

Relational Flow: A Theoretical Model for the Intuitive Dance

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(To be published by the International Coach Federation in the 2005 Coaching Research Symposium Proceedings)

Abstract

Inspired by participant comments at the ICF 2004 Coaching Research Symposium, the authors of this paper have collaborated to develop a theoretical model for the *intuitive dance*, a widely used coaching concept that is not well-defined or well-understood. We are positioning the model as part of a theory-building process to deepen the understanding of mastery in coaching and further the development of an academic foundation for the profession.

The authors define the intuitive dance as a relational dynamic between coaches and clients when they enter a zone where they are fully challenged at a high level of skill and awareness. At those peak moments the coach and the client are in a state we describe as *relational flow*. Relational flow extends the theory of flow (Csikszentmihalyi, , 1990, 1993, 1997, 2000) and builds on Csikszentmihalyi's (Csikszentmihalyi & Csikszentmihalyi, 1988; Csikszentmihalyi & Larson, 1984) notion of shared flow by emphasizing the relational genesis of this state.

In order to explain the relational dynamics of the intuitive dance and build a theoretical model to support further research and development, it is important to draw on other related theories. In this paper, we provide an overview of flow theory in addition to introducing four others that contribute to the emergence of relational flow in coaching:

- 1) Reflective practitioner (Schön, 1983)
- 2) Readiness to change (Prochaska, Norcross, & DiClemente, 1995)
- 3) Emotional intelligence (Goleman, 1995, 1998)
- 4) Relational competence (Jordan, Walker, & Hartling, 2004; Walker & Rosen, 2004)

The use of relational flow as a theoretical model for studying the practice of coaching will help to understand and promote mastery in the profession. This emerging body of work highlights the importance of the coaching relationship as a vehicle for flow states, growth, and change. We offer examples of additional research that will build on and further this model.

Rationale for Theory-building for the Intuitive Dance

The development of an academic foundation is an important endeavor if coaching is to evolve as a profession. An important element in the process is to identify and study concepts that express the uniqueness of coaching and offer the potential for sound theories and bases for outcomes research. We have identified the intuitive dance as such a concept. Many coaches speak of their peak coaching interactions as an intuitive dance, but a robust and coherent understanding of this phenomenon and its implications is lacking.

We propose that the development of a theoretical model is the first step in a theory-building process for the intuitive dance in coaching. We draw on a definition of theory as a coherent description, explanation, and representation of observed or experienced phenomena (Gioia & Pitre, 1990). Theory-building is the recurring process by which these phenomena are generated, verified, and refined (Lynham, 2000).

There are two primary outcomes from this process according to Dubin (1976): *outcome knowledge* that is explanatory and predictive in nature and *process knowledge* that increase the understanding of how something works. As Grant (2005) observed, a good theory accurately describes the part of the world under study, and it is able to guide actions and predict outcomes. Good theories also add to the knowledge base that serves as the foundation for the development and evaluation of a field's practice (Chalofsky, 1996).

So, given that a good theory about the relational dynamic in coaching would deliver important outcomes for the coaching field, we have developed relational flow as a theoretical model for the intuitive dance and outlined directions for future research. We propose that the development and study of a theoretical model for the intuitive dance may:

- (a) explain why masterful coaches get better results with their clients,
- (b) provide a basis for coaching outcome studies,
- (c) provide a roadmap for the development of mastery in coaching, and
- (d) demonstrate a process for developing theories and studying other coaching concepts.

Proposed Definition of the Intuitive Dance

The intuitive dance is a relational dynamic between coaches and clients when they enter a zone where they are fully challenged at a high level of skill and awareness. The shift into this state can arise from the coach, the client, or the "field" within which the coaching conversation occurs. This dynamic, which we conceptualized as *relational flow*, may underpin how and when both coaches and their clients make large steps forward in their work.

Relational flow is "intuitive" in that it fosters an awareness of not only what can be observed and discovered empirically but also of what can be directly experienced. It is a "dance" in that it moves through many steps that can be progressively learned and ultimately mastered. This combination uniquely describes a relational process that both deepens the levels of interaction and accelerates the potential for better outcomes.

By way of analogy, coaching conversations are to coaching outcomes as dance classes are to dancing. Over time, the initial mechanical consideration of sequential or rote steps is transformed into a more fluid and situational application of expertise. This shift can be observed in the coaching conversations and their outcomes for both the client and the coach. The coach's mastery of core coaching competencies sets the stage for moments of relational flow when self-consciousness is transcended and new discoveries emerge.

Similar to the experience of being happy, being in relational flow within a coaching session is something both participants know is happening but can be hard pressed to describe or define. It happens when a coach and his or her client perceive themselves as being "in synch" and engaged in a generative,

interdependent dialogue. The relational flow model provides a structure to study and advance coaching by: (a) understanding coaching processes and contexts that foster flow; and (b) helping coaches and clients find flow more readily and often (Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2002).

As Csikszentmihalyi's model (discussed below) would suggest, intuitive dancing is more the exception than the rule. Even so, coaches aspire to the dance during every coaching conversation and masterful coaches dance more often with their clients than novice coaches and achieve greater results in and beyond the coaching sessions.

Relevant Theories to the Intuitive Dance

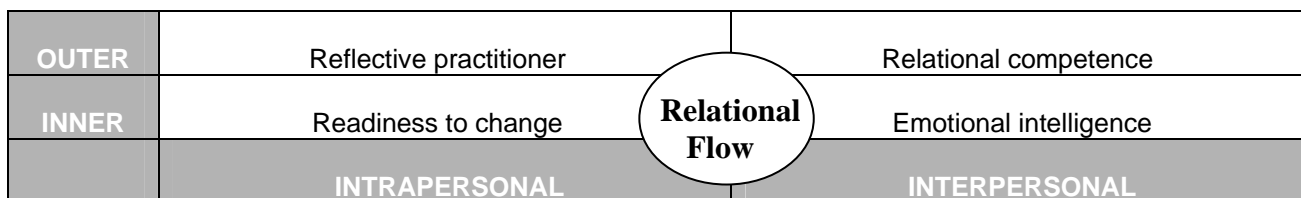
The core body of knowledge upon which we base our understanding of the intuitive dance is the research of Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi on the experience of flow (1990, 1993, 1997, 2000) and, in particular, his (Csikszentmihalyi & Csikszentmihalyi, 1988; Csikszentmihalyi & Larson, 1984) notion of *shared flow* as distinguishable from optimal individual experience in group settings where the others may or may not be in flow. We have also identified four theories that support our theoretical model. They can be framed within a grid defined by inner versus outer foci and interpersonal versus intrapersonal processes and they contribute to a better understanding of the dynamics of relational flow as it emerges at certain moments in coaching conversations. These theories further help position relational flow as an integral part of masterful coaching and as a theoretical model to guide research and practitioner development. The four theories are:

1. *Reflective Practitioner* (Schön, 1983): The coach draws on his or her mastery of coaching competencies and knowledge derived from prior experiences to construct original and spontaneous responses to what the client brings to the interaction.
2. *Readiness to Change* (Prochaska et al, 1995): The coach and client both have the cognitive and emotional foundation that is a prerequisite for embarking on and completing a path of change.
3. *Emotional Intelligence* (Goleman, 1995, 1998): The coach and client have high levels of emotional intelligence, including awareness and abilities to manage, express, and leverage emotions within relationships.
4. *Relational Competence* (Jordan, et al, 2004; Walker & Rosen, 2004): The coach and client are competent in growth-promoting relationships that foster psychological development through deeper connections.

Taking a multiparadigmatic view of this phenomenon is more representative of the multifaceted nature of the individual and relational realities in coaching conversations (Gioia & Pitre, 1990). In the end, the ultimate judge of whether or not the proposed model has yielded a good theory will be found in the application of resulting practices by coaches (Lynham, p.169).

In Exhibit 1, the theoretical model of the intuitive dance is overlaid on an adapted version of Wilber's (2000) "All-Quadrant" model to show how these additional theories support relational flow.

Exhibit 1: Relational Flow: Theoretical Model for Intuitive Dance

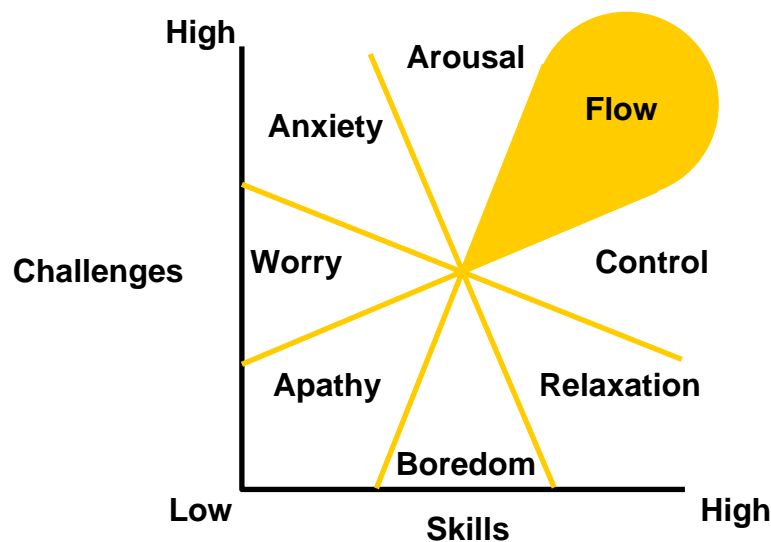


Flow

For more than 30 years, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi has involved thousands of subjects in both qualitative and quantitative research to characterize flow as the psychology of optimal experience. Flow is the experience people have when they are completely immersed in an activity for its own sake, stretching body and mind to the limit in a voluntary effort to accomplish something difficult and worthwhile (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997). It is used by many people to describe “the sense of effortless action they feel in moments that stand out as the best in their lives. Athletes refer to it as ‘being in the zone’” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997, p. 29). The flow experience expands an individual’s goal and interest structure and the skills relevant to an existing interest (Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2002). Flow also often involves the anticipation of desired future states which becomes a prolepsis that can be as engaging as actually reaching those states. One good example is the use of pre-event visualization exercises by elite athletes.

Coaches seek to foster the flow state in clients; our hypothesis is that flow is co-created within the relational dynamic when certain conditions are present. Our theoretical model offers a structure to identify and study those conditions and their implications.

Exhibit 2: Finding Flow (adapted from Csikszentmihalyi, 1997)



Csikszentmihalyi (2000) initially portrayed flow as a “channel” that represents an optimal balance between one’s perceived abilities and the perceived challenge at a high enough level to avoid both boredom (too much skill for the challenge) and anxiety (too much challenge for the skill). In flow, as represented by a later diagram similar to the example in Exhibit 2, an individual is engaged in a challenging situation that requires fully engaging and stretching one’s skills at a high level in response. It enables a person to paradoxically be engaged fully in the experience for itself and yet achieve optimal outcomes.

The relational dynamic in coaching offers cues for the coach in deciding what action to take next. Sometimes these cues are explicitly stated; other times they are intuitively inferred: Is the client in control, but not yet in flow? Then perhaps the dance needs to become more challenging. Is the client aroused, but not yet in flow? Then perhaps the dancers need to become more competent or aware.

So what are the characteristics of a flow experience? They include: clear proximal goals, decisiveness, merger of action and awareness, complete (yet effortless) concentration, sense of control, loss of self-

consciousness, altered sense of time, immediate feedback, and an autotelic emphasis (Csikszentmihalyi, 1993; Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2002). Flow research has historically emphasized the dynamic system composed of the person and his or her environment, as well as the phenomenology of person-environment interactions (Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2002). As flow states unfold, what happens in any moment is a response to what happened immediately before, rather than being dictated by a preexisting intentional structure in the person or the environment (Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2002).

This is where our concept of the intuitive dance as relational flow goes beyond Csikszentmihalyi's model. Whereas Csikszentmihalyi writes of finding flow in primarily individual terms, the intuitive dance builds more on his notion of shared flow to suggest that relational flow is a co-created experience emerging from the relational dynamic of the coaching conversation. When the coach and the client are fully challenged at a high level of skill and awareness in a co-creative partnership, relational flow is generated and the potential for clients to make desired changes is enhanced. In fact, both coach and client are often changed by the intuitive dance and move forward developmentally as a result.

A second difference between flow and relational flow is that the former focuses on the autotelic nature of the experience as an end to itself whereas the latter is embedded within a coaching partnership in which outcomes are anticipated and expected.

What are the conditions that foster relational flow and hence contribute to it as a theoretical model? The first condition is a coach who has developed professional mastery. Second, the client needs to be ready to change and able to step into flow with the coach. Third, both coach and client need to have a high level of emotional intelligence and relational competence to be able to use the conversations, the partnership, and the field or "third area" (Schwartz-Salant, 1986, 1998; Drake, 2005) created in their sessions. Hence, we propose that these four theories contribute to relational flow in coaching as represented in our theoretical model.

Reflective Practitioner

How is it that some coaches are able to enter into relational flow with their clients more easily and often than others? One of the key variables is the coach's level of professional mastery. Relational flow is predicated on the coach's mastery of the core competencies of coaching and the resulting ability to reflect in action by engaging in a continual process of rapid feedback and adjustment (Jackson, 2004). Research into mastery in coaching is important because experts work with knowledge differently than do novices. A master is a professional who is less tied to explicit rules, processes, and contextual cues in order to know how to act effectively — and yet does so with less effort. Experts are able to use the limited capacity of working memory to greater advantage than can novices, who must draw on it regularly to navigate client situations.

Experts do this by using their long-term memory schemata as the basis for the representation and resolution of problems. Through experience, and the deeper and broader knowledge that is then possible, experts direct their attention to the features of the case that are most associated with the problem diagnosis and therefore can quickly narrow the problem space (Clark, 1999). We hypothesize that this, in part, is what enables a coach to tune out distractions and consciously or unconsciously tune into the coaching moment in ways that can lead to the intuitive dance.

In Schön's (1983) research on reflective practice, mastery can be seen as the ability to draw on one's experience and expertise to recognize patterns, discern any incongruities between the pattern and the situation, reflect on what is discovered, and develop a new pattern of response to address the needs at hand. When we reflect, we shift from pattern thinking to meta-cognitive awareness. It may be that this level of awareness is tied to the presence of relational flow and the transcendence of the initial patterns brought to coaching conversations by both clients and coaches. Patterns give way, through reflective listening, to "not in pattern," which make possible new patterns. When a coach and client enter into relational flow it can be seen as crossing a threshold beyond the patterns with which they began (Drake, 2005), a process often marked with both risk and exhilaration. In keeping within Exhibit 2, we propose

that reflective practice exemplifies the process of managing and developing one's intrapersonal state in relation with one's actions and environment.

Reflective practice contributes to relational flow as a way to describe how coaches move between thinking and non-thinking, analysis and reflection. Masterful practitioners have learned to do this with greater ease as they move between the patterns they recognize and the emergent needs of the moment in order to create and sustain relational flow with their clients. This is much like the use of intuition by a chess master. Years of practice culminate in actions which appear to be effortless playing. As Daniel Kahneman (2002) notices, however, intuition as used by a master chess player and a new pupil are not the same thing. We suggest that it is for masterful coaches who are able to engage in continual cycles of feedback and adaptation.

Readiness to Change

Prochaska's (1995) trans-theoretical model defines a set of building blocks necessary for lasting change in behavior and self-concept. We propose that four of these building blocks for change contribute to a client's ability to engage in relational flow and a coach's ability to co-create this dance. Mastery in coaching requires an ability to assess clients' readiness and effectively apply the appropriate strategies to help them move forward. Relational flow may be both an outcome of and a contributor to the increased presence of these characteristics in the coaching relationship. It is striking to note that they bear a strong resemblance to Csikszentmihalyi's (1990, 1993, 1997) notion of the autotelic self. The four building blocks are:

1. *Raised Consciousness*: Awareness of the good and bad consequences of both the status quo and future possibilities, including change in goals, mental models, behavior, relationships, and self-image.
2. *Self-Awareness*: Conscious recognition of one's own patterns, strengths, weaknesses, and deepest desires including the desire to increase self-awareness.
3. *Self-Reevaluation*: An attitude of welcoming and enjoying curious and empathic inquiry and reflections on current situations and future potential.
4. *Emotional Arousal*: Access to the emotional energy which sparks motivation and supports resolve.

This theory offers a way to help clients assess their own intrapersonal state in terms of their ability to actually make the changes they desire and declare. An effective coaching partnership incorporates these building blocks of change as they are needed in response to the client's readiness for change. Masterful coaches ask themselves, "What does my client need most right now?" It may be that moments of relational flow signal and facilitate a shift in a client's development or self-concept and in their ability to make sustainable change.

Emotional Intelligence

Relational flow demands a high level of emotional awareness from both the coach and the client. Emotional intelligence, the signature work of Daniel Goleman (1995, 1998), provides an excellent framework for understanding and developing this awareness. It refers to the capacity for "recognizing our own feelings and those of others, for motivating ourselves, and for managing emotions well in ourselves and in our relationships" (Goleman, 1998, p. 317).

Goleman's work has identified five basic emotional and social competencies for emotional intelligence: self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skills. Goleman's study of emotional intelligence also recognizes intuition as a form of intelligence suitable for study. Moreover, Goleman contributes to the study of the intuitive dance in human relationships. Those who have low emotional intelligence rarely do the intuitive dance or experience relational flow. How do we increase our emotional intelligence? Goleman describes a 14-step process including assessment, communication, motivation, goal-setting, feedback, practice, support, emulation, environmental modification, and reinforcement.

This process reflects the best practices in coaching, as Goleman (1998) himself acknowledges when he notes that coaching is an increasingly common strategy to boost emotional competence. Emotional intelligence aligns with our theoretical model in providing language and a body of work about the inner abilities of coaches and clients to manage their interpersonal relations in coaching such that moments of relational flow are possible.

Relational Competence

The interpersonal nature of the intuitive dance suggests that a developmental theory about relationships would contribute to our theoretical model. Coaches and clients who are skilled at using relationships to support growth and change will be better intuitive dancers. Relational Cultural Theory (Jordan, et al, 2004, Walker, & Rosen, 2004) is predicated on the belief that people grow through and toward connection and not (just) separation. There is a mutual empathy and overall relational competence that is therefore necessary to support other people's development through and in relationships.

The five qualities of growth-promoting relationships and relational competence from this theory align well with our understanding of relational flow:

1. *Zest*: In connection, each person feels more vitality and can dance energetically.
2. *Action*: In connection, each person feels more able to act, both within the relationship and beyond it. That occurs both in the here and now interplay of coaching and afterwards, as clients and coaches alike feel more empowered in the world.
3. *Knowledge*: In connection, each person expands awareness of both themselves and the other. The picture is clearer, more objective, and more fully articulated, particularly as the context of connection decreases judgmental attitudes.
4. *Sense of Worth*: In connection, each person feels a greater sense of worth due to the genuine responsiveness of the other as seen in listening and recognition.
5. *Motivation for More Connections*: Being in connection with one party motivates a desire to be fully and deeply connected with others as it instills relational optimism and efficacy.

This body of work speaks to the outer dynamics involved in navigating interpersonal relations in coaching and provides some initial insights into the nature of what masterful coaches do when they move into relational flow with their clients. This process is often aided in coaching by attention to developing a client's skills at moving out of habitual patterns to engage in the present moment more fully and ably.

Next Steps

We have provided an initial theoretical model for the intuitive dance, which we call *relational flow*. This is the first step in a theory-building process intended to add to the knowledge base for coaching as a profession and field of study as well as inform those who seek mastery in the art of coaching. We will pursue an iterative process based on feedback and collaboration with other practitioners and researchers to further the development of the relational flow model and its theoretical foundation. Possible next steps include refining our understanding of the nature and characteristics of relational flow by testing the model against demonstrations of the intuitive dance by masterful coaches. Other elements of validating a theoretical model include, "interpreting new data, responding to new problems, defining applied problems, evaluating solutions, discerning priorities, identifying new research directions, developing common language and defining boundaries, and guiding and informing research" (Torraco as cited in Lynham1997).

As our theory stabilizes, additional research projects can be conducted, for example:

- a) *Outcome studies* to assess the degree to which increased relational flow leads to better and/or expedited outcomes for clients.

- b) *Mastery and skills-building studies* to define and test the characteristics of relational flow and measure both their use and their relationship to client change.
- c) *Professional development studies* that compare various approaches to developing coaches in terms of the skills needed to move into relational flow.
- d) *Phenomenological studies* to understand the experiences of coaches and clients just before, during, and after periods of relational flow.
- e) *Qualitative studies* to understand what contributes to the emergence of moments of intuitive dancing and what impedes them from happening.
- f) *Quantitative studies* including the development and testing of statistical assessment tools for measuring and evaluating the intuitive dance and its coaching outcomes
- g) *Narrative studies* to explore how coaches and clients narrate the experience of relational flow and what happens with their stories and self-concepts as a result.
- h) *Discourse analysis studies* to examine the role and use of language in periods of relational flow and the transitions in and out of this state.

Conclusions

In conclusion, relational flow is an important theoretical model for coaching that is worthy of further refinement and research. Bringing together five different yet overlapping theories and bodies of work (Flow, Reflective Practitioner, Readiness to Change, Emotional Intelligence, and Relational Competence) enables scholars to more holistically study the intuitive dance as the basis for masterful coaching and as part of an academic foundation for the coaching profession. We believe that relational flow as a theoretical model makes an important contribution to our field as a description of what happens in masterful coaching, and it has the potential to enhance the understanding of how masterful coaching facilitates client growth and change.

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