

Nadja Schnetzler
Laurent Burst

COLLABORATION IN FLOW

10 Tried-and-Tested Tools That Allow You
to Successfully Create Flow in Your Team,
Your Projects, and Your Whole Organization



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Nadja Schnetzler • Laurent Burst
Collaboration in Flow

For Inge, Eveline, and Silvia

*and all the people in office organizations who believe
in transformation, who move forward fearlessly and
decisively, and bring everyone along for the journey
with humor.*



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info@gabal-verlag.de; Nadja Schnetzler, Biel/Schweiz, nadja@flow-collaboration.com,
Laurent Burst, Zug/Schweiz, laurent@flow-collaboration.com

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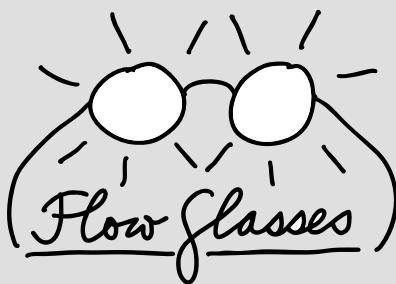
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Part 1

The Essentials of Collaboration in Flow

This book puts a pair of Flow Glasses on your nose. With these Flow Glasses, you'll only see what's relevant for achieving Flow. It doesn't matter whether you're an employee, a member of a club, a start-up founder, a project manager, or a company executive – anyone can put on the Flow Glasses!



Before we begin, a note: Are you someone who doesn't want to read a whole book but just wants to understand the core principle? Like a TLDR: Too long, didn't read? If so, read this chapter and the universal tool «The Flow Question.» It will change your perspective on work and collaboration, giving you a pair of Flow Glasses you can take with you to work starting tomorrow. With the Flow Glasses, you can improve your own Flow, your team's Flow, and ultimately the Flow of the entire organization.

Why, then, is the book considerably longer? Because we have carefully selected the tools that most effectively support Flow in everyday work. These tools are simple, efficient, reliable, and, on top of that, enjoyable. And it's far more effective to use Flow Bringers than to allow yourself to be bogged down by Flow Blockers.»

The Worst Flow Blockers in the Workplace

In most companies and organizations, Flow is constantly blocked, often bringing work and progress toward shared goals nearly to a standstill.

People in organizations, unfortunately, grow accustomed to things not flowing, tasks not moving forward, and to feeling either overwhelmed or completely underutilized in their work.

How Conflicts Stop Flow

When new people join an organization, different work styles often collide unconsciously, leading to conflict. And conflicts completely bring Flow to a halt. These examples of typical workplace situations illustrate this:

- **Example 1:** Zoey's team faces an important milestone. Next week, there will be a presentation that will determine whether the project, on which everyone has been working intensively for two years, will move to the next phase. There is still much to do, but a conflict over the direction for the next stage is paralyzing the team. This conflict is not only stalling the project but also negatively affecting team relationships. Various team members respond differently: Some are insecure and don't dare to contribute fresh ideas, while others are frustrated and let it show. Some even feel they aren't being accepted within the team. The conflict consumes the energy needed to clearly define the next project stage, which would make the presentation even stronger. Zoey has to move forward with a presentation she doesn't fully believe in.

- **Example 2:** Benjamin is new to the team and has brought with him enthusiasm and ideas. He was hired as a recognized expert in his field. His manager is not even aware that she regards many of the ideas he brings up in team meetings as competition and usually blocks them, sometimes with comments like, «You don't have enough experience in the organization yet to understand why we simply can't implement that.» After a few months, Benjamin has stopped suggesting new ideas, which then leads to reprimands: «We hired you to help us innovate, and yet you hardly say a word in meetings.» Benjamin is now unsure what to do.

- **Example 3:** Ella is a pragmatic, creative writer who can quickly produce well-crafted concepts based on input from various people. However, her strength does not lie in meticulous text editing. Her manager, a perfectionist, rarely gets past the first three paragraphs when reading Ella's work. His belief that a perfect text should be expected leads him to try to «train» Ella to perfection, and he also prevents her from working with someone else to edit the texts: «This is the least I should expect from you.» As a result, Ella spends weeks getting the texts to her manager's standards, which leaves her with less time to do what she does best. To her, editing feels like lost and pointless time.

- **Example 4:** Aaron has been a team leader for only a few weeks. Previously, he was never allowed to make decisions and had to ask others about even the smallest of details. Now, he's in a position where he suddenly has to make decisions every day. Feeling overwhelmed, he asks his manager for advice on almost every decision. As a result, he delays and postpones important decisions that the team needs. His team members also often have to wait unnecessarily long before they can finally start their tasks.

- **Example 5:** Fernando is frustrated. To focus, he needs quiet. In his company's open-plan office, he's constantly interrupted and distracted by colleagues. Additionally, he spends more than half his time in meetings. He feels as though he rarely gets to work on a task for more than 10 minutes at a time.

- **Example 6:** Emily opens her email program in her home office and feels like closing her laptop right away: Her manager has assigned her 10 new tasks. All are urgent, and Emily already has four issues she's trying to resolve. She realizes she'll need more time than expected. In the team meeting, she tells her manager and team members that she's over capacity. Her manager responds, «Oh, come on, we're all busy. You can handle it. You just need to prioritize correctly.» Emily is seeking support but instead feels overwhelmed and pressured to somehow juggle everything that's been thrown her way.

- **Example 7:** The team has just received a new assignment via customer service. Various aspects of the task are unclear, so the team members decide to ask Barbara, the account manager, to clarify with the client. Barbara, feeling stressed, saying, «I think the assignment is clear. Just go ahead; I can't bother the client again about this.» The team proceeds with the work despite the lack of clarity and hands the materials over to Barbara a week later for the client. The client contacts Barbara, expressing confusion over several aspects. The outcome: The team must spend significant time making corrections. More than a week has been unnecessarily lost.

Flow Blockers and Their Impact

We have asked hundreds of people in various organizations what brings them Flow at work and what disrupts it. The following list shows the most significant Flow Blockers:

Flow Blockers

- Constant distractions and interruptions
- Postponing and delaying
- Perfectionism
- Lack of clarity and misunderstandings
- Tensions and conflicts
- Fear and insecurity
- Senselessness
- Overload, too much at once
- Revisiting tasks repeatedly
- Non-functional or poorly functioning tools
- «Playing office»

All of these Flow Blockers hinder people who genuinely want to do a good job, causing them significant frustration. Flow Blockers, therefore, have considerable effects on work, people, collaboration, and the entire organization.

- **Constant distractions and interruptions.** This is the *most commonly* mentioned Flow Killer! People constantly interrupted by calls, emails, spontaneous visitors at their desk, or too many meetings cannot focus on tasks that require attention. Noise, constant notifications on mobile devices, and messages on various chat channels are also sources of interruption and distraction, increasing the risk of drifting entirely away from the current task.
- **Postponing and delaying.** This Flow Blocker is usually rooted in insecurity, lack of clarity, or fear. It leads to indecision, pushing tasks

back, involving more people, or initiating further clarifications – all of which can result in delays or even standstills.

- **Perfectionism.** Many people are accustomed to revisiting and refining their work so often that it becomes flawless or guaranteed not to offend anyone. This leads to delays and frustration among others involved. Achieving perfection is extremely time-consuming. It doesn't take much to reach a quality level of 80 percent; however, reaching the final 20 percent usually requires four times as much time as the initial 80 percent, unnecessarily slowing the Flow.
- **Lack of clarity and misunderstandings.** At work, lack of clarity and misunderstandings arise daily, as everything is constantly changing. They become Flow Blockers when they are not addressed, when questions are shut down with statements like «We've already discussed this,» or when information is withheld. Uncertainty and misunderstandings lead to massive costs, as much work ends up discarded. This also reduces motivation, which leads to additional costs.
- **Tensions and conflicts.** Tensions within ourselves and with others are a daily occurrence. If we don't address them, they can lead to irritations and escalate into conflicts. In our everyday work, we may feel a discomfort that stifles communication and makes collaboration difficult or even impossible. Tensions and conflicts are among the most powerful Flow Killers.
- **Fear and insecurity.** We frequently face situations that overwhelm us, expose us to uncertainty, or cause us to feel fear of something or someone. When we can't count on the support of others in these situations, this fear can paralyze us, preventing us from realizing our potential. We often feel uncomfortable, resort to unhelpful behaviors, such as self-censorship, or withdraw as much as possible. Acting out of fear and insecurity usually prevents us from doing what we know is right.
- **Senselessness.** Too many tasks or jobs lack meaning or fail to convey their purpose to the person performing them. This includes tasks where the person knows they won't make an impact or pro-

duce results. Those who don't see the purpose of their work cannot contribute meaningfully to the overall mission and therefore experience no personal Flow.

If the organization wants everyone to contribute to and support its purpose, it should ensure that people engage in work that makes an impact and that they consider meaningful.

- **Overload / Too much at once.** Flow is lost when we try – or are forced – to do too many things at once. Switching from one task to another without finishing any of them disrupts productivity. If we can't focus or are not allowed to prioritize where and how long to invest our energy, this can lead to complete shutdown and even burnout.
- **Revisiting tasks repeatedly.** There are times when reworking is necessary due to changed circumstances since the initial assignment. But there are also many cases where a lack of attention and communication at the start leads to multiple revisions or even restarts, which could have been avoided. This leads to personal frustration and disrupts Flow.
- **Non-functional or poorly functioning tools.** If people can't rely on their computer, software, office setup, printer, supply chain, and more, they not only lose productivity but also experience a major personal Flow disruption. These tools are just as important as a craftsperson's tools. After all, who has ever heard of a kitchen crew winning a Michelin star with blunt knives? The cost of top-notch tools is insignificant compared to the saved work hours and increased motivation they bring.

One Particularly Distinct Flow Blocker: «Playing Office»

Many things that sound professional and are done with the best intentions in companies often contribute little to Flow – or even prevent

it – because they are massive distractions. These behaviors stem from learned habits or beliefs about how a business «should operate.» Often, these beliefs or actions arise from insecurity. Flow is more likely when people feel secure enough to bring their whole, authentic selves to work, willing to question processes, challenge norms, and take new approaches.

«Playing office,» which is based on the commonly used German expression *Firma spielen*, means doing things simply because it seems like they «should» be done a certain way in a particular position, without considering whether these actions are actually useful or contributing to Flow.

In the process, we lose sight of our true goals: completing our work, moving initiatives forward, and acting with a balanced, intuitive approach. «Playing office» feels and looks like normal work – but instead of increasing Flow and serving the organization’s purpose, it holds everyone back, stalling both people and progress.

Typical statements that indicate someone is «playing office» include:

- «This decision needs to be made by the board, and they will meet in about three months at the earliest.»
- «This mistake cannot happen again – we need a checklist to ensure it doesn’t happen in the future.»
- «I’m not clear on the strategy. My manager sent a roughly 80-slide PowerPoint presentation three weeks ago, and I still don’t understand what my role in it could be.»
- «The heads of Human Resources and Communications don’t get along. We can’t start this important project because they refuse to work together.»
- «My manager told me to only take on tasks explicitly listed in my job description, so I’m unable to assist you with that.»
- «This software has been malfunctioning for weeks, and I’m not permitted to use an alternative that would work; as a result, this project is on hold until IT resolves the issue.»

- «While this idea sounds good, it also seems far too simple. Let's commission some studies to determine its feasibility.»

This kind of behavior creates cognitive dissonance for everyone involved. We hear things that sound important and are taken seriously by everyone; at the same time, the subsequent actions do *not* produce the desired results. Instead, they generate distraction, confusion, and frustration. We might not always be able to articulate it in this way, yet we sense that what we would do based on common sense either isn't permitted, seems impossible, or simply isn't valued.

By asking the Flow Question instead, we set everything and everyone in motion – without pressure or stress. The greatest efficiency arises naturally when we focus on Flow. Flow captures the essence of collaboration: Work flows, gets done, and is enjoyable. Everyone is engaged, yet not overwhelmed; we are learning, progressing together, and experiencing shared successes. Each person can fully contribute their skills and knowledge.

When we focus on Flow, we concentrate on the core of the work, allowing all distractions to disappear.

The Magical Solution: Flow

The Greek philosopher Heraclitus coined the term πάντα ῥεῖ, «Panta Rhei,» meaning «*everything flows*.» Another famous saying attributed to him is, «You can't step into the same river twice.» His thought was that if you step into a river for the second time, it is *no longer* the same river, as the water you stepped into previously has already flowed onward. Heraclitus also wrote, «Everything flows, and nothing remains. There is only an eternal becoming and changing.»

In the workplace, everything is also constantly moving and evolving, and as soon as we look around, many things have already changed. *We live in a world where everyone and everything is changing at a breathtaking pace.* What worked perfectly yesterday may no longer work tomorrow.

We, too, change as people, and with that, our needs evolve as well. This becomes especially clear when we experience significant changes firsthand. Our needs shift before, during, and after these changes in different ways. Here are a few examples:

- Before and after becoming parents for the first time, our needs around structuring work and balancing it with personal life look different.
- Before, during, and after the COVID-19 pandemic, our needs related to our work environment and how we collaborate changed.
- When an organization undergoes a reorganization, the needs of everyone in the organization shift. What seemed clear before is now in flux, requiring different approaches to navigate the reorganization.
- Before, during, and after the introduction of a new computer system, our expectations for support and assistance vary.
- Before the sudden availability of artificial intelligence, like ChatGPT, the needs of people within an organization were different than they were after this tool became accessible.

Even though we know and observe that the world is constantly changing – and we change along with it – our work environment is still set up as though everything is predictable and plannable.

Why Flow Fades Away

The reality of the world and the reality of the workplace often don't align, and outdated organizational tools disrupt Flow daily – an upgrade is urgently needed! The following examples illustrate how this discrepancy impacts Flow: Flow fades away.

- **Example 1: Changing Customer Behavior.** In a recent survey, customers expressed that they would like more digital services from the insurance provider, such as receiving information via messages sent to their mobile phones. However, due to the organization's culture of implementing only what is considered perfect, no mes-

saging-based service has been available even after five years. Customers don't receive what they want from the insurance provider because it isn't agile enough to respond to their needs within a reasonable timeframe.

- **Example 2: Contract Adjustment.** A customer's life situation has changed significantly over the past year – he is moving abroad with his family. He asks his customer advisor if there's a way to adjust his contract to fit his new circumstances. The advisor replies, «We can only adjust or cancel contracts every five years.» Now the customer must continue paying for a contract for four more years, even though it no longer aligns with his reality.
- **Example 3: Changing Conference Planning.** In the past, the company hosted a major conference every five years at a seminar hotel, where all employees gathered to connect and exchange ideas. After a two-year break, the project team begins planning the event again, only to find that many employees now prefer a hybrid or fully online conference, which better matches their current way of working. The team is unprepared for this shift, as they wanted to simply roll out their old plan and are now under time pressure. They proceed with the desired online version of the event but fail to consider that virtual gatherings require very different formats for engagement and interaction than in-person meetings. As a result, engagement and feedback are poor. Defiantly, the team concludes, «A conference at the seminar hotel would have been better after all!»
- **Example 4: Changes in Customer Care.** Diego is an experienced manager with over 30 years in customer care. When a centralized Customer Care Center is introduced in the organization, he suggests various approaches to his project team that were considered best practices 15 years ago and with which he previously achieved great success. However, the project team has conducted interviews with 100 customers and knows that today's needs are entirely different. Nevertheless, Diego, as the team leader, insists on integrating his best-practice approaches in detail into the concept. When the final concept is tested with customers again, Diego is disappointed to realize that these approaches are no longer effective in today's environment.

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