flow Theory**

The inability to gauge, judge, and measure flow outside of the report of individuals experiencing flow is at the heart of much criticism of the phenomenon. Self-reporting (Catino,

2000), self-assessment of skills (Ellis, Voelkl & Morris, 1994), and cultural influences challenge Csikszentmihalyi's definition of flow (Novak & Hoffman, 1997). The limitations outlined here do not present an impediment to the present research, as the focus was on coaches' experience of flow.

### **Summary of the Literature Review**

This literature review explored the concept of flow and the origins of flow theory, as well as the link between components of flow and coaching competencies. This review also looked at the positive effects of multiple experiences of flow. Csikszentmihalyi's findings that the necessary components of flow can be universally applied indicate that his concepts could be easily applied to the study of coaches who experience flow, despite the lack of research to date. Further supporting the possibility of the flow state for coaches was the comparison of flow to presence in the psychotherapeutic experience (Geller & Greenberg, 2002) and the number of ICF coaching competencies that include conditions necessary for flow (Table 4). This is an important study for coaches, as it is one of the first to explore the experience of coaching from a developmental perspective. Understanding coaches' experience of flow also provides insight into the factors necessary for coaches to experience flow. By understanding these factors, coaches may be better able to focus their learning, beyond core training, in ways that enhance their experience and professional effectiveness.

As a precursor to flow, Maslow's notion of the possibility of transcendence absent self-actualization supported Csikszentmihalyi's premise that flow is a widely available experience and that flow experiences over time can contribute to the ongoing development of a transcendent self. This is significant for coaching development as it indicates the possibility of flow as a developmental experience. Also significant to coaches, Csikszentmihalyi (1993) viewed

transcendence as an ability to create synergy between goals and dreams both for the self and for others.

The concept of play, which provided Csikszentmihalyi with the beginnings of his early model of flow, was also examined in this review. The work of Huizinga (1950) and de Charms (1968) provide keys to coaching competencies for purposes of this study, and how they relate to flow. Coaches must have clear goals and objectives to effectively coach others as they are charged with managing the process of coaching. Coaching presence also includes the notion of simultaneous awareness and action. Intrinsic motivation is not identified by ICF as a core competency. Several competencies point to the likely experience of flow, which involves intrinsic motivation. By including the motivations of coaches in this research, it will be possible to unearth connections between coaching motivations, competencies, and flow.

Reich and Zautra's (1981) research confirming the link between engagement and wellbeing is significant to the study of coaching development in that it indicates the possibility that coaching itself is a developmental tool for coaches who feel engaged in their work.

White's (1959) concept of competence and competence motivation was also an interesting backdrop to this research. His work further develops a research interest in learning if coaches experience a balance between the challenge of coaching and their perceived competence. Harter's (1981) suggestion that we focus on areas in which we feel competent and avoid those we are less sure of mastering also has a link to coaching development, as she suggests that successful attempts at mastery reinforce the desire to continue an activity. As experience often increases competency, this concept was of interest for this study.

Bandura's work is intriguing for a number of reasons. First, he found that competence is a result of the self-regulation necessary to commit substantial time, effort, and resources to an

endeavor. He also found that skills are not enough to be successful. One must also possess a sense of self-efficacy. This is significant to the study. For coaches, it affirms the interrelationship between competency and motivation. It also adds the important component of belief in one's abilities, a concept of flow.

Personality and temperament as preconditions for facilitating flow experiences were also examined in this review. Csikszentmihalyi's and other researchers' theories and findings were presented and compared to coaching competencies, which suggest that by virtue of the skills needed for coaching, coaches may enter the flow state easier than individuals in many other professions.

Finally this review looked at the benefits and limitations of flow. The benefits of flow suggest that a coach entering the flow state will not only experience growth and a sense of well being, but may also provide the best possible service to clients while in the flow state. The limitations of flow theory identified, while worth noting, will not impinge in the nature of the proposed research, as it is the goal of the research to study the experiences of coaches in the state of flow.

### CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In this chapter, I review research design, data collection, and analysis methods. In addition, I discuss sampling strategy, site selection, myself as the researcher, and the validity of the study.

#### Research Setting

Thirteen research interviews were conducted in the last quarter of 2012 and the first quarter of 2013. All interviews were conducted by telephone. Participants were located throughout the United States, in all time zones. All participants were interviewed in a quiet environment in their home or office. In order to prepare participants for the interviews, I provided them with an overview of my interview protocol, as well as a definition of flow (Csikszentmihalyi & Csikszentmihalyi, 1988) and ICF competencies, if they did not have them available.

#### Research Design

**Purpose.** The purpose of this research was to explore the flow experience of professional, ICF certified coaches and the ICF competencies related to the flow experience. I found no empirical research on the experience of flow during coaching sessions, nor coaching competencies related to flow. Under the broad purpose of how experienced coaches experience flow, this study also examined coaches' perceived preconditions for flow. The protocol also included a question about what clients must bring to a session in order for the coach to experience flow. It covered how flow appears to be triggered and what competencies appear to be related to flow among the participants.

**Research approach.** Research on individuals in many occupations has revealed common characteristics of flow, providing a foundation for this research. However, we do not understand, nor have we sought to inquire of coaches how their experience of flow influences their coaching practice. The focus of interest then becomes the experience of flow that may be specific to coaches. A qualitative research approach is best used when the purpose of the research is to explore an issue a group of people experience, and that calls for an in-depth analysis (Creswell, 2013). Qualitative research takes into account the context in which people experience a phenomenon and allows for the development of theories (Creswell, 2013). For these reasons, a qualitative approach was ideal for this study.

**Research paradigm.** Coaching is a constructivist profession. “A constructivist stance maintains that learning is a process of constructing meaning; it is how people make sense of their experience” (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007, p. 291). Coaching facilitates the process for clients of creating meaning from their different experiences, by challenging client thinking and through supportive reflection of the client experiences. Based on this view, I chose an interpretive/constructivist paradigm for this study. This paradigm has its foundations in a relativist ontology (Havercamp & Young, 2007). Relativism allows for the validity of multiple social realities. Constructivists assume that reality is derived from the interaction of the researcher and the research participant. The axiological beliefs accompanying this paradigm require that values of each participant are honored. Suitable research methodologies in this paradigm include interviews, observation, and the study of texts (Creswell, 2013). Such research assumes the researcher has examined and understands her/his values and beliefs in relation to the topic since the researcher influences meaning co-development (Havercamp & Young, 2007).

**Method overview.** Single, semi-structured interviews of 60-90 minutes were used for this project. Interviews were conducted via telephone, recorded, and transcribed. Participants received transcripts of the interviews and were provided with an opportunity to make corrections to transcripts. Participants received all required documents in advance of the study, including a study overview and informed consent documents.

### **Participant Selection**

For this research, I used purposive sampling (Silverman, 2001) to ensure that participants met the qualifications for this study and were able to share their experiences of flow. Further, purposefully selecting participants helped me as researcher to better understand the experience of flow in coaches, and helped me to answer my research questions (Creswell, 2013).

In order to qualify for the study, coaches for both my pilot and research studies met the following parameters:

1. Currently have an active coaching practice
2. Are certified through the ICF at the Associate Coach Certification (ACC), Professional Coach Certification (PCC), or Master Coach Certification (MCC) level
3. Have a minimum of 10 years experience as a professional coach
4. Possess a minimum education of a bachelors degree
5. Have experienced flow in coaching sessions multiple times within the last year
6. Feel they can describe their experiences of flow

Participants were recruited through organizations in which I am active or familiar, and through peers and colleagues. Organizations included the ICF, the Evidence-Based Coaching Program at Fielding Graduate University, Wellcoaches, Inc., The Institute of Coaching, New

Ventures West, and the Co-Active Coaching Network. Several of my peers also circulated my recruitment letter to coaches in their individual coaching network.

ICF-certified coaches are familiar with the ICF Coaching Core Competencies. A minimum of 10 years experience ensured a professionally mature perspective and a level of competence that Csikszentmihalyi (Csikszentmihalyi & Csikszentmihalyi, 1988) found to be a prerequisite to flow. These coaches were not only able to articulate their experience of flow and how flow relates to ICF competencies, they were also able to discuss the evolution of the flow experience over time. Since depth of engagement was required, all participants had at least a bachelor's degree.

The initial recruitment letter was sent in October 2012 (see Appendix A). Two participants were chosen for the pilot study. Twenty-three potential participants responded to the letter. Of those 23, 13 were deemed qualified and were interviewed for this research.

### **Recruitment Challenges**

Only 13 of 23 respondents met the criteria and proceeded to the interviews. Many willing recruits lacked at least one of the participant qualifications. I cast my net beyond the United States, to Canada, Europe, Australia, and New Zealand, as well as South America.

As coaching is a relatively new profession, I was prepared for the challenge of finding coaches with at least 10 years of experience. In fact, many coaches with 5 years or less coaching experience reported that they experienced flow frequently. In the early stages of recruitment, I considered lowering the experience requirement, but ultimately wanted the experience and reflection that more seasoned coaches might be able to offer. What I was not prepared for, however, was the number of successful coaches with 10 or more years of coaching experience who were not ICF certified and saw no need to pursue certification. These coaches were some of



the most experienced. They were highly regarded, with many clients, and found ICF certification superfluous.

### **Data Collection**

The qualitative researcher “attempts to understand the world from the subjects’ point of view, to unfold the meaning of their experiences, to uncover their lived world” (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, p.1). In order to understand coaches’ point of view and lived world in relation to flow, semi-structured, in-depth interviews were the primary data collection methods for this research.

For this study, I conducted 13 semi-structured, in-depth interviews with coaches who have experienced flow multiple times in the course of coaching individuals. I began with a Flow Study Recruitment Letter (see Appendix A) sent via email to potential participants and organizations of potential participants, inviting them to join the study, and outlining qualifications and characteristics of flow. Once possible participants were identified, I conducted pre-interview phone sessions to determine eligibility and willingness to participate. After a pool of candidates was identified, I sent candidates an overview of the process, a statement of my goal for the research, and an informed consent form. When I received confirmation of willingness to participate and a signed informed consent form, I scheduled interview appointments. All interviews were conducted through a private conference call line. Participants had agreed in advance to be recorded. Once we completed introductions and I addressed any questions participants had, I announced the beginning of the recording and conducted the interview.

Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) refer to a research interview as an “inter view” because it is a professional conversation that is “inter-change of views between two persons conversing about

a theme of mutual interest” (p.2). While referring to interviews as conversation, Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) also note that they are not conversations of equals. The researcher is in control of the questions and direction of the conversation. In an attempt to make each interview more of a true interchange, I asked interviewees to provide any additional perspectives they had on coaches in flow not in the protocol.

### **Data Analysis**

I chose thematic analysis as my analysis approach to this study because it is theoretically flexible (Braun & Clarke, 2006). It allows for coding not just words or short phrases as codes, but also longer phrases, sentences, and passages (Saldana, 2009).

### **Thematic Analysis**

As coaching is a relatively young profession, without universally agreed-upon standards, definitions, or approaches, it seemed imperative that I bring the most flexible approach to my data analysis. Analyzing research participants’ perception of their flow experiences often required lengthier codes in order to capture the full experience. I began specifically using Braun and Clarke’s (2006) approach to thematic analysis, which involves the following six steps:

1. Becoming familiar with the data
2. Generate initial codes
3. Search for themes
4. Review themes
5. Define and name themes
6. Produce the report

**Becoming familiar with the data.** In order to familiarize myself with the data, I reviewed memos and notes taken during interviews and reviewed transcripts.

**Generating initial data points and categories.** The initial coding method was a hybrid of inductive and deductive coding (Saldana, 2009). I remained aware of the focus of my study as I coded and at the same time remained open to all data of interest in the research. Initial coding served to organize and integrate all of the interviews for further analysis.

As I reviewed the transcripts, I highlighted words, phrases, and passages in which participants made statements related to their perceived experience of flow. These excerpts became my data bits. Data bits were sorted into categories. Upon completion of initial coding, there were 811 data bits in 36 categories. A computerized document was developed for each category and data bits transferred to their associated categories.

**Searching for themes.** In order to search for themes, I first setup a “sticky wall” and placed a large sheet for each category on the sticky wall for purposes of reviewing, looking for patterns and connections, and consolidating categories where warranted. I next consolidated all of the categories and data bits into a single document to assist with word searches. I then reviewed all of the data bits for potential themes and subthemes and grouped data from my initial codes into potential theme and subtheme categories.

I first took a visual approach to theme development by attaching labels of possible themes and subthemes to the “sticky wall” and grouping relevant initial data bits into documents labeled with the possible themes and subthemes. I also created a “miscellaneous” label for data that seemed not to fit any theme. As I searched for themes, patterns of the flow process emerged that I could not ignore. I scribbled some diagrams of what I was experiencing, but continued the analysis.

I then went back to my sticky wall and looked for connections between my 36 categories. I ended up with three primary labels under which all but three of the categories were placed. In the end, only three of my original categories were placed in the “miscellaneous” labeled category, which indicated to me that I likely had workable groupings.

Upon further review of the data, five primary themes emerged from the 33 original categories. Along with the primary themes, *a model of coach flow experience* and *a model of coach flow entry process* emerged, which will be discussed in Chapter 4.

### **Data Management**

All e-mails, electronic copies of interview recordings, transcripts of interviews, and data analysis are stored on a password-protected computer. Additionally, any notes, printed copies of electronic files, and signed consent forms are kept in a locked file cabinet in my private home office. I will maintain all associated data from this study for 3–5 years, after which time I will destroy them by shredding hard copy documents and deleting electronic documents from the computer and any external disks used during the course of the study.

### **Protection of Human Participants**

#### **Voluntary Participation**

All coaches who agreed to participate in this study were volunteers who chose to participate based on their own personal interest in the topic. Each participant was informed about the objectives and risks associated with this study. This notification was provided at least three times during the course of this research: in the recruiting email, during a prescreening call, and through their review of an Informed Consent form. In addition, participants were informed they would have the opportunity to decline or withdraw from the study at any time. I ensured there

was no coercion of participants by soliciting and choosing participants with whom I did not have an employment, financial, or supervisory relationship.

### **Participant Confidentiality and Anonymity**

Every effort was made to protect study participants' confidentiality and anonymity. Each participant was given the opportunity to be identified through a pseudonym of their choosing. I acknowledge that some participants in the study may know each other and choose to share their participation with others. I further required the professional transcriptionist used for this research to sign a confidentiality agreement.

### **Researcher**

“In qualitative research, the investigator serves as a kind of ‘instrument’ in the collection and analysis of data” (McCracken, 1988, p. 18). In order to fulfill qualitative goals, the researcher must bring her/his experience, comprehension, and creativity to the process. As noted earlier, the researcher is assumed to bring her/his values, experience, social location, and comprehension to the research. I personally brought to this study experience similar to that of the research participants. My experience provided me with an understanding of other coaches' perceived experiences and assisted in my development of appropriate interview questions. Having experienced flow many times in my own professional coaching career, I believed that the flow experience was possible for other coaches and recognized that other coaches' experience of flow may differ from mine.

I am a White, divorced woman. I have had my own coaching and consulting practice for 20 years. I have more than 4,000 documented hours of professional coaching, and master's degrees in Organization Development and Human Development. I completed the Evidence Based Coaching Certification at Fielding Graduate University in 2009. In addition, I have Professional

Coach Certification (PCC) status from ICF, I am a board-certified coach as recognized by the Center for Credentialing and Education, and I am a faculty member of Wellcoaches, Inc., which provides wellness coach training and certification.

As noted earlier, I bring a strengths-based appreciative philosophy to my coaching, which includes the assumption that clients are whole and capable of achieving their goals. I view my role as creatively managing the process of coaching.

### **Delimitations**

The focus of this study was to explore coaches' perceived experiences of the flow state during coaching sessions. The study did not empirically investigate the effect of the flow state on coaching outcomes or on client experience.

### **Validity**

“Validity. . . is one of the strengths of qualitative research and is based on determining whether the findings are accurate from the standpoint of the researcher, the participant, or the readers of an account” (Creswell & Miller, 2000). According to Creswell (2009), qualitative validity is tested by employing multiple strategies to check for the accuracy of research findings. For this study, a number of strategies were employed. First was member checking. All transcripts of interviews were provided to research participants to review and check for errors. Data sources were also triangulated (Creswell, 2009) by assuring that patterns emerged through the integration of multiple participant interviews into proposed categories, and later themes. If a pattern was evident, interview data were reread to ascertain if patterns worked in relation to the data, and also to look for data that may have been missed in previous coding.

I also clarified my biases, as noted earlier in the study. And finally, I attempted to provide multiple perspectives for each theme to add to validity through providing a realistic and deeper description of each theme.

### **Summary**

This chapter detailed the research method and design used for this study, which seeks to reveal the way in which coaches describe their experience of flow. A qualitative research design was chosen, which supported the interpretivist/constructivist paradigm. The importance of purposive sampling was detailed along with the participant recruitment approach and the reasoning for specific participant qualifications. The choice of semi-structured research interviews for data collection was explained, as was the choice of thematic analysis. I also discussed where I placed myself as the researcher. The research approach chosen yielded important findings about the experience of coaches in the flow state, as well as the conditions, and triggers coaches found necessary to experience flow and key behaviors clients contributed to coaches' experience of flow. As detailed in Chapter 4, the research provided important insight into the flow experience of coaches from a developmental perspective.

## **CHAPTER FOUR: KEY FINDINGS**

The purpose of this study is to explore the ways in which experienced coaches perceive their experience of the flow state during coaching sessions. During interviews they were asked about multiple facets of a specific coaching session in which they experienced flow. They were also asked to relate details for a coaching session in which they did not experience flow. Further, participants were asked about facets of these sessions, ICF competencies they could identify during flow states, preconditions, and triggers for flow. Participants were then asked questions about their broader experiences with flow.

In this chapter, I summarize participant profiles and report key findings of the research.

### **Participant Profiles**

This research study included 13 participants, each of whom met the participant criteria. All participants practice in the United States. Though not a requirement, 12 of the 13 participants identified some type of executive coaching as at least 50% of their coaching business. For purposes of this study, executive coaching involves coaching individuals or teams through organizational change, through career or job transitions, through the process of specific skill development, and/or through the process of resolving problems (Peltier, 2010).

Participants included both men and women, coaches from each of the three ICF certification levels, and secondary education ranging from bachelor's degrees to doctorates. Table 5 provides a summary of characteristics of study participants.



Table 5

*Summary of Participants' Characteristics (n=13)*

<i>Gender</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>
Male	4	31
Female	9	69
<i>Years of Coaching Experience</i>		
10	3	23
11-15	6	47
16-20	2	15
21-25+	2	15
<i>Education</i>		
Bachelor's Degree	2	15
Master's Degree	7	54
Doctorate	4	31
<i>ICF Coaching Certification Level</i>		
Associate Certified Coach (ACC)	2	15
Professional Certified Coach (PCC)	8	62
Master Certified Coach (MCC)	3	23
<i>Primary Type of Coaching Identified</i>		
Executive Coaching Greater than 50 % of Clients	11	84
Executive and Wellness Coaching Each 50%	1	8
No Defined Specialty	1	8
<i>Estimated Percentage of Sessions in Which Flow Experience is Perceived</i>		
30 – 50 %	5	38
51% - 70%	1	8
71% - 90%	5	38
91% - 99%	1	8
Unable to Measure	1	8

**Introduction to Participants.** Table 6 provides a brief introduction to each of the participants in this research study.

Table 6

*Individual Participant Characteristics*

<i>Identifying Name</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Years of Professional Coaching Practice</i>	<i>Highest Academic Degree Completed</i>	<i>ICF Certification Level</i>	<i>Identified Coaching Specialty</i>
Angie	F	10	Masters	PCC	Executive
Brian	M	14	Masters	ACC	Executive Coaching
Christina	F	12	Masters	PCC	Career 50%, Wellness 50%
David	M	15	Doctorate	PCC	Executive
Deepa	F	15	Doctorate	PCC	Executive
Dian	F	16	Masters	PCC	Executive -Business
Francine	F	18	Doctorate	MCC	Executive- Transition
Gloria	F	17	Masters	PCC	No specialty identified
Kelly	F	21	Bachelors	MCC	Executive
Kim	M	13	Doctorate	PCC	Executive
Sam	M	23	Masters	MCC	Executive-Conflict within organizations
Susan	F	10	Bachelors	PCC	Executive-Abrasive leaders
Tammy	F	10	Masters	PCC	Executive-Transition

**Overarching Themes, Key Findings, and Model Development**

The results of this research provide new information about how coaches experience the flow state. My data analysis revealed five unique themes. These themes were supported by major findings from the data. First, preconditions exist in order for coaches to experience flow during a coaching session. Second, triggers exist for coaches to move into and out of the flow state. Third, coaches perceive a transcendent experience when they are in the flow state. Fourth, flow experiences produce an extended positive affect for coaches. Fifth, coaching competencies play a key role in coaches' experience of flow. In order to emerge as a theme, at least eight coaches (62%) reported related experiences. Figure 3 provides a summary of the key findings.

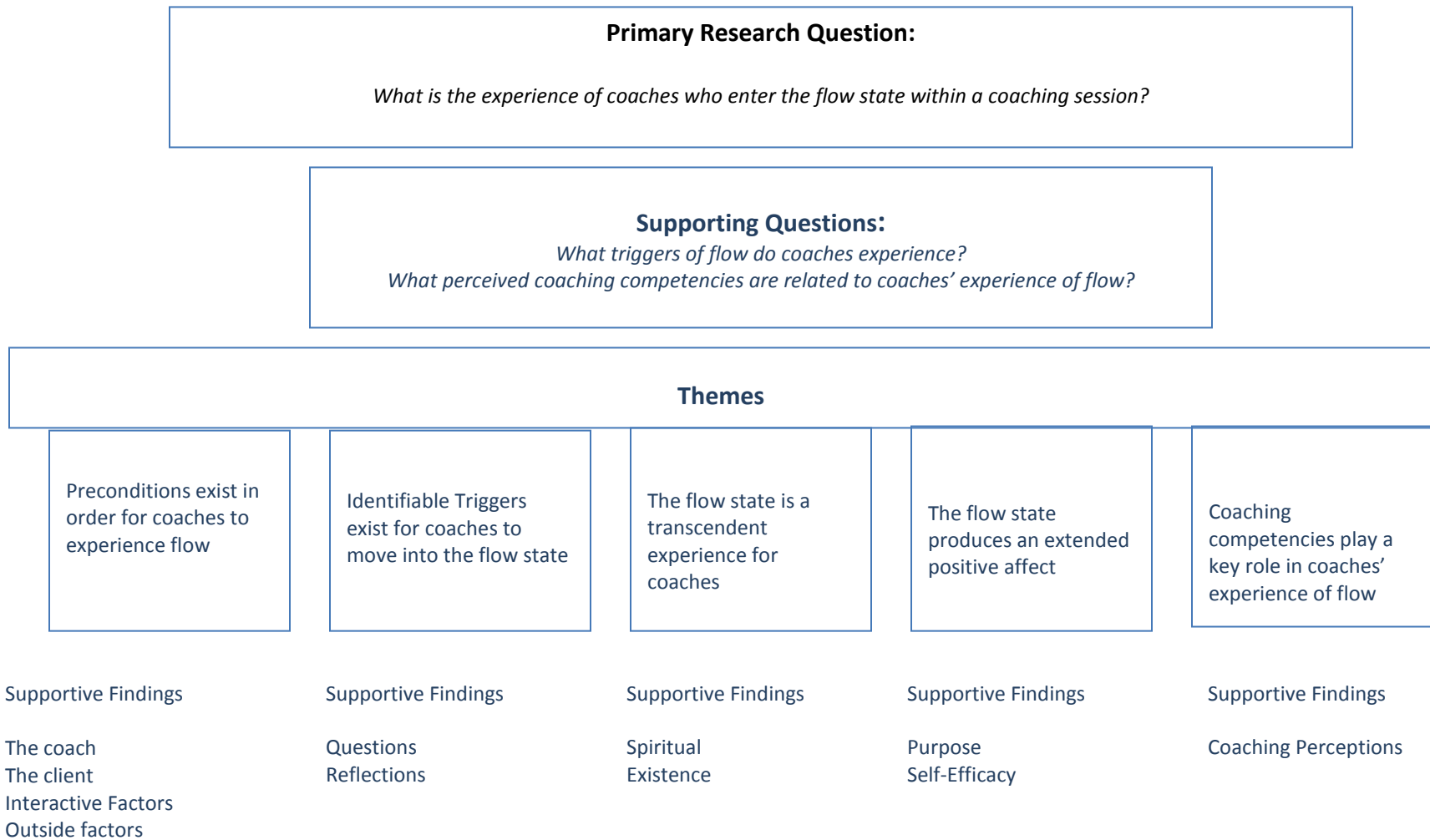


Figure 3. Summary of key findings.

**Theme 1: Preconditions for Flow**

All coaches interviewed stated that certain preconditions had to be met in order for them to experience flow during a coaching session. For purposes of this paper, preconditions for flow are defined as any actions, environments, states of being, or interactions that must be present in order for a coach to experience flow. Preconditions included those that the coach met, those that the coach perceived were met by the client, perceived interactive preconditions, and perceived outside factors.

**Preconditions for Coaches.** Preconditions for flow fell into three primary categories: overall sense of self, preparation for the session, and behavior within the session. These preconditions are outlined in Table 7. The bold descriptors identify coaching competencies, which will be discussed later in the chapter. Coaches were not asked specifically about coaching competencies when they were describing their preconditions.

Table 8

*Coach Preconditions for Coach Flow Experience*

Overall Sense of Self	Preparation for Session	Behavior in Session
Experience Confidence Competence General high self-regard	Environment free of distractions <b>Set intentions for session</b>	Challenge <b>Commitment</b> <b>Deep regard for client</b> <b>Trust</b> • <b>Feeling safe to take a risk</b> <b>Listening</b> <b>Presence</b> Safe to be authentic Sense of resonance with client Sense of selflessness Transformational coaching Understanding client learning style <b>Vulnerability</b> <b>Supportive of client</b>

***Sense of Self.*** Overarching the specifics of a client or client interaction, the majority of coaches identified four perceived aspects of self as coach that were preconditions to their ability to achieve flow: experience, confidence, competence, and high self-regard.

Gloria: You have to have the experience, and confidence is a piece of it, in knowing that if you ask the wrong question, it will be okay. Also, I feel by now that I am competent enough as a coach that I can let go of trying so hard. . .I think that is key.

Susan: I can remember from my very first coaching sessions, thinking “Oh my God! I won’t be able to help this person!” And then I learned first to say “Okay, I’m just going to let spirit take over, just clear your mind, just let it go.” I don’t necessarily think the words anymore, but I do think about letting go. So with this woman I was coaching, I said to myself, “Here it is again. Big deal. Ego there.” I just knew the feeling of wanting to troubleshoot, but as soon as I released it, I felt a sense of flow.

Kelly: You have to have confidence in your ability to succeed, in order to experience flow. You also need to have a strong sense of self-regard.

***Preparation for Session.*** The majority of coaches also noted the importance of preparation as a precondition to experiencing flow during a session. Key preparation factors cited by coaches included a mindfulness practice, a deep regard for the client, a distraction-free environment, and setting intentions prior to a coaching session.

Christina: I’ve got this calm place, this environment that’s free from distractions. I also think it’s about mindfulness. I’m sitting at my peninsula in my kitchen and I have my hands around my cup of tea. I can feel the warmth through my hands and I take a sip every so often. I think it’s symbolic of being here, right now. You can make a difference. I’m nourishing myself while I’m giving of myself to someone else.

Dian: It’s a quick preparation. I set my intentions that I’m here to support and help the client gain some awareness. Also, my environment is close to isolation. I’m sitting at my desk and my computer screen is not open. I have a small window and I can’t see much when I look out.

***Coach Behavior in Session.*** As noted in Table 7, coaches identified a dozen preconditions that they need to meet in order to experience flow during a coaching session. Many of their descriptors related to coaching competencies, although they were not specifically asked about competencies here.

Sam: So we're both fully present. I don't think I can enter flow with a coaching client unless we are both fully present. It's not just up to the coach. Although, the coach I think is largely responsible for instigating it.

Brian: For me, a precondition of flow is that I have deep concern for the client. I have concern for all of my clients because they are human beings. But, I'm lucky that I only take coaching clients at this point who I really, really like.

Dian: It has to be safe for me to not hold back and to open that door for this to be a more in-depth conversation. Unless we're going to talk about what's really going on, I'm not very engaged.

Deepa: Getting the "I" out of the way and really being present to what is.

Angie: I would enter through the door of listening and that would be the thing that would allow me to really connect and get to that state.

Kim: I have to be good. I have to be worthy of trust. And, I have to be supportive. And, I have to demonstrate that [the client's] success is what matters. All those fundamental trust building type of things. And I have to be a good coach and be open and listen well.

**Preconditions for Clients.** With one exception, all coaches cited key preconditions for the client necessary for the coach to achieve flow during a coaching session. In total, coaches collectively identified more than 25 factors the client had to bring into a session in order for flow to be possible. The most often cited client requirements fit into three primary categories: facets of motivation, coachability, and vulnerability. Client preconditions are summarized in Table 8.

Table 8

*Client Preconditions Necessary for Coach to Experience Flow*

Facets of Motivation	Coachability	Vulnerability
Desire for: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Discovery</li> <li>• Change</li> <li>• Learning</li> <li>• Growth</li> </ul> Willingness to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Be accountable</li> <li>• Be honest</li> <li>• Engage</li> <li>• Explore</li> <li>• Go deep</li> <li>• Learn</li> <li>• Participate</li> <li>• Stretch</li> <li>• Take action</li> <li>• Take on the “hard stuff”</li> <li>• Trust</li> </ul>	Open to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Considering options</li> <li>• Deeper conversation</li> </ul> Emotional Intelligence <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Self-awareness</li> <li>• Interpersonal awareness</li> </ul> Committed to personal growth No distractions Intelligence Goals in mind Prepared for change, moving forward Openly curious	Authenticity Direct communication Sincerity Trust Coming from the heart

**Facets of Motivation.** With the exception of the one coach who did not believe the clients affected her ability to achieve flow in a session, every coach cited at least three facets of motivation necessary for clients to express in for a coach to achieve flow during a session. I say “facets” of motivation, as both willingness and desire must be present for motivation to be present (Brown, 2007, p.vii). The purpose of this study does not include the exploration of client motivation as a key, so my interviews did not explore coaches’ specific perceptions about client motivations.

David: The client has to bring a willingness and a commitment to participate. They are very aware of the experience and they are excited about it. And they want to go forward because they are generally interested in getting results for themselves. These are the kinds of sessions in which people really want to change. They’re committed to their own personal growth and are willing to do whatever it takes to change. They seem to have an insatiable appetite to want to be in the session because they know it’s going to help them.

Gloria: Clients have to be excited about the work that they're doing. They have to bring the passion, but also their willingness to look at different viewpoints, to be open to different viewpoints. They can't come with the attitude of "Yes, but I can't do that." That just cuts it down for me. But the client who says "Wow, that might work" can help to set the stage for my flow experience. This openness, willingness, excitement and positive energy to me is vitally important.

Christina: The client has to have the willingness to truly discuss the topic that they bring up, regardless of their stage of readiness to change. I will meet them where they are. But, they need a willingness to venture out. They have to have a willingness to search, to look for the answers.

**Coachability.** All but one coach cited factors of client coachability that needed to be present in order for the coach to experience flow in a session. Coachability refers to a client's openness to the process of coaching. Factors that affect a client's coachability include ego strength, openness to feedback, responsiveness to pressure, and awareness of need for change (Bacon & Spear, 2003).

Francine: Clients who are willing to engage and really stretch and grow. Clients who are willing to take on a challenge and clients who are able to experience not just the practical and cognitive sides of their issues, but also experience the emotional and abstract contribute to my ability to experience flow. Some clients are so outcome driven that they want to speed through the process, get the action, get to the strategy. I find it more challenging to get into a flow state with those clients.

Tammy: Clients need to be really focused on the time that we're spending together and really consciously shutting down the distractions.

Brian: In a session in which I did not experience flow, I don't know whether or not the client really even had an interest in being coached, or had an interest in gaining self-awareness. The client was all about proving who he was. He had a very expert mentality. There just didn't really seem to be a desire for discovery, which really puts me in the flow state.

**Vulnerability.** Six coaches noted that client vulnerability was also an important precondition to coaches' ability to achieve flow during a session.

Susan: When clients are able to be vulnerable and when I'm able to help them create that trust and intimacy, then flow is more possible.



Deepa: In order for me to experience flow, the client first brings a willingness to learn. Second is taking accountability for their learning and third is giving me permission to coach. Having that trust that I am the right person sitting in front of them and a willingness to be coached.

Sam: I experienced flow when the session was out of her head, really into her heart, and she began grabbing a hold of some conversations she had to have with the CEO and how vulnerable those conversations felt to her.

## Theme 2: Flow Triggers

Most coaches interviewed identified a similar triggering process that propelled them into the flow state. They also identified similar events that precipitated their exit from the flow state.

**Flow entry triggers – the flow entry process.** When asked about what triggered entry into the flow state, nine coaches recalled that it was a specific question or reflection that they expressed. Upon diving deeper into the triggers, however, the findings suggested that there was a multistage process that involved the question or reflection, and that the question or reflection was not the stand-alone trigger. Figure 4 summarizes the coach flow entry process uncovered in the findings. Each stage is described in detail below.

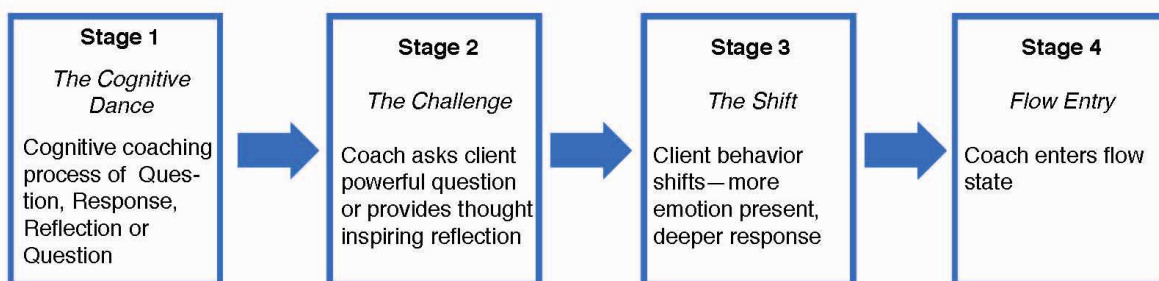


Figure 4. Coach flow entry process.

**Stage 1 – The Cognitive Dance.** In the first stage of the flow entry process, participants describe the interaction in a number of ways that indicate there is a cognitive volley or dance of sorts

going on between the coach and the client. Some coaches identified this stage as “ping-pong” coaching.

**Stage 2 – The Challenge.** In the second stage of the flow entry process, participants report that they either ask a question or reflect on something the client has said that has a powerful impact on the client. The client’s behavior shifts. There is more emotion present, there may be a moment of silence as the client processes the coach’s contribution, and the client’s response seems to come from a deeper place.

**Stage 3 – The Shift.** In the third stage of the process, participants perceive a shift in client behavior in reaction to the coach’s remark in Stage 2. Coaches observe that clients may become momentarily silent, emotions appear stronger, sometimes clients appear jarred by the coach’s remarks, and their responses to the coach’s remarks in Stage 2 are deeper, less cognitive.

**Stage 4 – Flow Entry.** In the final stage of the flow entry process, the coach’s interior driver for the session begins to shift from a cognitive process to a transcendent process that moves them into the flow state.

Dian: I was coaching another coach based on recordings of her coaching sessions with a client. I didn’t feel like we were connecting really well. Then, I said “I was just wondering what the laughter was about in the coaching call I listened to.” And that wondering prompted a whole shift in the conversation. She wasn’t sure. And she started processing it. It was fascinating to listen to. So that’s when the flow happened – when she was in the process of discovering something.

Gloria: It seems to be a pivotal question. And it’s not just your basic simple question. This particular client is very talented musically and yet she’s never done anything with it professionally. And yet it’s just been this burning desire. She’s family oriented, a mother and helps her husband with his business. The question I asked was about how could she be a good mom, a good wife and still allow the music to be a big part of her life?

Christina: I was listening to the client talk about her fear of the unknown and her wondering if she was making the wrong decisions. My question to her was “So tell me where you are with all of this right now?” And she started to talk and that’s when I recognized this is a really challenging conversation. I don’t know where it will go. I feel

like time is standing still and we're going to jump into this together and I'm going to let go of the need to find the answer. It's a feeling of I'm getting ready to jump in with her.

**Flow exit triggers.** Coaches interviewed cited three primary triggers that caused them to move out of flow during coaching sessions: time, conscious movement to a new stage of the coaching process, and distractions.

**Time.** Every coach interviewed perceived some aspect of time to be an exiting trigger. Most coaches echoed Kim's perception of time as a flow exit factor.

Kim: The clock told us we had to stop.

For Angie, it was her perception of a time limit for flow.

Angie: For me, a super pure flow state is something that isn't a sustainable feature. I think it happens for an extended period of time but I don't think it is a forever thing. So, I think it exhausts its time limit.

**Conscious movement to a new stage in the coaching process.** The majority of coaches noted that conscious movement into a new aspect of the coaching process that sometimes was combined with time, also led them to lead the flow state.

Kelly: Just watching the time and recognizing that I've got to make sure we address some things before we wrapped up our conversation.

Francine: I think the gears in the back of my head started clicking and saying, "You need to step back and take charge here to help [the clients] pull this together." And that was a recognition that conflict conversations often need to have some assistance at closing the threads, decelerating the emotional state, helping people make the transition back. When people are in a deep emotional state, they're not present with themselves in some ways. So by stepping out of flow, it's helping them in some ways get back into themselves and their lives and use or reflect on the experience in a constructive way. And, so I stepped back in and kind of took charge to help them regain a sense of control and calm, and at the same time acknowledge their emotional conversation as a gift.

Brian: For me, it is the movement into discussion of commitments and action that brings me out of flow. I can't imagine a time when I would ever enter the flow state when we're really talking about commitments and actions.

Christina: I feel like I get out of flow when we get to planning, designing action and goal setting. I feel like we step away from it.

***Distractions.*** Coaches also noted their own distractions or those of the client were triggers for their exit from the flow state. Not all distractions were negative for the coaching session.

Kim: [When you bask in an accomplishment of the session] it's hard to stay in flow unless you continue to work on something that's related to or equally as important.

Angie: My perception of others, my being distracted by the past, being distracted by the future, being distracted by my self-image, being distracted about my judgments of others. All those things have the capability to take me out of flow. That can show up in coaching if I'm worried about what my client is perceiving of me, or if I'm worried about if I look like I know what I'm doing. If I'm asking myself, "Am I coming across as intelligent and bright?" All of those things are socially constructed and can have the capability of taking me out of flow.

Gloria: I have a client who can go off on tangents. I have to be so attentive to keep her on task or on the issue that we're talking about or the goal that she's talking about. If she veers off and starts talking about somebody else or something else or a hassle, I just kind of snap out of flow.

Kelly: I could interrupt flow with my own excitement or my own curiosity. And that could happen by way of a question that might come to me.

### **Theme 3: The Transcendent Experience of Flow**

Csikszentmihalyi (1993) suggests that individuals in the flow state experience transcendence and that flow experiences over time contribute to the ongoing development of the transcendent self. In their model of temperament and character, Cloninger, Svrakic & Przbeck (1993) note that using words to describe self-transcendence is difficult because the experience is intuitive rather than analytical. However, they did identify the following three aspects of self-transcendence: a self-forgetful versus self-conscious experience, transpersonal identification versus self-differentiation, and spiritual acceptance versus rational materialism (p. 982).

Csikszentmihalyi (Csikszentmihalyi & Csikszentmihalyi, 1988) provides additional insight into self-transcendence:

In flow the self is fully functioning, but not aware of itself doing it, and it can use all the attention for the task at hand. At the most challenging levels, people actually report experiencing a *transcendence* of self, caused by the unusually high involvement with a system of action so much more complex than what one usually encounters in everyday life. The climber feels at one with the mountain, the clouds, the rays of the sun. . .the surgeon feels at one with the movements of the operating team, sharing the beauty and the power of a harmonious transpersonal experience. (p. 33)

In describing their experience of the flow state, most coaches spoke of experiences that moved them beyond their conscious state, outside the bounds of the everyday. They used words like “spiritual.” They found that cognition may be present but it is not the primary driver when they experience flow. As coaches described their experience of the flow state during coaching sessions, Csikszentmihalyi’s concepts of flow came to life. Most frequently mentioned by coaches in interviews were the sense of timelessness, the sense that the challenge and coaching skills were matched, and a sense of effortlessness.

Francine: Once we got started, it really was the experience of flow. There was just a sense of ease. And I felt that I was able to really be with her because we had this sense of resonance. And the morning passed and it was amazingly quick and rich. There was this sense that our interaction was very organic, just evolving.

Brian: It’s just fun and rewarding. It’s just such an honor to stand in the presence of someone else going through discovery. It’s inspiring and it’s humbling. On some level it’s a truly spiritual and divine experience.

Kelly: Flow for me is beyond just getting engaged and excited. It’s being on the same page mentally, where you don’t have to spend a lot of time explaining. And there’s not qualifying or defending thinking. You trust the relationship and so you just go with it. And you’re transparent and open.

Susan: There's really a merging with the client in a way, while not getting caught up in her story.

Angie: It's not work. I have a feeling of ease and grace.

Tammy: I am totally in tune with what the other person is saying. It feels like any external distractions, whether visually, hitting any of my five senses seems to go away and I'm just hearing the voice of the other person.

Sam: I think in the flow state you forget about what you're able to do. There's a "yes" quality to it. It's no longer "I think I can." It's "Yes!"

Dian: When I'm in that place, I'm not in my head, because when I'm in my head, I think a thousand different thoughts, ideas, possibilities, much too rapidly. So, it's more about being in my heart.

Kim: I knew I was in the flow state [in this session] because I ceased to exist. I didn't have to think about anything. The next question just came out of me. I didn't have to worry about how am I doing, how is the session going? It didn't matter at all. The conversation took care of itself. It was just effortless. Exactly the right question was asked, and the next question. And it was really clear when it was time to push him. It was just easy to coach. It was almost like I wasn't there. Which makes no sense, but that's how I felt. . . If I was at church, it would be the Holy Spirit. There's almost another presence there. It's not another person. But, it is quiet and easy to think. And it's like a sacred place where it's easy to think, it's easy to talk, it's easy to communicate and there's a stillness in the air. The rest of the world does not exist. And, it always changes the relationship that I have with the client. We are closer after that all the time. We have an experience like you've kissed a girl when you're a kid. It's an event and you both know it and you are different. The relationship is totally different. Your conversations are different. You don't have to waste time with superficial stuff anymore.

David: Flow is one of those kinds of situations that make the whole coaching experience exciting. A time that I remember was an effortless session. In that moment I'm not defined as a coach. Myself and the client have become one. And the information freely flows and the existence of time goes away. It's very conversational. It's not question, response, question, response. It's like energy feeding off of each other. You're all in one motion. There's a relaxation and we're moving forward.

Gloria: When I'm in flow there isn't the need for as much courage. I'm not afraid to ask questions and I don't feel that I have to overcome anything.

Tammy: She was coming up with all kinds of imagery and I felt I was almost in her mind but she was describing.

Brian: Although I was very aware, although I was part of the situation, I really wasn't part of the situation, if that makes sense. It really just was about her and this discovery

process. I was also aware of me doing exactly what I was supposed to be doing in the universe at that time. I remember it being such a gift and being aware of it being a gift that I was actually a part of the discovery process, or witness to it. It's inspiring and it's humbling and it's awe provoking. And it makes your heart sing afterwards. And on some level it is truly a spiritual and divine experience.

Susan: It came out of my absorption, out of my concentration on her and letting go. And then, effortless emerged. It's just the being present, awareness and actions merge. Kind of objective and subjective at the same time. I'm not in there, but I'm clearly there. I'm not in her business, but I'm clearly in the situation. I'm merged with what's going on.

Kelly: And flow for me is beyond just getting engaged and excited. It's being on the same page mentally, where you don't have to spend a lot of time explaining. And there's no qualifying or defending thinking. You trust the relationship and so you just go with it. And you're transparent and open. I knew I had experience flow from just the sheer enjoyment of the conversation. There was pleasure in even the bumpy parts of the conversation.

Deepa: There is a timeless quality to it. And yet, I'm very aware of the movement of the dialogue within the time assigned.

#### **Theme 4: Extended Positive Affect of the Flow State**

When coaches experienced flow in a coaching session, all but one coach reported a flow "afterglow" that often stayed with them for the remainder of the day. The most oft cited sensations were gratitude, sense of purpose, and self-efficacy.

Kim: It makes you feel good about yourself and about what you do and the possibilities. And about people. You know the goodness of people, the desire of people to do something significant in their life.

Sam: It's rich, it's vivid. I'm deeply moved. I'm hopeful. In a funny sort of way I feel powerful. The French word would be *puissant*. It is a sense that something profound just happened.

Angie: My world shifts because I remind myself that anything is possible and that we're all connected. And, I often feel empowered that I can see the change that I want to see in the world. And I also feel that ignited is the power in me, empowering someone else.

David: It's a confidence builder. I know, once again, that I'm doing something right.

Gloria: The world takes on a rosier view. I go about the rest of my day humming a tune or feeling good. I also think it expands me in some way. I want that good feeling to keep going. So I try to look at something else that might give me that.

Christina: I have more energy. I have that spring in my step, like this is a great life, getting to do what I love so much and making a difference in the lives of other people.

Susan: I'm more positive. I behave more positively. My worldview is more positive and my perception is more positive.

Kelly: It continues to drip drip drip into that pot of joy in the work that I do. I consider it a privilege that people would trust me to really open the door to who they really are and what they really need and want.

**Theme 5: Coaching Competencies Play a Key Role in Coaches' Experience of Flow**

When asked about the relationship of coaching competencies to their experience of flow, coaches described coaching competencies that were sometimes pivotal and sometimes supportive of their ability to achieve flow during a coaching session. They described the competencies that they recalled using prior to entering the flow state and during the flow state. They further reported that while they invoked some of the same competencies in both phases of the process, often they felt they were using the same competencies in a deeper way.

**Perceived coaching competencies evident prior to entry into the flow state.**

Participants indicated that coaching competencies were evident prior to their entry into the flow state. Though one coach indicated that all ICF competencies needed to be in place prior to her entry into the flow state, most coaches identified specific competencies. Table 9 summarizes the pre-flow coaching competencies the majority of coaches reported experiencing.

Table 9

*Perceived Coaching Competencies in Effect Pre-Flow*

Active Listening	Facilitating Learning
Building on client's ideas & suggestions	Open-ended Questions
Direct Communication	Presence
Empathy	Reflection
Establishing the Coaching Agreement	Self-Awareness
Establishing Trust & Intimacy	Self-Management



Susan: If I am in the ICF competencies, flow is more possible.

Kim: The early one was trust. Our relationship was at the point that he could talk to me about this thing that he had not talked with anybody else about, even his spouse.

David: Two of the key competencies are presence and active listening. You can't be in a session and looking at your Blackberry. You need to be tuned in with your client, in the present moment.

**Perceived coaching competencies in effect during flow.** Coaches described many similarities in coaching competencies they experienced while in flow with those they used pre-flow. The difference, many said, was the level at which they were practicing the competencies. Some described the difference as the difference in ICF coaching certification levels of ACC (entry), PCC (mid-level), and MCC (most advanced). According to ICF (2013), coaches at each stage of certification must meet the same competencies, but at increasing levels of depth, as demonstrated in required exams. To be certified at the ACC level, coaches must also have 100 hours of client coaching experience and 60 hours of training. To be certified at the PCC level, coaches must have 750 hours of coaching experience and 125 hours of training. To be certified at the MCC level, coaches must have 2500 hours of coaching experience and 200 hours of training.

Table 10 summarizes the coaching competencies that the majority of coaches perceived were used while they were in the flow state.

Table 10

*Perceived Coaching Competencies During Flow State*

Active Listening	Powerful Questions
Direct Communication	Ethical Contract
Coaching Presence	Self-Management
Co-creating the Relationship	Trust
Creating Awareness	

Susan: The powerful questions were at a higher level. So was listening, communicating, then creating awareness. Listening and coaching presence were at a high level – I would say MCC. I wonder if one can really create awareness without being in the flow state. . .

**Coaching competencies and the Literature Review.** In comparing the competencies that coaches perceived related to flow to the assessment in the literature review, only two coaches indicated that they could remain in the flow state through designing actions. Other coaches indicated designing actions as one of the exit flow triggers as they reported moving back into a cognitive state. With the exception of two coaches (not the same two noted above), all coaches said that flow was an outcome of an exceptional coaching session, not something that they could deliberately create during a session. This is in line with Csikszentmihalyi's research identifying flow as emerging from the experience. The two coaches who indicated they had purposely entered flow both had long-standing meditation practices that they believed help them move into the flow state.

### **Summary**

In this chapter I introduced my research participants and detailed my research findings. My findings suggested five themes that emerged from the research process: Coaches perceive that preconditions to flow exist, coaches perceive identifiable triggers leading into and exiting the flow process, coaches often have a transcendent experience when in the flow state, flow produces a lingering positive affect for coaches, and coaching competencies play a key role in coaches' experience of flow. In addition, the research findings suggest that a process exists for triggering flow.

## CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

The primary question addressed by this research is: *What is the experience of coaches who enter the flow state within a coaching session?* The supporting research questions are 1. *What triggers of flow do coaches experience?* 2. *What perceived coaching competencies are related to coaches' experience of flow?* This chapter summarizes the research study and discusses the key themes and findings of the research. This chapter also examines implications for theory and practice, provides the results of validity testing, discusses theories developed as a result of the research process, acknowledges the limitations of the research design, and provides recommendations for future research.

### Summary of the Research

The purpose of this exploratory research study was to investigate how coaches experience the flow state, as described by Csikszentmihalyi (1975a, 1975b, Csikszentmihalyi & Csikszentmihalyi, 1988). Further, the research sought to explore perceived ICF coaching competencies that coaches use when coaching while in flow. My research is new and addresses a gap in the literature. It examines coaches' specific experience of flow, triggers for flow, preconditions for flow, and perceived ICF coaching competencies that are present before and during flow as experienced by coaches. Based on this research I also found that coaches bring attributes to flow beyond Csikszentmihalyi's general descriptors, as discussed below. Outcomes of my research include five themes, as outlined in Chapter 4, and two initial proposed models: *the model of coach flow experience*, which includes *the model of coach flow entry*. A third proposed model also emerged from the research as I looked at similarities between coaching and the helping professions in general: *a model of the flow experience for the helping professions*.

As noted in Chapter 4, five research themes emerged from the data and are displayed in Figure 4. Following is a discussion of each.

### **Theme 1: Preconditions of Flow**

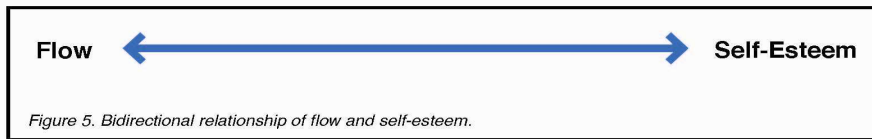
The research data indicate that in order for 12 out of 13 coaches to experience flow, preconditions must be met by both the coach and the client (See Table 6 and 7).

**Coach preconditions.** For the coach, preconditions are found in the categories of overall sense of self, preparation for the session, and behavior in the session.

**Overall sense of self.** The data indicate that coaches must have a sense of self-efficacy and self-esteem in order to experience the flow state. The precondition of self-efficacy is analogous to “the individual’s perceived skills are well-suited to the challenge,” a characteristic of flow outlined by Csikszentmihalyi (1996, 1993). However, the general concept of flow does not require a high degree of self-esteem, which seven coaches identified as a precondition. In his discussion of self-efficacy, Bandura (1997) emphasizes that the two are often considered synonyms when in fact they are two very different concepts. “Perceived self-efficacy is concerned with judgments of personal capability, whereas self-esteem is concerned with judgments of self-worth” (p. 11). I am confident that research participants have a clear understanding of the distinction, based on what I know of their experience, training, and practice. The relationship of self-efficacy and flow is clear; according to participants, the coach must believe in her or his skill as a coach in order to experience flow. This also relates to a certain degree of experience likely necessary in order for a coach to experience flow.

Csikszentmihalyi (2003) found the self-efficacy, self-esteem connection unexpected but not surprising in his research. “When measurements are taken of variations in self-esteem during the day, one finds that after approaching a flow-like state, a person’s self-esteem score climbs

significantly. Similarly, people who have more flow experiences also have higher self-esteem overall” (p. 56). From a developmental perspective, it appears then that there is a bidirectional relationship between self-esteem and flow, as illustrated in Figure 5.



Interestingly, participants suggested that self-esteem was a precondition of the ability to experience flow and Csikszentmihalyi viewed self-esteem as an outcome of flow that allows for more frequent flow experiences. This suggests that flow contributes to the personal development of coaches' self-esteem as increasing self-esteem contributes to a greater ability to achieve flow, creating a virtuous cycle.

Further evidence of a developmental relationship is evident in Maslow's hierarchy of needs. Both the need for self-efficacy and esteem are found at the fourth level of Maslow's hierarchy of needs, indicating there may be a developmental level needed in order to experience the flow process in coaching (see figure 6).



Figure 6. Maslow's hierarchy of needs. (Adapted from Maslow, 1987)

***Preparation for the session.*** Five research participants identified a deep regard for the client in advance of the session, as a precondition to flow. Eleven cited the need to clear their environment from distractions as a requirement. Nine participants stated the need to set intentions for the session in order to have an opportunity to experience flow. Minimal distractions and clear objectives are characteristics of Csikszentmihalyi's concept of flow, as is the setting. Setting intentions is also a component of flow in that it leads to having clear goals and objectives, according to Csikszentmihalyi. However, deep regard for the object of flow is not mentioned. This would seem to be a requirement unique to professions in which the interpersonal connection is at the heart of the session. In addition to coaching, this would seem to apply to professions such as teaching and psychotherapy.

***Coach behavior in the session.*** Coaches collectively identified 14 behaviors and approaches that they needed to bring to a session as a precondition for flow. Nine of the 14 are also identified as ICF coaching competencies, though participants were not specifically asked about competencies when asked about their perceived behaviors. Competencies were specifically discussed later in the interview. The large percentage of necessary competencies as preconditions of flow suggests a level of coaching development and experience necessary for a coach to experience flow in a session. Precondition competencies are highlighted in Table 11.

Table 11

*ICF Core Competency Coach Flow Preconditions*

<p>Co-Creating the Relationship</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Establishing Trust and Intimacy with Client             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Genuine regard for the client</li> <li>○ Demonstrate respect for coach learning style</li> <li>○ Provides ongoing support</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Coaching Presence             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Open to not knowing- takes risks</li> <li>○ Trusts inner knowing</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<p>Communicating Effectively</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Active listening</li> <li>• Powerful questioning</li> </ul>
---	---

**Client preconditions.** All but one participant indicated that the client must bring something to the coaching table in order for a coach to experience flow. Participants most often used the words “desire” and “willingness” when discussing what the client must bring. They also discussed coachability and vulnerability.

The most interesting facet of the client pre-condition finding for me was that it appears to exist for most coaches (12 of 13 in my study). From a developmental perspective, questions arise regarding potential client screening processes for coaches who want to reap the professional and personal benefits of flow.

As noted above, one coach believed that her ability to achieve flow was completely within her power.

Angie: To be in flow has everything to do with me and nothing to do with my client. I believe that flow and my wellbeing is not contingent on anything other than my perception.

## **Theme 2: Flow Triggers**

As the data in Chapter 4 indicate, most participants identified a similar perceived triggering process for entering into the flow state during a coaching session. When exiting the flow process, the majority of coaches described similar triggers. Exit triggers were generally perceived as distinct events rather than processes.

**The coach flow entry process.** Nine out of 13 participants identified similar triggering mechanisms that moved the coach's experience from a cognitive interaction into flow. The mechanisms appeared to occur in a multi-stage process outlined in Figure 5.

From a developmental perspective, the ability to listen at a deep enough level to produce an important reflection or question requires a highly developed listening skill in which the coach hears beyond the words. Similarly, reflecting and/or asking powerful questions based on this deep listening also requires trust in one's skill and the courage to take a risk that coaches with significant experience likely accomplish much more readily than inexperienced coaches. This willingness to take a risk may also be attributed to self-efficacy and self-esteem as discussed earlier.

**Coach flow exit triggers.** Conversely, exit triggers for coaches appear to have similar characteristics to exit triggers for flow in many other activities. As noted in Chapter 4, coaches identified recognition of time, movement into cognitive processes, and distractions. Csikszentmihalyi noted these exit triggers in his research, indicating they are common in many activities.

## **Theme 3: The Transcendent Experience of Flow in Coaching**

Csikszentmihalyi's definition of flow came to life as research participants described their experience of flow during coaching sessions. They talked about transcendence, in which their



perspective moved beyond the normal boundaries and limitations of normal coaching interactions (Ellerman & Reed, 2001). They reported experiencing a duality when they were in the flow state of ceasing to exist and being very present with the client. The experience was described as spiritual by several coaches. Coaches continued interacting with the client in an altered state. All coaches reported that they believed clients were unaware of coaches' altered state while they were in flow.

The transcendent experience of flow in a coaching session offers potential benefits for coaches from both a personal and professional perspective. Nine coaches perceived that they were most effective as coaches when in the flow state. One coach reported that from a purely practical perspective, he may be less effective when in a flow state because the session departs from focusing on the client's stated goals into a deeper generative conversation that was nonetheless ultimately productive for the client. Three coaches reported that after a flow experience their relationship with the client was permanently changed and deeper. The majority of coaches reported that the flow state contributed to their sense of self-efficacy about coaching.

#### **Theme 4: Extended Positive Affect of the Flow State**

With one exception, all coaches reported that their experience of flow in a coaching session positively affected them in some lingering way after the session had ended. Coaches perceived a heightened sense of self-efficacy, gratitude, and sense of alignment with their purpose, making them want to go back for more. Supporting Csikszentmihalyi (Csikszentmihalyi & Csikszentmihalyi, 1988; Csikszentmihalyi, Rathunde, & Whalen, 1993), several coaches reported that the flow experience was the joy of coaching and one of the primary motivators for continuing their coaching work. As noted in the literature review,

Csikszentmihalyi (Csikszentmihalyi & Csikszentmihalyi, 1988) found that intrinsic motivation was the driver for the individuals he studied to continue with their flow-inducing activities.

As noted above, one coach said she did not perceive any changes in perception or world view, referring to her overall belief system.

Francine: It's like everything else in the world. It changes every moment.

### **Theme 5: Coaching Competencies Play a Key Role in Coaches' Experience of Flow**

As outlined in Chapter 4, research data indicate that coaching competencies are key factors in coaches' experience of flow. Competency in several coaching facets is necessary, for example, to setting the stage for flow to be possible. These include building a relationship of trust, being present and empathetic with the client, and establishing a coaching agreement. Powerful questions and reflections are pivotal to a coach's ability to enter the flow state as he or she facilitates a necessary change in client behavior. Once in the flow state, coaching competencies support a coach in the flow state as the coach brings competencies to a higher level to serve the relationship.

From a developmental perspective, the perceived competence that emerges from experience appears to be an important predictor of flow during a coaching session, according to coaches interviewed. It is the trust co-created with the client, the deep listening that leads to the powerful questions and reflections that set the stage for flow. Without these competencies, achieving flow in a coaching session would seem unlikely.

### **Implications for Theory and Practice**

The data collected for this research are rich with possibilities for coaching theory and practice both within the realm of my research focus and beyond.

## Coaching Theory

As reported earlier in this chapter, coaches can experience many of the facets of flow that have been described in previous research. They also experience some facets and processes that appear unique to coaching. As I am unaware of any previous empirical research focused on the flow experience of coaches, I propose that both the similarities and differences that coaches experience from universal concepts of flow provide rich possibilities for both the theory and practice of coaching

When studying the numerous professions and activities that Csikszentmihalyi and colleagues researched for flow experience, I did not find one example that involved more than one person, in which the sole focus was a helping interaction, there was an imbalance in skillset, and the focus was on the flow experience of the person in the helping role. When I looked at dyads and flow, I found competitors such as chess players. The third party that is the precondition for flow is the game of chess, not the other player. And since challenge must be involved, the second player is perceived to have enough skill to present a challenge. In competent coaching, there is no competition, the client is not perceived to be at the same skill level of coaching. However, the client is perceived to be the expert of her or his own life. It is the intricacies of the client life that the coach brings skill to in order to help the client learn, grow, and achieve goals.

Based on my research, I first propose two models based on my qualitative research on coaches' experience of flow during coaching session: *model of coach flow experience* and the related *model of coach flow entry*. I then propose expansion of the first model to apply to a broader professional universe.

**Model of Coach Flow Experience.** In the model of coach flow experience,

- *Coaches move through a series of steps when they experience flow during a coaching session.*
- *Clients contribute to coaches' experience of the flow state.*
- *Coaching competencies play an overarching role in coaches' ability to experience flow during an intervention.*

This theory is illustrated in Figure 7. This model for coaches has widespread potential implications for the coaching profession, as well as many other helping professions that rely on relationships with others, including psychotherapy, counseling, management, and healthcare. Professional implications are described later in this chapter.

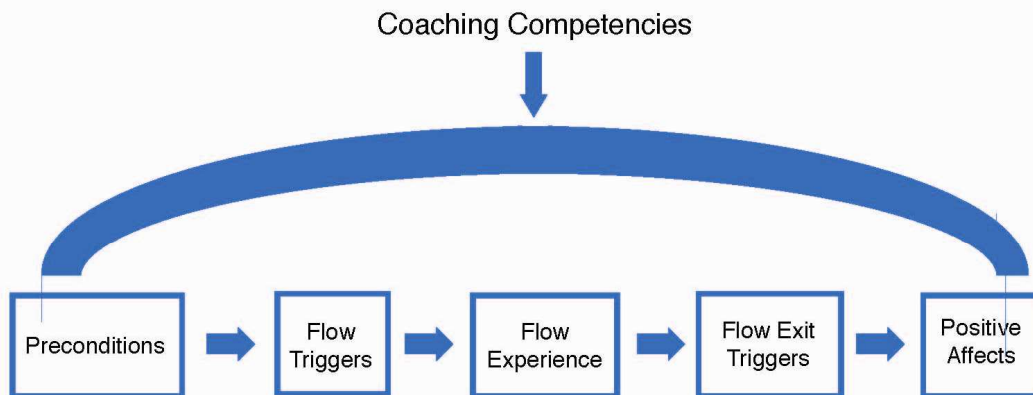


Figure 7. Model of coach flow experience.

**The Model of Coach Flow Entry.** Embedded in the *model of coach flow experience* is the *model of coach flow entry*. According to this model,

Flow is triggered by a four stage process within a coaching session:

1. *The Cognitive Dance – Cognitive Exercise of Questions, Answers, and Reflections*

2. *The Challenge – Powerful Question or Reflection*
3. *The Shift – Shift in Client Behavior*
4. *Flow Entry – Coach Enters the Flow State*

Figure 4, recreated below from Chapter 4, illustrates the model. The stages were described as a process, in depth, in Chapter 4. From a process perspective, I suggest that the entry process is unique to the activity of coaching. Certainly, the flow process for an interpersonal dyadic or group process would differ from that of an activity that involves only one person. As such, I propose that the Model of Coach Flow Entry Process is newly developed with this research.

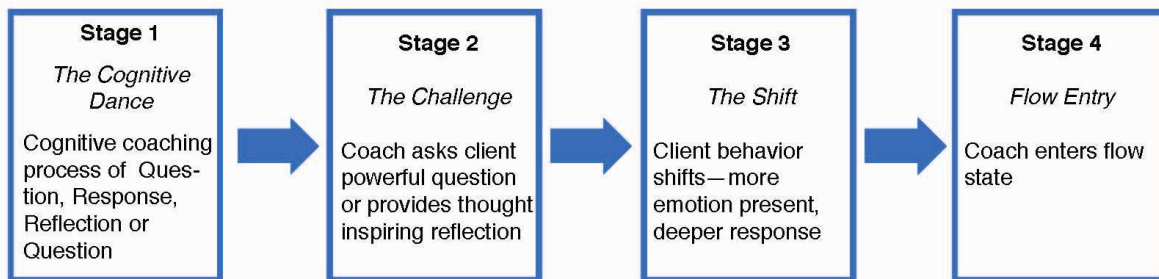


Figure 4. Coach flow entry process.

As the *coach flow entry process model* is embedded in the *coach flow experience model*, I have combined the models into a single illustration, noted in Figure 8.

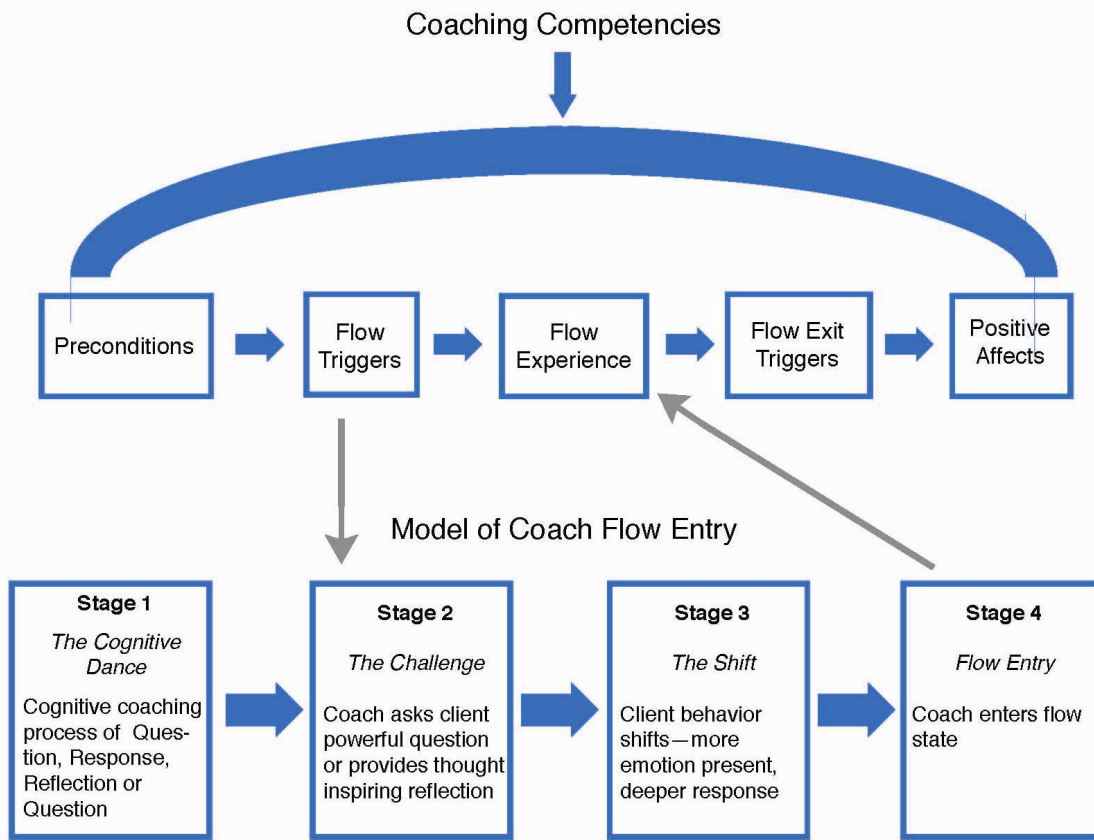


Figure 8. Revised model of coach flow experience.

### Implications for Coaching Practice

The theories, models and accompanying research here provide several direct implications for the practice of coaching that can be of immediate service to coaches, coach educators, and the coaching profession in general. For everyone, the benefits of the flow experience can be enormously uplifting, increasing self-esteem and self-efficacy, and producing a feeling of competence and transcendence. Each of these effects of flow serve professional development, personal development, and the health and wellbeing of people who experience it.

**Research implications for coaches.** Without exception, each of the coaches I interviewed for this study indicated that while they were aware that they experience flow in coaching, they had not ever analyzed their experience of flow until I asked them to participate in the research. Several coaches indicated that the interviews alone gave them greater insight into their experiences and how flow serves them personally and developmentally. Coaches reported that as they gained coaching experience, they have been able to achieve flow more frequently. As noted in the literature and the experience of coaches interviewed for this research, flow has many positive effects for coaches. Coaches reported greater ease and perceived effectiveness when they were in flow. They also reported positive affect that lingered following coaching sessions that resulted in increased feelings of self-efficacy and affirmation of purpose.

For all coaches who have experienced flow, this research can serve as a template with which to reflect and learn from their flow experiences. By examining aspects of coaching technique, competencies, and their own process in sessions in which they experience flow, coaches may be able to increase the likelihood of entering flow. The theories and models presented here can help a coach evaluate a session from a flow perspective, both in sessions when flow occurs and when it doesn't.

For coaches who have not experienced flow, this research provides a roadmap of the journey. These expert coaches noted that they had to achieve a level of experience, mastery, and confidence in order to create the conditions for flow. Inexperienced coaches can benefit from their descriptions and insight into the processes and competencies that will further their mastery and bring them closer to experiencing the benefits of flow. These models of flow can also serve as both a proactive and reflective guide for measuring their flow potential.

**Research implications for coach educators.** For coach educators, this research can serve as the basis for a plan designed to help students achieve the flow experience in their coaching development. It can also serve to educate the educators on the facets of flow. If the research cohort is any indication, most coaches have never before examined the flow experience. This research outlines the benefits and features of flow in coaching development, and adds a new perspective on the application of specific coaching competencies.

**Research implications for the coaching profession.** The coaching profession as a whole benefits as research on coach development is scarce. In addition, the profession benefits from this study on coaching because it provides evidence of the importance of the competencies in coaching development. Moreover, it presents a new model and suggests an approach for theory and model development that is both achievable and accessible.

### **Implications for Helping Professions**

While the focus of this research was specifically on the coaching profession, many helping professions share characteristics of coaching. As a result, I propose that the *model of coach flow experience* be expanded as a *model of the flow experience for the helping professions*. Egan (2010) describes helping professions as professions in which the mission is helping others become better at helping themselves. According to Egan (2010), several types of professionals fall into this description, including psychotherapists, psychiatrists, social workers, ministers, organizational consultants, attorneys, teachers, and managers. In each of these helping professions, including coaching, the interaction between the helper and object(s) of help is at the core of the activity. As a result, I propose that the flow experience coaching model be expanded to apply to the helping professions. I do not propose, however, that the flow entry process is the



same for all helping professions. The entry process would appear to be dependent on the helping process of the professional activity.

### **Model of the Flow Experience for the Helping Professions**

In this model,

- *Helpers move through a series of steps when they experience the process of flow during an intervention.*
- *Clients contribute to a professional's achievement of the flow state.*
- *Professional competencies play an overarching role in professionals' experience of flow during an intervention.*

This model is illustrated in Figure 9.

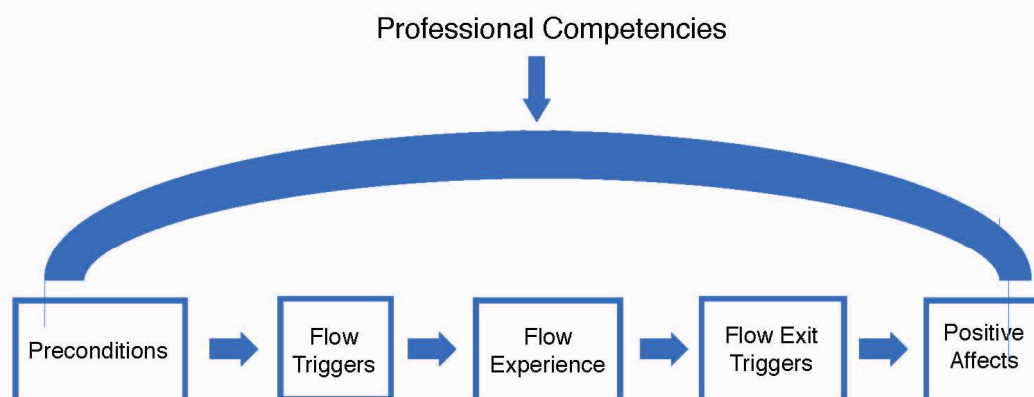


Figure 9. Model of flow experience for the helping professions.

### **Limitations of the Research Study**

This research study had several limitations. Perhaps most significant are the limitations inherent in research for a doctoral dissertation. As this research is unfunded, I was limited in the size of my sample, the research paradigm I chose, and the length of time I had to complete my research. Further, my purposive sample qualifications were quite narrow in the world of

coaching, requiring 10 years of experience in a young industry, ICF certification, and minimum education requirements. My research can only be seen to apply to this subset of the coaching industry.

Another important limitation of the study involved the reflective nature of the research. All participants related their flow experiences based on their memory of the coaching sessions. Further, as several participants astutely noted, once someone observes he or she is in the flow state, the observation takes him or her out of it. So to be in flow is to be unconscious of one's own experience in the moment, often making it difficult to recall the sensations during the experience.

Upon review of my research participant cohort, I also observed a phenomenon that may be viewed as a limitation. All but one of the participants for this study identified themselves as engaging in some type of executive coaching at least 50% of the time. I did not specifically recruit coaches who specialize in executive coaching activities. However, these are the coaches who met the qualifications and had enthusiasm for my study. Regarding the possible differences in study outcomes based on my research cohort of executive leaning coaches, I am unaware of how this group's coaching experience may differ from those who identify themselves as primarily life coaches, for example.

### **Conclusion**

This research addresses the primary research question of "*What is the experience of coaches who enter the flow state within a coaching session?*" The research concludes that coaches' experience of the flow state is a multifaceted integration of cognition, heart, transcendence, and competence that serves and is served by their experience, their competence, and their dedication to service of clients.

The research also concludes that coaches experience a process during coaching sessions in which they are able to achieve the flow state. That process includes skill, trust, and the integration of coaching competencies, which play a key role in coaches' ability to achieve and sustain flow in a coaching session.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

Research in the present study suggests several opportunities for future research related to coaches and the flow state that could serve the professional and personal development of coaches. One recommendation is to repeat the research conducted for this dissertation on a larger sample to test the models developed from this research both specifically on coaching and more generally for all helping professions. Also recommended is conducting research on both coaches and their clients to ascertain if clients' experience in sessions in which coaches experience flow would provide a wider view of the effects of flow. This research may confirm suggestion of the existence of "relational flow" outlined by Moore, Drake, Tschannen-Moran, Campone and Kauffman (2005) in a paper published by ICF for its 2005 Coaching Research Symposium. The authors of this paper suggest that relational flow experienced by both the coach and client may exist if certain conditions are met.

Based on a strong correlation indicated by coaches in the present study, research is recommended on the ways in which coaches' experience of flow in other aspects of their lives informs and influences their experience of flow in a session or intervention. Understanding outside influences may provide greater developmental avenues.

Three coaches in the present study pondered whether similarities in temperament between coaches and clients may affect coaches' ability to achieve flow in a coaching session. Research is recommended that compares coach and client Myers-Briggs type indicators or

Cloninger's 7-factor model of temperament and character in relation to coaches' ability to achieve flow. Coaches familiar with brain science also pondered the effect of "mirror neurons" on coaches' experience of flow. An examination of brain science implications for flow is also recommended.

From a more global coaching development perspective, research comparing the flow experiences of coaches from different coach training programs would be valuable as an opportunity to find out if training has an influence on flow experience potential.

Finally, further research testing the *model of flow experience for the helping professions* could serve the development of professionals in a number of fields, particularly by focusing on the distinct flow entry process for each.

### **Summary**

As the coaching profession has developed over the last two decades, much of the coach-related literature has focused on the training of coaches. Little empirical research attention has been paid to the experience and development of coaches.

In this study, I examined coaches' experience of the flow state as presented by flow pioneer Csikszentmihalyi. I also examined the facets of the flow process and the influence of ICF coaching competencies on the flow process.

The literature provided a solid backdrop to the research as it looked at the characteristics of flow, the history of flow theory development, coaching competencies, and concepts related to flow. I gathered data from a group of highly skilled and generous coaches who supported my research by their skill focus and presence. As a result, I had a high degree of confidence in the data collected for this research.

Through this research I developed five themes related to coaches' flow experience: that preconditions to flow exist on the part of both the coach and the client, a flow entry trigger process and exit triggers exist for coaches, that the flow state offers the possibility of a transcendent experience for coaches, that flow produces a positive lingering affect, and that coaching competencies play a key role in coaches' experience of flow.

From these themes, I developed a *model of coach flow experience* and an embedded *model of coach flow entry* that may serve coaches, coach educators, and the coaching profession by providing models of a coaching development process. Out of this research and identification of similar characteristics between coaches and other professionals in helping professions, I developed a *model of flow for the helping professions*. The research was rich, rewarding, and contributed to solid literature on coach development.

## REFERENCES

- Bachirova, T. , & Cox, E. (2009). A cognitive-developmental approach for coach development. In S. Palmer, A. & Whybrow (Eds.), *Handbook of coaching psychology: A guide for practitioners*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Bacon, T. R., & Spear, K. I. (2003). *Adaptive coaching: The art and practice of a client-centered approach to performance improvement*. Palo Alto, CA: Davies-Black .
- Bandura, A. (1997). *Self-efficacy: The exercise of control*. New York, NY: W.H. Freeman.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77-101.
- Brown, L.V. (Ed.), (2007). *Psychology of motivation*. New York, NY: Nova Science.
- Bryant, F.B., & Veroff, J. (2007). *Savoring: A new model of positive experience*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Catino, R. J. (2000). *Relationship between flow experience, flow dimensions, and the equivalence of challenges and skills in the web-based training environment*. (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). College of Education, University of North Texas, Denton, TX.
- Cloninger, C. R., Svrakic, D. , & Przybeck, T. R. (1993). A psychobiological model of temperament and character. *Archives of General Psychiatry*, 50.
- Creswell, J.W. (2009). *Research design (3<sup>rd</sup> ed. )*. Los Angeles, CA: Sage.
- Creswell, J. W. (2013). *Qualitative inquiry & research design (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.)*. Los Angeles, CA: Sage.
- Creswell, J.W., & Miller, D. (2000). Determining validity in qualitative inquiry. *Theory into Practice*, 39(3), 124-130.
- Csikszentmihalyi, M. (1975a). *Beyond boredom and anxiety*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Csikszentmihalyi, M. (1975b). Play and intrinsic rewards, *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, 15(3) 41-63.
- Csikszentmihalyi, M. (1985). Reflections on enjoyment. *Perspectives in Biology and Medicine*, 28, 469-497.
- Csikszentmihalyi, M. (1993). The measurement of flow in everyday life: Toward a theory of emergent motivation. In J. E. Jacobs (Ed.), *Developmental perspectives on motivation*. Omaha: University of Nebraska Press.

- Csikszentmihalyi, M. (1990). *Flow: The psychology of optimal experience*. New York: Harper Collins.
- Csikszentmihalyi, M. (1996). *Creativity: Flow and the psychology of discovery and invention*. New York, NY: Harper Collins.
- Csikszentmihalyi, M. (1997). *Finding flow: The psychology of engagement with everyday life*. New York, NY: Basic Books.
- Csikszentmihalyi, M. (2003). *Good business: Leadership, flow and the making of meaning*. New York, NY: Penguin.
- Csikszentmihalyi, M., & Bennett, S. (1971). An exploratory model of play. *American Anthropologist*, 73(1), 45-58.
- Csikszentmihalyi, M., & Csikszentmihalyi, I. S. , Eds. (1988). *Optimal experience*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Csikszentmihalyi, M., Rathunde, K., & Whalen, S. (1993). *Talented teenagers: The roots of success and failure*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- De Charms, R. (1968). *Personal causation: The internal affective determinants of behavior*. New York, NY: Academic Press.
- Egan, G. (2010). *The skilled helper: A problem-management and opportunity-development approach to helping* (9<sup>th</sup> ed). Belmont, CA: Brooks/Cole, Cengage Learning.
- Ellerman, C.R. & Reed, P.G. (2001). Self-transcendence and depression in middle-age adults. *Western Journal of Nursing Research*, 23, 698-713.
- Ellis, G. D., Voelkl, J. E., & Morris, C. (1994). Measurement and analysis issues with explanation of variance in daily experience using the flow model. *Journal of Leisure Research*, 26, 337-356.
- Fitzgerald, C., & Berger, J.G. (Eds.) (2002). *Executive coaching: Practices & perspectives*. Mountain View, CA: Davies-Black.
- Geller, S. M., & Greenberg, L. S. (2002). Therapeutic Presence: Therapists' experience of presence in the psychotherapy encounter. *Person-Centered and Experiential Psychotherapies*, 1(1, 2), 71-86.
- Gibbs, G.R. (2007). Analyzing qualitative data. In U. Flick (Ed.), *The Sage qualitative research kit*. London, UK: Sage.
- Grant, A. M. (2008). Workplace, executive and life coaching: An annotated biography from the behavioral science literature. Coaching Psychology Unit, University of Sydney.
- Harter, S. (1981). *A model of intrinsic mastery motivation in children: Individual differences and*

- developmental change*. Minnesota Symposia on Child Psychology, Vol. 14. Hillsdale, NJ
- Havercamp, B. E., & Young, R. A. (2007). Paradigms, purpose, and the role of the literature: Formulating a rationale for qualitative investigations. *The Counseling Psychologist*, 35(2), 265-294.
- Huizinga, J. (1950). *Homo ludens*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.
- International Coach Federation website. Retrieved 2012 from [www.coachfederation.org](http://www.coachfederation.org).
- Kampa-Kokesch, S., & Anderson, Z. (2001). Executive coaching: A comprehensive review of literature. *Coaching Psychology Journal: Practice and Research*, 53(4), 205-228.
- Kauffman, C. (2006). Positive psychology: The science at the heart of coaching. In D.R. Stober, & A. M. Grant (Eds.), *Evidence based coaching handbook*. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons.
- Kegan, R. (1994). *In over our heads: The mental demands of modern life*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Kilburg, R. R. (2004). Trudging toward Dodoville: Conceptual approaches and case studies in executive coaching. *Consulting Psychology Journal: Practice and Research* 56(4), 203-212.
- Kilburg, R. R. (2009). *Executive coaching: Developing managerial wisdom in a world of chaos*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- Kvale, S. & Brinkmann, S. (2009) *Interviews: Learning the craft of qualitative research interviewing*. Los Angeles: Sage.
- Laske, O. (1999). An integrated model of developmental coaching. *Consulting Psychology Journal*, 51(3), 139-159.
- Losada, M., & Heaphy E. (2004). The role of positivity and connectivity in the performance of business teams: A non-linear dynamics model. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 47 (6), 740-765.
- Lyubomirsky, S.L., King, L., & Diener, E. (2005). The benefits of frequent positive affect: Does happiness lead to success? *Psychological Bulletin*, 131, 803-855.
- Maslow, A. H. (1954). *Motivation and personality*. New York, NY: Harper & Row.
- Maslow, A. H. (1968). *Toward a psychology of being*. New York, NY: Van Nostrand Reinhold.
- Maslow, A. H. (1971). *The farthest reaches of human nature*. New York, NY: Penguin.
- Maslow, A. H. (1987). *Motivation and personality* (3rd ed.). New York, NY: Longman.



- Massimini, F., & Carli, M. (1988). The systematic assessment of flow in daily experience. In M. Csikszentmihalyi, & I. S. Csikszentmihalyi, (Eds.), *Optimal experience*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Massimini, F., Csikszentmihalyi, M., & Delle Fave, A. (1988). Flow and biocultural evolution. In M. Csikszentmihalyi, M. & I. S. Csikszentmihalyi, (Eds.) *Optimal experience*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- May, R. (1975). *The courage to create*. New York, NY: Bantam.
- McCracken, G. (1988). *The long interview*. Newbury Park, UK: Sage.
- Merriam, S.B., Caffarella, R.S., & Baumgartner, L.M. (2007). *Learning in adulthood: A comprehensive guide*. San Francisco, CA: John Wiley & Sons.
- Moore, M., Drake, D. , Tschannen-Moran, M. , Campone, F., & Kauffman, C. (2005). Relational flow: A theoretical model for the intuitive dance. *2005 Coaching Research Symposium Proceedings*. Lexington, KY: International Coach Federation.
- Nakamura, J., & Csikszentmihalyi, M. (2002). The concept of flow. In C.R. Snyder, & S. L. Lopez, (Eds.). *Handbook of positive psychology* (89-105). Oxford, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Novak, T. P., & Hoffman, D. L. (1997). *Measuring the flow experience among web users*. Paper presented at the Interval Research Corporation, Nashville, TN.
- Orlick, T. (1992). The psychology of personal excellence. *Contemporary Thought on Performance Enhancement*, 1, 109-122.
- Peltier, B. (2010). *The psychology of executive coaching: Theory and application* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Perry, S. K. (1999). *Writing in flow: Keys to enhanced creativity*. Cincinnati, OH: Writer's Digest Books.
- Privette, G. (1983). Peak experience, peak performance, and flow: A comparative analysis of positive human experiences. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 45(6), 161-168.
- Privette, G., & Bundrick, C. M. (1989). Effects of triggering activity on construct events: Peak performance, peak experience, flow, average events, misery and failure. *Journal of Social Behavior and Personality*, 4, 299-306.
- Privette, G., & Bundrick, C. M. (1991). Peak experience, peak performance, and flow: Correspondence of personal descriptions and theoretical constructs. *Journal of Social Behavior and Personality*, 6, 169-188.
- Quinn, R. E. (2000). *Change the world: How ordinary people can accomplish extraordinary results*. San

- Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Reich, J. W., & Zautra, A. (1981). Life events and personal causation: Some relationships with satisfaction and distress. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *41*(5), 1002-1012.
- Ryan, R. M., & Deci, E. L. (2000). Self-determination theory and the facilitation of intrinsic motivation, social development and well-being. *American Psychologist*, *55*(1), 68-78.
- Saldana, J. (2009). *The coding manual for qualitative researchers*. Los Angeles, CA: Sage.
- Siegel, D. J. (2007). *The mindful brain: Reflection and attunement in the cultivation of well-being*. New York, NY: W.W. Norton.
- Silsbee, D. K. (2008). *Presence-based coaching: Cultivating self-generative leaders through mind, body, and heart*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Silverman, D. (2001). *Interpreting qualitative data*. London, UK: Sage.
- Stober, D. R., & Grant, A. M. (2006). *Evidence based coaching handbook*. Hoboken, N J: John Wiley & Sons.
- Svrakic D. M., Draganic S., Hill, K., Bayon, C., Przybeck, T. R., & Cloninger, C. R. (2002). Temperament, character, and personality disorders: etiologic, diagnostic, treatment issues. *Acta Psychiatrica Scandinavica*, *106*, 189–195.
- Teng, C. (2011). Who are likely to experience flow? Impact of temperament and character on flow. *Personality and Individual Differences*, *50*, 863-868.
- Washburn, M. (2000). Transpersonal cognition in developmental perspective. In T. Hart. P. L. Nelson, . & K. Puhakka, K. (Eds.) *Transpersonal knowing: Exploring the horizon of consciousness*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Wesson, K. & Boniwell, I. (2007). Flow theory – its application to coaching psychology. *International Coaching Psychology Review*, *2*(1), 33-43.
- White, R. W. (1959). Motivation reconsidered: The concept of competence. *Psychological Review*, *66*(5), 297-333.
- Whitworth, L., Kimsey-House, K., Kimsey-House, H. & Sandahl, P. (2009). *Co-active coaching: New skills for coaching people toward success* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Boston, MA: Davies-Black.
- Wilber, K. (1997, February;). An integral theory of consciousness. *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, *4* (1), 71-92□.
- Wildflower, L., (Ed.) (2008). *Research and theories: Origins and applications of coaching*. Santa Barbara, CA: Fielding Graduate University.

- Wood, R., & Bandura, A. (1989). Social cognitive theory of organizational management. *The Academy of Management Review*, 14(3), 361-384.
- Zautra, A., & Reich, J. (1980). Positive life events and reports of well-being: Some useful distinctions. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 8(6), 657-670.
- Zeus, P. & Skiffington, S. (2008). *The complete guide to coaching at work*. North Ryde, Australia: McGraw-Hill.

## APPENDIX A: ICF Core Competencies

### A. SETTING THE FOUNDATION

**1. Meeting Ethical Guidelines and Professional Standards** - Understanding of coaching ethics and standards and ability to apply them appropriately in all coaching situations.

1. Understands and exhibits in own behaviors the ICF Standards of Conduct (see list, Part III of ICF Code of Ethics),
2. Understands and follows all ICF Ethical Guidelines (see list),
3. Clearly communicates the distinctions between coaching, consulting, psychotherapy and other support professions,
4. Refers client to another support professional as needed, knowing when this is needed and the available resources.

**2. Establishing the Coaching Agreement** - Ability to understand what is required in the specific coaching interaction and to come to agreement with the prospective and new client about the coaching process and relationship.

1. Understands and effectively discusses with the client the guidelines and specific parameters of the coaching relationship (e.g., logistics, fees, scheduling, inclusion of others if appropriate),
2. Reaches agreement about what is appropriate in the relationship and what is not, what is and is not being offered, and about the client's and coach's responsibilities,
3. Determines whether there is an effective match between his/her coaching method and the needs of the prospective client.

### B. CO-CREATING THE RELATIONSHIP

**3. Establishing Trust and Intimacy with the Client** - Ability to create a safe, supportive environment that produces ongoing mutual respect and trust.

1. Shows genuine concern for the client's welfare and future,
2. Continuously demonstrates personal integrity, honesty and sincerity,
3. Establishes clear agreements and keeps promises,
4. Demonstrates respect for client's perceptions, learning style, personal being,
5. Provides ongoing support for and champions new behaviors and actions, including those involving risk taking and fear of failure,
6. Asks permission to coach client in sensitive, new areas.

**4. Coaching Presence** - Ability to be fully conscious and create spontaneous relationship with the client, employing a style that is open, flexible and confident.

1. Is present and flexible during the coaching process, dancing in the moment,
2. Accesses own intuition and trusts one's inner knowing - "goes with the gut",
3. Is open to not knowing and takes risks,
4. Sees many ways to work with the client, and chooses in the moment what is most effective,
5. Uses humor effectively to create lightness and energy,
6. Confidently shifts perspectives and experiments with new possibilities for own action,
7. Demonstrates confidence in working with strong emotions, and can self-manage and not be overpowered or enmeshed by client's emotions.

### C. COMMUNICATING EFFECTIVELY

**5. Active Listening** - Ability to focus completely on what the client is saying and is not saying, to understand the meaning of what is said in the context of the client's desires, and to support client self-expression.

1. Attends to the client and the client's agenda, and not to the coach's agenda for the client,
2. Hears the client's concerns, goals, values and beliefs about what is and is not possible,
3. Distinguishes between the words, the tone of voice, and the body language,
4. Summarizes, paraphrases, reiterates, mirrors back what client has said to ensure clarity and understanding,
5. Encourages, accepts, explores and reinforces the client's expression of feelings, perceptions, concerns, beliefs, suggestions, etc.,
6. Integrates and builds on client's ideas and suggestions,
7. "Bottom-lines" or understands the essence of the client's communication and helps the client get there rather than engaging in long descriptive stories,
8. Allows the client to vent or "clear" the situation without judgment or attachment in order to move on to next steps.

**6. Powerful Questioning** - Ability to ask questions that reveal the information needed for maximum benefit to the coaching relationship and the client.

1. Asks questions that reflect active listening and an understanding of the client's perspective,
2. Asks questions that evoke discovery, insight, commitment or action (e.g., those that challenge the client's assumptions),
3. Asks open-ended questions that create greater clarity, possibility or new learning
4. Asks questions that move the client towards what they desire, not questions that ask for the client to justify or look backwards.

**7. Direct Communication** - Ability to communicate effectively during coaching sessions, and to use language that has the greatest positive impact on the client.

1. Is clear, articulate and direct in sharing and providing feedback,
2. Reframes and articulates to help the client understand from another perspective what he/she wants or is uncertain about,
3. Clearly states coaching objectives, meeting agenda, purpose of techniques or exercises,
4. Uses language appropriate and respectful to the client (e.g., non-sexist, non-racist, non-technical, non-jargon),
5. Uses metaphor and analogy to help to illustrate a point or paint a verbal picture.

#### **D. FACILITATING LEARNING AND RESULTS**

**8. Creating Awareness** - Ability to integrate and accurately evaluate multiple sources of information, and to make interpretations that help the client to gain awareness and thereby achieve agreed-upon results.

1. Goes beyond what is said in assessing client's concerns, not getting hooked by the client's description,
2. Invokes inquiry for greater understanding, awareness and clarity,
3. Identifies for the client his/her underlying concerns, typical and fixed ways of perceiving himself/herself and the world, differences between the facts and the interpretation, disparities between thoughts, feelings and action,
4. Helps clients to discover for themselves the new thoughts, beliefs, perceptions, emotions, moods, etc. that strengthen their ability to take action and achieve what is important to them,
5. Communicates broader perspectives to clients and inspires commitment to shift their viewpoints and find new possibilities for action,
6. Helps clients to see the different, interrelated factors that affect them and their behaviors (e.g., thoughts, emotions, body, background),

7. Expresses insights to clients in ways that are useful and meaningful for the client,
8. Identifies major strengths vs. major areas for learning and growth, and what is most important to address during coaching,
9. Asks the client to distinguish between trivial and significant issues, situational vs. recurring behaviors, when detecting a separation between what is being stated and what is being done.

**9. Designing Actions** - Ability to create with the client opportunities for ongoing learning, during coaching and in work/life situations, and for taking new actions that will most effectively lead to agreed-upon coaching results.

1. Brainstorms and assists the client to define actions that will enable the client to demonstrate, practice and deepen new learning,
2. Helps the client to focus on and systematically explore specific concerns and opportunities that are central to agreed-upon coaching goals,
3. Engages the client to explore alternative ideas and solutions, to evaluate options, and to make related decisions,
4. Promotes active experimentation and self-discovery, where the client applies what has been discussed and learned during sessions immediately afterwards in his/her work or life setting,
5. Celebrates client successes and capabilities for future growth,
6. Challenges client's assumptions and perspectives to provoke new ideas and find new possibilities for action,
7. Advocates or brings forward points of view that are aligned with client goals and, without attachment, engages the client to consider them,
8. Helps the client "Do It Now" during the coaching session, providing immediate support,
9. Encourages stretches and challenges but also a comfortable pace of learning.

**10. Planning and Goal Setting** - Ability to develop and maintain an effective coaching plan with the client.

1. Consolidates collected information and establishes a coaching plan and development goals with the client that address concerns and major areas for learning and development,
2. Creates a plan with results that are attainable, measurable, specific and have target dates,
3. Makes plan adjustments as warranted by the coaching process and by changes in the situation,
4. Helps the client identify and access different resources for learning (e.g., books, other professionals),
5. Identifies and targets early successes that are important to the client.

**11. Managing Progress and Accountability** - Ability to hold attention on what is important for the client, and to leave responsibility with the client to take action.

1. Clearly requests of the client actions that will move the client toward their stated goals,
2. Demonstrates follow through by asking the client about those actions that the client committed to during the previous session(s),
3. Acknowledges the client for what they have done, not done, learned or become aware of since the previous coaching session(s),
4. Effectively prepares, organizes and reviews with client information obtained during sessions,
5. Keeps the client on track between sessions by holding attention on the coaching plan and outcomes, agreed-upon courses of action, and topics for future session(s),
6. Focuses on the coaching plan but is also open to adjusting behaviors and actions based on the coaching process and shifts in direction during sessions,

7. Is able to move back and forth between the big picture of where the client is heading, setting a context for what is being discussed and where the client wishes to go,
8. Promotes client's self-discipline and holds the client accountable for what they say they are going to do, for the results of an intended action, or for a specific plan with related time frames,
9. Develops the client's ability to make decisions, address key concerns, and develop himself/herself (to get feedback, to determine priorities and set the pace of learning, to reflect on and learn from experiences),
10. Positively confronts the client with the fact that he/she did not take agreed-upon actions.

**APPENDIX B: INFORMED CONSENT FORM**Fielding Graduate University  
**Informed Consent Form**

**Research Study Title:** Coaching, Clients and Competencies: How Coaches Experience Flow

**NAME OF PARTICIPANT:**

You have been asked to participate in a research study conducted by Barrett W. McBride, a doctoral student in the School of Human and Organizational Development at Fielding Graduate University, Santa Barbara, CA. This study is supervised by Dr. Judith Stevens-Long, Dissertation Chair. This research involves the study coaches who experience the flow state during coaching sessions with clients. This research will be part of Barrett's doctoral dissertation.

You were selected for this study because you meet the following research criteria:

- 1) Currently have an active coaching practice;
- 2) Are certified through the ICF at the Associate Coach Certification Professional Coach Certification or Master Coach Certification level;
- 3) Have a minimum of 10 years experience as a professional coach;
- 4) Possess a minimum education of a bachelors degree;
- 5) Have experienced flow in coaching sessions multiple times within the last year; and
- 6) Feel that you can describe your experiences of flow

Before you agree to participate in this research study, it is important that you read and understand the information provided in this Informed Consent Form. If you have any questions, please ask the researcher for clarification.

**Why is this Study Being Done?**

The coaching profession is a growing one. As the profession has grown, numerous coaching certification programs have emerged and hundreds of articles and books have been written to provide coach training and development. Much of this training and development has focused on the practical skills coaches need to effectively coach clients toward achieving their goals. Little empirical research or literature has been produced, however, on the personal experience of coaching or coaching development.

In order to fully understand the nature of coaching, it is vital that we begin to look more closely at the coaching experience from the coach's perspective. By understanding the coach's experience, we will be able to better understand what makes coaching successful and what makes coaches successful. From this understanding, it may be possible to incorporate discovered themes into coach development programs, in turn producing more highly skilled and highly evolved coaches. One area of experience is the flow state.



Research on individuals in many occupations has revealed common characteristics of the flow state, providing a foundation for this research. However, we do not understand, nor have we sought to inquire of coaches how their experience of flow influences their coaching practice. In this study I focus on the flow state as experienced by professional coaches. The study will seek to examine patterns and themes that emerge from interviews with a group of professional coaches who experience flow while engaged with clients. It is my hope that this study will provide insight into coach development and the relationship between flow experiences and coaching competencies.

### **How Many People will Take Part in the Study?**

There will be 15-20 participants in this study

### **What is involved in The Study?**

If you agree to participate in this study, you will undergo one 60-90 minute interview. Your interview will be digitally recorded for accuracy. After the transcription of the interview, it is possible that a follow-up interview (not to exceed 30 minutes) will be required for additional clarification.

Interviews will take place by telephone and you will call a toll-free phone number provided by the researcher. The results of this interview will be transcribed by a professional transcription service. Once the transcription is complete, you will have the opportunity to review the transcription of the interview to check that your comments are accurate and reflective of what you meant to say.

### **How Much Time is Required to Be in the Study?**

The study involves one interview and one possible follow-up interview, which will be arranged at your convenience. The total time involved in the telephone conversation will not exceed two hours. Review of your transcript should take no more than an hour.

### **What are the Risks of the Study?**

The risks to you are considered minimal; there is a very small chance that you may experience some emotional discomfort during or after your participation as you reflect on your experience of the flow state.

### **What are the Benefits of Taking Part in this Study?**

As a participant in this study, you will be reviewing your developmental journey and the ways that the flow state impacts your coaching practice. It is possible that you will have new insights or increased recall of growth and change that could be purposely integrated in to you coaching practice.

### **What about Confidentiality and Protection?**

The information you provided will be kept strictly confidential. Your consent to participate in this study includes consent for the researcher, supervising faculty, and a transcriptionist who will also see your data. Your research records may be inspected and/or photocopied by authorized representatives of Fielding Graduate University, including members of the Institutional Review Board or their designees, for monitoring or auditing purposes

The Informed Consent Form and other identifying information will be kept separate from the interview data. All materials will be kept in a locked file cabinet in the researcher's home office and only the researcher will have the key. The digital voice recordings will be listened to only by the researcher and the transcriptionist, who has signed the attached Professional Assistance Confidentiality Agreement. Any records that would identify you as a participant of this study, such as this Informed Consent Form, will be destroyed by shredding approximately three years after the study is completed.

In order to ensure anonymity, you may wish to select a pseudonym for any quotes that might be included in the dissertation. Approval of the transcript indicates that you have given permission for direct quotes to be used in the dissertation.

The results of this research will be published in my dissertation and possibly published in subsequent journals, books, or presentations.

The security of the data transmitted over the Internet cannot be guaranteed, therefore there is a slight risk that the information you send to me via e-mail will not be secure. The collection of such data is not expected to present any greater risk than you would encounter in everyday life when sending or receiving information over the Internet.

### **Participation in this Research is Voluntary:**

You are free to decline to participate or to withdraw from this study at any time, either during or after your participation, without negative consequences. Should you withdraw, your data will be deleted from the study and will be destroyed. The researcher is also free to terminate the study at any time.

### **Compensation**

No compensation will be provided for participation

### **Study Results**

You may request a copy of the summary of the aggregate final results by indicating your interest at the end of this form.

### **Additional Information**

If you have any questions about any aspect of this study or your involvement, please tell the researcher before signing this form. You may also contact the supervising faculty if you have

questions or concerns about your participation in this study. The supervising faculty has provided contact information at the bottom of this form.

You may also ask questions at any time during your participation in this study.

If you have questions or concerns about your rights as a research participant, contact the Fielding Graduate University IRB by e-mail at [irb@fielding.edu](mailto:irb@fielding.edu) or by telephone at 805.898.4033.

Two copies of this informed consent form should be printed. Please sign both, indicating you have read, understood, and agree to participate in this research. Return one to the researcher and keep the other for your files. If you receive this Informed Consent Form through e-mail, you may scan the entire document and return as an e-mail attachment. You may also print one copy, sign it and fax all pages to the researcher at 916.456.5611, while keeping the original for yourself. The IRB of Fielding Graduate University retains the right to access all Informed Consent Forms and other study documents.

**I have read the above Informed Consent document and have had the opportunity to ask questions about this study. I have been told my rights as a research participant, and I voluntarily consent to participate in this study. By signing this form, I agree to participate in this research study.**

---

NAME OF PARTICIPANT (please print)

---

SIGNATURE OF PARTICIPANT

---

DATE

Please send me a summary of the results of your research \_\_\_\_\_

Judith Stevens-Long, Ph.D. Dissertation Chair  
Fielding Graduate University  
2112 Santa Barbara Street  
Santa Barbara, CA 93105  
Phone: 805.689.7288

Barrett W. McBride, Researcher  
PO Box 19025  
Sacramento, CA 95819  
Phone: 916.456.5855  
Fax: 916.456.5611  
E-mail:  
[bmcbride@email.fielding.edu](mailto:bmcbride@email.fielding.edu)

**APPENDIX C: LETTER OF INVITATION**

Dear Fellow Coach:

I am writing as I embark on a research study about coaching development. I am seeking coaches to participate who have experienced the flow state in their coaching. This study will be conducted by me, Barrett McBride. I am a doctoral student in the School of Human and Organization Development at Fielding Graduate University in Santa Barbara, CA. This study is being supervised by Dr. Judy Stevens-Long.

My intent with this research is to begin a conversation in the scholarly coaching literature about flow as a developmental experience for coaches. Much current scholarly literature focuses on the experience of the client and effectiveness on coaching outcomes. The predominance of practitioner literature on coaches focuses on models, training and skill development. It is my hope that this study will contribute to the emerging literature on coaches' ways of being, beyond their skillset.

When I say "flow", I am referring to flow as defined by flow theorist Csikszentmihalyi. According to Csikszentmihalyi, the flow state includes the following characteristics:

10. The activity has clear goals and objectives requiring response.
11. The activity provides immediate feedback.
12. The individual's perceived skills are suited to the challenge.
13. The individual feels completely absorbed in the effort -- a high level of concentration, minimal distractions.
14. The individual's awareness and actions merge.
15. The activity feels effortless.
16. Intrinsic motivation is present – the engagement is self-rewarding.
17. The individual experiences an altered sense of time.
- 18.** The individual experiences a loss of ego-awareness or self-consciousness and has the sense of expanded consciousness and expanded strength.

Have you experienced this type of flow in your coaching sessions? If so, I am very interested in interviewing you for my study. I am particularly interested in what you experience when you enter a state of flow during a coaching session, what perceived coaching competencies relate to your experience of flow, triggers of flow, ways you maintain flow in a coaching session, and how much control you have over the flow state.

For this research, I am seeking 15-20 participants, willing to be interviewed, who meet the following criteria:

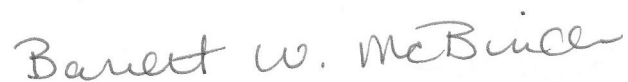
- 7) Currently have an active coaching practice
- 8) Are certified through the ICF at the Associate Coach Certification, Professional
- 9) Coach Certification, or Master Coach Certification level
- 10) Have a minimum of 10 years experience as a professional coach

- 11) Possess a minimum education of a bachelors degree
- 12) Have experienced flow in coaching sessions multiple times within the last year
- 13) Feel they can describe their experiences of flow

If you meet the above criteria and would like to participate or have additional questions about the study, please contact me at my e-mail address below. Please include your phone number and convenient times for me to call you for a brief screening interview.

Thank-you for taking the time to consider this invitation.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Barrett W. McBride".

Barrett W. McBride  
PO Box 19025  
Sacramento, CA 95819  
Phone: 916.456.5855  
Fax: 916.456.5611  
E-Mail: [bmcbride@email.fielding.edu](mailto:bmcbride@email.fielding.edu)

**APPENDIX D: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS****Coaching, Clients and Competencies: How Coaches Experience Flow**  
**Barrett McBride****Interview Questions****I. Coach Background Questions**

1. What is the name you have chosen for this interview? (Pseudonym)
2. How many years have you been a practicing professional coach?
3. Do you specialize in a specific type of coaching? If so, what is it?
4. To the extent that you are able to recall, in what percent of coaching sessions do you estimate that you experience flow?

**II. Grand Tour Questions**

1. Think of a time when you experienced flow in a coaching session and describe the experience.

There are several follow-up questions possible, including:

- At what point in the session did you enter the flow state?
- Did you purposely attempt to enter a flow state?
  - If so, what steps do you take?
- What were your somatic sensations? Physiological changes?
- How was your interaction different with your client when you were in the flow state than not?
- Did the client notice a shift that you were able to notice? Explain
- How did you know when you were in the flow state?
- How long were you in the flow state, if you have a sense?
- What happened just before you entered the flow state?
- Was there a trigger that led you into the flow state?
- What coaching competencies were in play just before you entered, while in the flow state, at the end of the flow state?
- What caused you to leave the flow state – if you did?
- Did you experience flow more than once during a session?
- Were you conscious of being in a flow state during the session? In reflection afterwards?
- 

2. Repeat the same question scenario with a second example or an example of a session in which flow was not experienced.

3. What is the value of the flow state to you in your work as a coach?

There are several possible follow-up questions possible, including:

- Do you perceive that you are more effective as a coach when you are in a flow state? If so, in what ways
  - Do you view the flow state as part of your developmental process/growth as a coach? Explain
  - Over time, do you find yourself in a flow state more often or less often as you gain more experience in coaching?
  - Does achievement of flow in a coaching session affect your behavior, world view, perception once you leave the session?
  - What determines if you will enter a flow state during a session? type of client? Client situation? Coaching environment? Other?
  - Do you have a strategy for entering the flow state?
  - Do you engage in other activities that you believe contribute to your ability to achieve the flow state?
  - Do you have a coaching philosophy that you believe contributes to your ability to achieve the flow state?
  - What specific coaching competencies do you find that relate to flow? If so, what are they and how do they influence flow?
4. Is there anything about the flow state in relation to coaching that I haven't asked about that is important to you?