Hacking Flow: How to Make Outperformance a Habit with Steven Kotler

By Mark Bidwell
Welcome to The Innovation Ecosystem podcast. This is Mark Bidwell. With me today is Steven Kotler who is a New York Times bestselling author, an award-winning journalist, and an entrepreneur, and his books include Abundance and Bold, both of which he co-wrote with Peter Diamandis; The Rise of Superman; and most recently Stealing Fire which he co-authored with Jamie Wheal. So, welcome to the show, Steve.

Thanks for having me, Mark. Good to be with you.

So I remember reading The Rise of Superman with the subtitle, 'Decoding the Science of Human Performance' while I was leading a business unit at Syngenta several years ago and I remember thinking, 'How can I take these strategies and these hacks and apply them in the workplace?', and then three years later you must have been reading my mind because you published Stealing Fire, which gives lots of practical tools for people to bring these kinds of things into the workplace. So can we start by exploring this topic of flow. Maybe for guests who don’t know what it means, can you explain what it is and perhaps a little bit about the back story of how did you get interested in this subject?

It’s a great place to start. So why don’t I just start with the back story and kind of walk you into how I came in. I started out my career as a journalist and this was in the early 1990’s and back then action sports - surfing, skiing, rock climbing and the like - were really hot topics, and Gravity Games was just starting to happen, The X Games, and if you could write and ski, and write and surf, or write and rock climb, there was work, and I couldn’t do any of these things very well but I needed the work. So I lied to my editors and I got to spend the better portion of a decade kind of chasing top athletes, professional athletes around mountains and across oceans, and if you’re not a professional athlete and you spend a lot of time chasing professional athletes around the world, you end up breaking a lot of bones, and I broke a ton of bones. And what would happen, I’d be hanging out, I’d snap this or that, and I’d have to take 3 to 5 months off, and when I came back the progress I saw was amazing, it was astounding, it didn’t make any sense, it was leaps and bounds kind of stuff. Stuff that was absolutely impossible discussed like, ‘it’ll never happen’, 4 months before I broke something - I come back and not only was it being done, it was being iterated upon.

This is the so-called Roger Bannister Effect essentially, right?

Well, it wasn’t the Roger Bannister Effect at that time. At that time it was – the examples I like to give are snowboarding. In 1992, when I started covering snowboarding, the biggest gap jump that anybody had ever cleared was 40ft and then in 1996 - excuse me - 40ft end to end, and that’s huge! It’s two double decker buses or two buses stacked end to end. Within 10 years they were clearing gaps that were 260ft long.

Jeeso.

They went through jumping over a house, or a couple of buses, to a skyscraper. Surfing is this 1000-year-old sport and from 488 to 1996 the biggest wave anybody had ever surfed was 25ft. There are physics papers written about how it’s impossible to surf a wave bigger than that. Today surfers are pushing to waves over 100ft tall. So this was the kind of progress I was seeing and it didn’t make any sense and for a lot of reasons. I mean, action sports...
athletes, especially in the early 90’s, was a punk rock irreverent crowd. These were not extremely well-educated people; they were not well off as a general rule. A lot of the people I knew came from broken homes and had really difficult childhoods and here they were on a regular basis pushing the limits of human possibility and my question was, 'What the hell is going on? Where is this coming from? And how are they managing to do the impossible?' I ended up breaking, believe it or not by the time I was done, 82 bones, and it was very clear to me on my way at that point that I was obsessed with this question but I also was going to have to do something else for a living because I was going to kill myself if I kept going. So I just basically took my question to every domain imaginable and from maverick entrepreneurs and businessmen doing amazing things like the guys we wrote about in Bold and Abundance, Richard Branson, Jeff Bezos, Elon Musk, that kind of thing, looked at the military, looked at top creatives, looked everywhere, and what I discovered is, it doesn’t really matter where you look, in every domain all commitment and performance has the same signature and it’s a state of consciousness known to researchers as flow, which is where you started, that was your first question. Now flow, it technically is defined as an optimal state of consciousness, a state of consciousness where we feel our best and we perform our best. Your listeners, our listeners, they may know it as runner’s high, or being in the zone, or being unconscious, but it refers to those moments of rapt attention and total absorption where you get so focused on the task at hand that everything else disappears, action awareness will start to merge, your sense of self will start to vanish, time will pass, frames, it’ll slow down, you’ll get that freeze frame familiar to anybody who’s been in a car crash, sometimes it speeds up, 5 hours will pass by like 5 seconds and throughout all aspects of performance both mental and physical go through the roof. So that’s sort of where it started for me and where the definition comes from. It started with that simple question which is, how the hell these people keep doing the impossible.

What’s interesting is the techniques and the results are beginning to appear in the workplace. So you touched on this McKinsey study which I think you wrote in a Harvard Business Review article about the VUCA world that we’re all living in which people running businesses are increasingly recognizing characterizes, 24/7, their lives, right? The volatility, the complexity, the ambiguity. So, how is this beginning to show up in the workforce?

Well, you need to understand just a tiny bit about what flow does to the brain and that’ll tell you why it’s so important. So when we move into this state, all of the brain’s information processing machinery gets massively ramped up so we take in more data per second so data acquisition goes up. We pay more attention to that data so salience goes up. We find faster connections between that incoming data and older ideas so pattern recognition goes up, and then we find more connections between those older ideas and really remote disparate forgotten memories and thoughts and those kinds of things. What this means is the state, among its many other attributes, surrounds, essentially, the creative problem-solving process, especially when it – and it’s especially good for solving very complex problems. Creativity research done all over the place shows that flow can amp up creativity by 200% to 500%. It’s a huge spike. And Teresa Amabile at Harvard figured out that heightened creativity outlasted the flow state by a day, maybe two, and seems to suggest that we don’t know for sure that flow actually trains the brain to think more creatively over time. So if you want to know why it matters so much in the workplace, it is, if you go for a look at a list of 21st century skills, those skills we need to thrive in today’s world in business, the top of everybody’s list is creative problem solving, heightened creative problem solving. So the main skill we need in the world right now is one of those that flow really, really, really laps up.

So for the individuals listening, for the individual, what I call ‘intrapreneurs’ listening at the moment, these are people sitting in large organizations trying to creatively solve problems, let’s get into what can they do to actually access this, because I think in The Rise of Superman you talked about for instance external triggers and internal triggers. Can you just unpack a couple of things that they can do?

Yeah so what we know now over the past decade is we – neuroscience has advanced so much that we can now kind of peer into the brain, we can look under the hood at flow and for the very first time we can see where this state is coming from and why it’s showing up, and one of the things that we’ve learned, and this is a lot of the research that my organization, flow Genome Project, has tried to spearhead – we’ve figured out that flow states have triggers, preconditions that lead to more flow, and there are twenty of these in total and ten of them lead to individual flow, right? You and me - you know, me falling into a flow state when I’m writing say, or in those ten that produce group flow, which is a team coming together for the first time and when – we’ve all experienced group flow and great brainstorming sessions when the ideas are just bouncing around, flying and they’re really productive or when you see a phenomenal 4th quarter comeback in football – the Super Bowl this last year with the Patriots in the 4th quarter, that’s a great example of group flow - and the thing to know about these triggers, first thing is that flow follows focus. It is a state of absolute uninterrupted concentration and all your attention is in the right here, right now, so underneath all these triggers what they all sort of do is they drive attention in the present moment. They focus attention on the right here, right now. If you wanted to put it more formally, you’d say these are twenty of the things that evolution shaped our brain to pay a tremendous amount of attention to. So when we go into organizations, the Flow Genome Project works with organizations, one of the first things that we do is we tell people if you can’t hang a sign on your door that says, ‘Fuck off, I’m flow’, you’re kind of sunk, and the reason is, flow demands uninterrupted concentration and the trouble with the modern world is it’s - we have amazing communication technology and massive distraction as a result so you’ve got to be able to shut your office door, turn off your devices, not answer your email, not look at your phone, no Facebook, no Twitter. The very first thing you need to do is long periods of uninterrupted concentration and what the research actually shows if you’re really
interested in maximizing flow, you need periods of 90-120 minutes. And take it one step further, and this is stuff that Tim Ferriss has said a lot and I really, I see it in my own life, I see it in people I know and I think it’s very true, if you’re really doing CEO level thinking and you really have to solve hard, wicked, modern creative problems, you’re going to, you know - 90 minutes is great, 120 minutes is great, but there’s going to be a couple times a week when you’ve got to block for 4-5 hours for just uninterrupted concentration and rumination to really work through that stuff and really kind of milk the flow for what it’s worth.

And this, I think, in some of the language you use, is this struggle period, then there’s a release period, then there’s a flow period, then there’s a recovery period right?

So one of the things that we learned, we used to believe that flow was binary, right? You were in the zone or you weren’t. We now know it’s a four stage cycle and there are different kinds of neurobiological changes under each part in the cycle and you have to move through one to get to the next, to get to the next, to get to the next, and you’re absolutely correct, the first stage in the flow cycle is known as struggle, and this is a loading phase. One of the things that happen in flow is, when we learn, what we’re trying to do is, we’re trying to take information from the conscious mind and put it into the subconscious, turn it into chunks of data that are easily retrievable by the adaptive unconscious. When you get enough of these chunks coming together all at once, suddenly you have a new skill, that’s skill acquisition basically from a brain perspective. flow is what happens when all those skills come together for the first time. For that gap, you’ve got to train up those skills, right? So for an athlete, this is learning to keep your eye on the ball. For me, as a writer, this could be the early research phase, right, when I’m reading hundreds of articles and doing hundreds of interviews and all that sort of stuff and wrestling over structure. The thing that’s important to know here is that frustration is actually built into the struggle phase. Most people kind of bump into frustration and think it’s a sign they’re going in the wrong direction and one of the things you learn when you study high performances are, emotions don’t always mean what we think they mean and if you’re doing this or if you’re interested in producing flow, that frustration is a sign you’re actually going in the right direction. It means that your working memory, which is a very limited resource of what you can think about consciously at once, is sort of overloaded at this point and that is the point you want to get to, and then the second stage of the cycle is known as release, so then you literally want to take your mind off the problem and that literally means to totally forget about what you’re doing. The research shows that low-grade physical exercise works best. You don’t want to exhaust yourself, this isn’t time to go sprinting but a long walk is good. Albert Einstein famously used to sail a boat into the middle of Lake Geneva and stare at the clouds, that was his thing, and the funny thing about Einstein, by the way, most people don’t know this story, he was a terrible sailor but unbelievably fearless so he would sail out into the middle of these incoming crazy storms without noticing it, get totally stranded having his flow session out there and have to get rescued. It happened all the time.

And just so I’m clear, this struggle - when you say the two hours of deep work I guess is the language some people use, is that the struggle phase or is that the flow phase that comes from release?

Yeah so you have to understand – they’re two separate things, right? That McKinsey study, let’s just back up for a second, the McKinsey study found that top executives are 500% more productive in flow. That’s a massive boost to productivity. So what you want to try to do is maximize the amount of flow in your life, right? If you really, really, really want to take advantage of the heightened creativity, the boost in motivation, all that stuff, you want to maximize the amount of flow in your life. To maximize it you need some cognitive literacy, you need to understand how the state works. It has triggers and it has stages. The first stage is the struggle phase then there’s a release phase and then after you’ve taken your mind off the problem and let your subconscious chew on it for a while, then you start to apply some of flow’s triggers. Now as you pointed out when we started this there are, you said, there were external triggers and internal triggers and you were talking specifically about the individual triggers, they kind of double up. So let me just give you a really great example of one of those triggers. Uninterrupted concentration we talked about - so when you’re trying to move back into flow, you’ve got through the struggle phase, you’ve gone for a long walk, gotten a night’s sleep, whatever, you wake up the next day, you go back to work, you sit down, you hang a sign on your door that says ‘Do Not Disturb’ and you dive into whatever you’re trying to do for an hour or so, that’s when you want to start having some of the triggers to apply, and for example, and again these triggers are things that help us focus our attention in the present moment, so let me give you a classic example here, one of flow’s internal triggers, one of its psychological triggers, and this was discovered by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi who was sort of the godfather of flow psychology back in the 70’s when he was chairing the University of Chicago Psychology Department, he discovered something called ‘the Challenge-Skill balance’ and this is the idea that we pay the most attention to the present, what we’re doing right here, right now when the challenge, the task at hand, what we’re trying to do, slightly exceeds our skill set. You want to stretch but not snap. So if I were to say this emotionally, flow shows up most when our attention, when the task at hand emotionally sits between boredom, not enough stimulation or paying attention, and anxiety which is way too much stimulation. In-between is this sweet spot. Now here’s what top executives tend to miss about this one. So for people who are a little less, let’s say enthusiastic about what they’re doing, this sweet spot is tricky because you’re pushing yourself outside your comfort zone and if you’re not really a fired-up go-getter, you’re not going to be happy. People don’t like being outside their comfort zone and they retreat quickly. For top executives they tend to go in the other direction, they tend to bite off challenges that are so much bigger than their skill sets just by force a habit that they lock themselves out of flow by taking on too much at once and so one of the things we’re always telling people is, in this
state - so that if you have to go slow to go fast - you take slightly lesser challenges and you work your way up, you chunk them down, chunking your goals, having really clear goals like, 'What am I doing right now? What am I doing in the next instant?' is really important because again we don’t have to wonder, we don’t have to think about, ‘What do I have to do next? Oh I have to check my to-do list’, we just kind of know, one thing going to the other, we have very clear goals. Those are the things you can start applying after you’ve gone through the release phase, you’re trying to get into flow, going back to the task at hand. Does that make sense?

Yeah absolutely. So what I’m curious about, you mentioned Tim Ferriss earlier on, in his latest book I think he summarizes what are the common behaviors of a number of his folks, and meditation keeps on coming up as an individual practice that characterizes like 80% of his billionaires, now so I’m interested in, what are the individual practices of these execs who are able to get into flow? I mean beyond meditation which I guess is part of it but what else are they doing that really helps them access this hyper performance in a systematic way almost?

Alright. So let’s talk about it with three different kinds of organizations and we’ll go small, medium, large, OK? So Patagonia often tops lists in America of best places to work, socially conscious company, everybody loves it, very successful obviously, and there are basically two rules at Patagonia among when they do business and both are designed to trigger flow. The first is autonomy, so when you are master of your own ship, you pay more attention to the stuff you’re doing, you care more about it, it helps focus attention, so they let employees make their own hours. They also - Yvon Chouinard, their founder, built their corporate headquarters right on the Pacific Ocean and there’s one rule at Patagonia which is directly from the top which is Let My People Go Surfing.

The name of his book, right?

Yes, and surfing for a variety of reasons is essentially packed with flow triggers. They’re everywhere in the sport, it’s a huge trigger of flow and his feeling is, ‘Sure!’ And when I say ‘let my people go surfing’ – and I was just talking to a Patagonia employee about this a couple months ago - you can walk out of a business meeting. Your boss could be yelling at you in a meeting and you can walk out and go surfing and come back and have your job and be totally fine and it’s totally OK, and the reason is simple. If you take 2-3 hours and go surfing, whatever, and you come back and you’re 500% more productive, you can get more done in an afternoon than most people can in a week. So that’s a small example. They’ve taken two flow triggers; surfing, allowing employees access to a high flow environment, and autonomy, integrated into their organisation. The result is people love working there and it’s a very successful company. So that’s small. If you wanted to go to go to medium - so a bunch of years ago Csikszentmihalyi and another researcher went looking for the highest flow environments they could find that weren’t in action sports environments, and one of the things they found was in Montessori education, and Montessori education is built on a number of foundational principles, a lot of them are flow triggers. First, 90-120 minutes of uninterrupted concentration, that’s how the kids learn in self-directed blocks of 90-120 minutes. So you’ve got autonomy, they get to choose what they study, they’re going to study for 90-120 minutes, you’ve got periods of focused attention, so another of flow’s really important triggers is known as deep embodiment. It’s a fancy way of saying you’re paying attention to multiple sensory streams at once, so what this really means is learning through doing. So at Montessori education it’s, ‘don’t just read about the windmill, go out and feel it’ so you engage your hands, your eyes, your ears, they often call Montessori education ‘embodied education’ for this reason, but all this stuff drives students into flow. Now one of the things that we know about flow, and this is researched done by the U.S. military is there’s a big spike in neurochemicals and the more neurochemicals that show up during experience, the better chance that experience will move for short term holding to long-term storage, so flow spikes learning by 470%. Huge massive spike, it can literally cut the path to mastery in half as a result, that’s why I was seeing in action sports so much progress so quickly. It wasn’t the Bannister Effect it was that, those explanations. So Montessori does all these things together and students, pretty much any test you give them from social intelligence, emotional intelligence through academic skills tests, they outperform pretty much every other student in the world and it’s because they’re spending so much time in flow and learning rates are so spiked when they’re in this state, and then if you want to go all the way to maximum, you get to what athletes do where they build their lives around these triggers, or organizationally - in Stealing Fire, my new book, we opened it with time we spent with the U.S. Navy SEALs. Navy SEALs - let’s talk about this monetarily because it’s just easier to put in perspective. It’s very expensive to get to SEAL Team Six, Dev Group is what they call it. It is the top of the SEALs, right? It costs about $3.5 million dollars per soldier to train somebody up to that level, very expensive, and if you break down what they’re spending their money on, what you’re going to find is that of that $3.5 million, according to the SEALs, a good half of it if not more is spent training the soldiers how to drop into a group flow, and how to drop into flow because it’s fundamental if you want a tightly moving, collaborative, cooperative team that’s highly creative and super spontaneous which is what small groups of soldiers need to be in modern urban warfare, you need to build it into everything, so literally it’s what the SEALs do. Once you get past a physical fitness in a certain level of skills acquisition almost everything we think of SEAL training is actually teaching these guys and screening for people who can drop into flow nearly on command.

And if we look from a corporate angle for a moment, we talked about Patagonia there which is a private company but as you say, very successful. What about, I think you mentioned when we spoke the other day, about Nike doing some pretty interesting stuff, Google comes up a couple of times as well, are there any

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companies that are really tapping into these technologies to really solve some of the wicked problems that they’re facing around innovation, around creativity?

Well, so you know The Flow Genome Project, we work with everybody from Fortune 100 companies like Google and Facebook, all the way through Wall Street firms and what we’re seeing across the board everywhere is that the top performing organizations are absolutely bringing more and more and more flow into the workplace basically at every level you could possibly imagine and a simple example, 44% of American companies are going to roll out a mindfulness-based training program right now so flow follows focus. It’s different than meditation, it’s a different state, the trance state you get into in meditation is not flow, because it is focused training in the present moment, it’s a phenomenal practice, plus any company that’s rolling out a mindfulness program is doing this already so we’re seeing that’s kind of the simplest, most widespread business example that I can give you, but you want to take it to crazy extremes, the firms will go unmentioned but — one of the things that happens in flow is you deactivate the prefrontal cortex, the front part of your brain where a lot of your complex decision making takes place and you basically trade, you turn that process over to your unconscious which is faster, has a wider kind of database to work from and has a lot of advantages from an information processing standpoint and one of the ways you can do this automatically is with transcranial magnetic stimulation. You can shoot a weak magnetic pulse at the prefrontal cortex and if you know what you’re doing you could induce a 20-40 minute temporary artificial flow state. It’s not a full blown flow state, it’s missing some of the neurochemistry but it will get you a good way there and I know a good number of Wall Street traders who are doing this and then getting out to the trading floor because they make better decisions.

So someone listening to this show at the moment, there are some devices out on the market now which I think are approved by F.D.A. and stuff which enable you to do that, right?

No, no. OK, so to go back to Tim Ferriss once, I was giving a lecture on this at Summit in Powder Mountain and Tim was in the audience and he asked the question afterwards and we were talking about this technique and he pointed out, ‘Look, I’ve tried this at home’, and you can do it with a 9 volt battery in some Radio Shack here but if you do it wrong you’re going to make yourself stupid for a good little while, and so in fact what the research consistently shows, Mark, is that it’s an extremely effective technique but it’s very, very individual so you actually need a really skilled operator to figure out exactly which portions of the prefrontal cortex you want to knock out and it’s very individual. The researchers is amazingly exciting and getting very precise and I do think at some point in the next 5 years, especially with neuroscience becoming an exponential growth curve as it is, I think we’ll start to see these at home devices but for right now there’s the old fashioned way which is building your career around flow triggers, and by the way if people are really wondering how to do this on the business side we don’t have to linger here but if you go to my website, if you go to www.stevenkotler.com, you can download right there on the landing page, I think it’s the bottom of the page, a free PDF that breaks down seventeen, a breakdown of all the triggers basically and shows you how to apply them in the big — and sort of bridge the gap from the action sports world into the business world saying, ‘This is what these guys are doing, this is what you can do.’

Super, super, and then finally before we move on, when you’re working with leaders through your work, corporate leaders, are there certain things that some people do that are just getting in the way of getting into flow states? So let’s look at it from the other angle, what are the things you’ve got to absolutely avoid doing at all costs if you want to increase the likelihood of getting into this flow state as a leader versus an individual?

Interesting. So one thing I want to point out, this isn’t Stealing Fire, it’s really wild research but it was done at the Esade School of Business, they were looking — you can use biometric signals to predict which leaders are going to be able to get themselves into flow interestingly and what they also discovered in this research study is that leaders who can get themselves into flow end up training their whole teams into flow. So it really, sort of, emphasizes how important this is for leaders, that they have to get good at this stuff. OK here’s the thing, it’s an error leaders often make which is it goes back to the flow cycles. So on the back end of the flow cycle, first stage - loading phase, second stage – release, third stage is the flow state itself, and in the back end of the flow state there’s a recovery period, so a refractory period and you need to rest, so this means two things for leaders. One: so many, many top executives that I know don’t get enough sleep. One of the first things we do when we go to work with a company is we put everybody in some kind of a sleep monitoring device. Sleep hygiene is so critical, this is a high energy state, you have to get your 7.5 hours a night to really be able to maximize it. This also means active recovery. I try to end every day with meditation in an infrared sauna, breath work in a sauna to really calm my nervous system down, help me reset, real active recovery to get a full night’s sleep. That’s critical. On the flip side, here’s something else I see leaders screw up on, don’t delve - say you’re running a sales department and you’ve got one sales team that had an amazing quarter, the group gelled, came together, basically what happened is they got into a lot of flow states and they burst past their quotas, amazing results, and what happens all the time is the work cycle is so short and we were so focused on the now that people come through this, they’ve done amazing work for you, and leaders will often turn to the people and go, ‘That’s amazing, that’s fantastic, that’s wonderful, you kick ass. Why don’t you do it again in maybe half the time and we’ll double your quotas, how’s that? Bigger challenge. Go.’ And they don’t give - that might be fine by the way — but they need time to recover. You can do that but you have to say, ‘Look, two weeks off, take it down, feed your brain, get plenty of sleep, whatever, and then jump in.’
cannot - even though our work cycles are so short and intense, you have to understand that there's a natural cycle here - you can't fight your biology and I think the same thing with sleep. Where I actually see leaders go wrong often is they try to fight their biology and one of the things that we argue for in Stealing Fire, and it's in The Rise of Superman but it's really in Stealing Fire, is what we call cognitive literacy. Understand that high performance in a lot of cases involves states of consciousness. We think it involves skill acquisition, it actually involves being able to tune your state of consciousness accordingly and you need to understand a little bit, not a lot but a little bit, about how your brain and your body work to be able to do this reliably and not screw up like this. Let me put it and bring it full circle. Earlier I talked about the Challenge-Skill balance, right? That sweet spot? A number of years ago Csikszentmihalyi and Google mathematician, sat down and they were like, 'What's the actual ratio? The difference between challenge and skills?' and they took a stab at it on the back of the envelope and they came up with 4%. A 4% gradient difference between your challenge and your skills. So the challenge has to be 4% greater than your skill set. That, by the way, a totally arbitrary number that we then took into the flow Genome Project and other experiments for a couple of years and actually find it very accurate. So we like it and so we use it and the thing about when you turn to your employees and say, 'OK, no recovery time and double your quotas', you're kicking - it's too big of a challenge - you're kicking them out of that sweet spot so what's going to happen is they're going to get stuck in struggle. And by the way, flow, because it hacks all these feel-good neurochemicals, it's very addictive, so you had a high flow, sold a lot of stuff, hit your quotas, felt really great along the way and then suddenly the boss massively ups the challenge, locks you out of flow because it's past that 4% sweet spot by 20% and you haven't been allowed to recover, you're suddenly not getting anymore feel-good neurochemistry and that frustration is going to mount and mount and mount, you get stuck in struggle and if you want to talk about a dejected workforce, you want to know why 83% of American workers are disengaged on the job, a lot of it is because their leaders are not tuning the Challenge-Skill sweet spot. Their jobs are either too boring or too hard. Employees don't have enough autonomy to steer for themselves so hopefully in all this you can start to see that this isn't a lot of voodoo in terms of, 'Yeah you can use transcranial magnetic stimulation', some of it is just, in a sense, a little bit of practical common sense in understanding how your brain and your body works - what's the sweet spot for ultimate performance and how do you tune a workforce and yourself to that sweet spot? Does that make sense?

No, absolutely. One of the big things that struck me here is that you talk about autonomy. I had a previous guest, it was the biographer of Berkshire Hathaway of Warren Buffett’s companies, not of him but of his businesses, right?

Oh that must have been fascinating.

Fascinating, and what was really interesting is when the guy set off on the book he spoke to Charlie Munger, his business partner, Warren Buffett’s business partner, and he said, ‘Pay attention to the connection between performance - business performance - and autonomy’, and this guy, who is a Professor of Law, I think, at New York State University, he actually dug into that and one of his big findings was the way Buffett runs these businesses. Autonomy is the number one priority, it’s at the top of the – he gives all his CEO’s complete autonomy to run the business as they choose.

It’s Dan Pink’s finding, right? And Dan Pink writes, ‘Intrinsic motivation, you need autonomy, mastery, and purpose.’ All three, by the way, are flow triggers. Purpose, we pay more attention to those things that we believe in, so another thing we see, we talk about it, that we see execs do it wrong. At Singularity University - Peter and I have written about this at Singularity University - they train companies up in this, I train companies up in this, massively transformative purposes. Google wants to organize all the world's information. That's their massively transformative purpose and for those people who hear that and go, 'Oh yeah, that doesn't sound all that transformative to me' you got to remember that before Google came along, the last person who tried that was Alexander the Great when he built The Library of Alexandria. He had to conquer half the world to do it. So yeah, not a small thing to take a big, massively transformative purpose. Why does it matter so much? It focuses attention. We pay more attention to those things that we believe in. Well run companies, companies with visionary leaders, they don’t have mission statements. Who reads a frickin’ mission statement? They have massively transformative purposes.

I know at Syngenta, we talked about this before, at Syngenta the purpose was bringing plant potential to life which drags you through all the crap you have to go through in the day to day course of work but if you can get everyone, all 29,000 people viscerally connected to that purpose you can achieve enormous things.

Yeah, absolutely. You know I'm a big fan of Syngenta. Like I just - cool company and I totally very much agreed with a lot of the stuff you did and I think you got - you're right. Peter and I talk about this a lot in Abundance and Bold, especially in Bold, if you want to really scale up today’s game, you got to sort of tear down the walls of your company, you need to start open sourcing ideas and all that kind of stuff along the way, to do those, to have those kinds of fluid boundaries, when you have that kind of thing you can ignite passion in the workforce, it focuses attention, attracts other people, right, because passion it – you’re going to end up with - I mean, do you want to work for a company that does agribusiness or do you want to work for a company that wants to change the
way we think about plant life forever?

Absolutely. So I’m mindful of time because you’ve got to stop so before I get into the three questions I sent you, I got one other question because I know you’re a keen downhill mountain biker. My question is, do you find it’s getting easier for you to get into flow state over time, and secondly, are you getting – have you developed more ways of getting access to flow since you’ve been studying this and living this world?

Yeah, for sure, and I get out of it - it’s really funny, I’ll get knocked out of it for a really long time. I mean, I may be great at it and know everything about it but I can get just as locked out but I really try to build my life around flow so almost everything I do is a high flow trigger. Writing itself, creativity, when you link ideas together, pattern recognition, get a little squirt of the feel-good neurochemical dopamine, it’s a focusing chemical, and it will help drive flow. So writing itself and there’s ways I write to trigger more of it and things like that but writing itself is a flow trigger. I run an animal sanctuary with my wife full time, it’s built out of our house, and altruism is another flow trigger known as ‘helper’s high’. Downhill mountain biking, I try to hurl myself down mountains at high speed, so risk is a flow trigger.

Lovely. It’s reassuring for those of us who occasionally fall off the wagon or forget what it feels like but-

You know, for somebody who’s supposed to be best in the world at this - that’s all I’m saying.

Yeah, fair enough. So listen I sent three questions through to you. First one, what have you changed your mind about recently?

What have I changed my mind about recently? I’ll tell you what - so I was talking to a guy, I was talking about a new way of collaborative writing through the Net and he was talking about how there’s this kind of emergent, it came out of, it was called CreepyPasta. Have you ever heard of this?

I haven’t, no.

So it started on Reddit and people would – it was collaboratively written horror stories are where it started, so somebody would post an opening to a horror story on Reddit and somebody else would come along and add a line and they would end up writing these stories. Somebody I was talking to recently is building a company where they’re putting blockchain underneath emergent storytelling like that so every contributor who - we can now collectively write stories and every contributor can get paid for their contribution through cryptocurrencies and I where I got turned is I have been involved in new versions of storytelling in new ways for a long time, I’ve tried, I helped start a company back in the early 90’s that was trying to use biofeedback on exercise devices to steer storytelling on screens. You would run on a treadmill and what your body was doing on the treadmill would help you decide where the story went and it was really impossible to do, and for a really long time, I was like, ‘You know what? Whatever. There are still stories, beginning middle, end. There’s going to be no new forms of storytelling, I don’t see it happening. I just see technology devaluing a lot of writing in the publishing industry’ and whatever, this is the first time I saw something and went, ‘Wow, that’s totally different. People are getting paid for their contribution and it’s a new way of doing this’. That turned me around. That may not be the exact answer to your question but it really did turn me around and something I’ve been thinking about for a long time.

No, there’s no right or wrong answer. Second one, have you got a personal work habit or a practice that you can share with our listeners that really has helped you become more effective? I think you might have covered a couple of these but what’s the one that’s made the difference?

I think the thing that I’m probably most famous for is, I get up at 3:30 am or four in the morning every day and I write till 8 am no matter what.

No matter what.

Yeah. I really believe, really, really fervently believe two things, which is that the secret to - you know all these people who do the impossible they understand that as long as they commit, they’re willing to be a little uncomfortable every day. I’m willing to get up at four o’clock in the morning and be a little tired and I’m going to face the empty page for four hours no matter what else happens and the worst thing that could happen is I’m going
to be uncomfortable, my writing is going to suck, I’m going to be pissed at myself, frustrated, whatever, but I’m just willing to do it over and over and over again and I think that’s consistent with most super successful people I know. They’re just willing to be uncomfortable consistently.

That’s what Tony Robbins says about his very, very cold immersion in very, very cold water every morning because he’s saying to his mind, “I’m not going to let you rule me. I’m going to make these decisions myself” and it’s that level of control that actually yields those results I think.

But it’s not – you’ve got to remember, people think that - they hear that - I was just talking to my assistant actually about this and he’s like, “You know, people hear you say something like you get up at four o’clock in the morning and you write for four hours interrupted every day and they think, ‘I can’t do that, that’s the rest of my life, oh my God!’” and that’s not what I’m saying at all. All I’m saying is I know that tomorrow morning I’m going to get up and I’m going to be willing to be uncomfortable for four hours. That’s how I’m going to start my day, whatever. It’s not - I never go further than that. Clear goals, chunked down. Anyways, that’s my habit.

Got it. Final thing, what’s your most significant sort of failure or low? What did you learn from it and how did you apply that learning?

Well most of my work with flow, even though I told you the story that starts with actions sport, also emerged out of - I spent three years in bed with Lyme disease and I was really, really sick, and out of it came everything that is - I lost the girl I thought I was going to marry, my house, went bankrupt, my dream job, got fired from a job I spent a decade trying to get. All of it went away, right? Three years in bed, whatever, and everything I’ve ever wanted in my life happened because of that. So I don’t even – all of the lows have produced the best highs. I love a good long low sometimes. Get your ass kicked for a couple of years and then you get out and you get to slay the dragon again, that rebirth is kind of invigorating, and if you do it enough times, you start to trust it, you no longer doubt that you can make it back. You’re just like, ‘Oh yeah, this is what I’m going to do now.’

Love it, love it. Reassuring. So where can people get in touch with you?

www.stevenkotler.com If you want to check out the new book, www.stealingfirebook.com For all things flow, www.flowgenomeproject.com And you’ll provide those links I’m guessing?

Yeah, I’ll put them all in and I’ll put some of the other references in. So, Steven, it’s been a real pleasure. I’m very, very pleased we managed to get together. Thanks. This is different from what our audience normally hear that’s why I was so keen to get it on, because I think it’ll be very relevant for them, and next time you’re in Switzerland, look me up, but many thanks for your time.

Mark, I really appreciate it.

I’m just going to say it’s been a great pleasure to have you on the show, Steven. I’m sure our audience enjoyed it as much as I did and many thanks for your time today.

Many thanks for your time, I appreciate it.

We’ll keep in touch, thanks, Steve. Cheerio.

You’re welcome.

Bye.
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