



## Finding the Zone

by Kevin Evers

If you're like me, you dream about moments of total focus. Time slows. The mind stops churning. Complex tasks are performed with effortless grace. Psychologists call it "flow." Athletes call it "the zone." For a baseball player, it's the sort of surreal state in which a 99 mph fastball seems to take on the size and speed of a beach ball.

Unfortunately, at work, I'm not in the zone very often. Many times I find my attention straying from the task at hand to yet another YouTube video of a kitten riding a tortoise. I give up. Maybe I don't have access to the deep and secret part of the brain that allows the athlete or the CEO to turn high performance into a daily routine.

Not so, according to a ton of recent research and literature on the subject. From Malcolm Gladwell's take on talent versus practice to Daniel Kahneman's research on the thinking brain to Charles Duhigg's *The Power of Habit*, released earlier this year, the secrets to becoming more productive seem to be at our fingertips. By the time you read this article, several more books on this topic will probably be out. But can all this analysis and advice really make us more productive at work? Taken together, a few recent titles seem to offer a good plan of attack.

Let's start with Duhigg, who tells us that superstars actually form their good habits by using the same part of the brain—the basal ganglia—the rest of us use to drive to work every day without a lot of mental effort. The difference is that our brains have formed our basic rituals on the sly, while the standout athletes and executives have mentally trained themselves to trade their old, unproductive habits for new, better ones. According to Duhigg, every habit is formed by a loop that begins with a cue, followed by a routine and a reward. To take a simple example, say a Facebook update pops up on your computer screen, so out of habit you stop working and click on the message. What's the reward in that situation? It's not the contents of the message; it's the distraction. Next step: Replace the old routine (checking the message) with a new one (going for a walk to clear your head or seeking out a coworker for conversation). The golden rule is to make sure the cue and the reward remain the same. Top performers focus on changing their habit loops until even the most challenging tasks don't seem like work anymore.

My favorite story in Duhigg's book comes from Tony Dungy, former head coach of the Tampa Bay Buccaneers and the Indianapolis Colts. Dungy had noticed that Derrick Brooks, a linebacker, was often a step too slow. The problem with Brooks's routine was that he was interpreting too many signals—the running back's feet, the quarterback's eyes—at once. Essentially, he was multitasking, a difficult thing to do in an office, let alone a football field. He needed to think less and react faster. So Dungy coached him to take the same starting cue (the running back's motion) and get to the reward (anticipating the play) in a different way: by looking at the signals in a progression, one after the other, instead of all together. At first, this required a lot of Brooks's mental energy. But eventually the new routine became automatic. Good habits became a reaction rather than a choice.

Of course, Brooks needed a committed coach and a supportive team to help him. Not all of us have bosses and colleagues like that. The other thing Duhigg—and many other productivity and performance authors—overlooked is the role our emotions play in our ability to change.

As pioneering researcher Richard Davidson and writer Sharon Begley explain in *The Emotional Life of Your Brain*, emotions are the result of complex brain processes, and we each have a distinct emotional style determined by six dimensions: resilience, outlook, social intuition, self-awareness, sensitivity to context, and intention. Our aptitude in those dimensions is shaped by both our DNA and our life experiences, and it can either help or hinder us when it comes to our work lives. In one study, researchers found that activity in the part of the brain linked to happiness—the right prefrontal cortex—can vary as much as 3,000% among individuals. That's crazy. Essentially, a low score on Davidson's resilience scale equates to a prefrontal cortex that is less able to dampen negative emotions, which means you'll have a tough time exerting yourself to, say, change your habits. That's why so many of us revert to old behaviors in times of stress; it's just easier.

Davidson's book is a great companion to Duhigg's because it gets at the complex causes of our spikes and dips in motivation. The message would be disheartening if it weren't for *Emotional Equations*, in which author Chip Conley persuasively argues that we can control those brain processes, altering our baseline emotional styles. After going through a series of personal crises, Conley, the founder of Joie de Vivre Hospitality, came up with 18 equations to help control his negative emotions, in effect outsmarting his brain. Like a good stoic, he thinks all of us can do the same. So if you're feeling anxious, remember: Anxiety = Uncertainty ×

Powerlessness. Searching for contentment? Joy = Love – Fear. Feeling bogged down? Flow = Skill ÷ Challenge. Conley may sound like a cheerleader at times, but I can see how his mind tricks might help us overcome the inherent hurdles we face when trying to do anything new.

So I like the cumulative message of these books: Once I command my emotions, my brain can focus on turning new and difficult routines into unthinking behaviors. Of course, that's much harder than it sounds. Even with this new knowledge, I know "the zone" isn't a state of mind I'll be able to achieve all the time. But at least I know now that it isn't completely out of reach.

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