

# Using Focus, Flow, and Realistic Optimism to Enhance The Performance of Higher Education Administrators

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## Abstract

A vital aspect of the expectations for an administrator in higher education is accomplishing results, especially in this age of accountability in higher education that emphasizes concepts such as performance indicators and performance-based funding. Higher education administrators need to systematically review their skill sets for effective job performance in the context of today's accountability environment. Focus, flow, and realistic optimism are three concepts of positive psychology that will significantly aid higher education administrators in fulfilling their job responsibilities by achieving the results demanded for their positions.

*Keywords:* higher education administrators, focus, flow, and realistic optimism

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## Context<sup>1</sup>

Higher education administrators today are often under extreme pressure to produce effective results in the context of accountability through such concepts as performance indicators and performance-based funding. Financial conditions in many institutions of higher learning are incredibly challenging because of the difficulty of securing adequate revenue to meet the needs of the institution and the need to judiciously manage expenditures. Higher education administrators should consistently search for skills such as focus, flow, and realistic optimism that will help them become more productive and make significant contributions to the realization of their institutions' visions and missions. Most importantly, the effectiveness of higher education administrators must prompt results that are beneficial for their current and future students.

The application of *attention* is the lynchpin for higher education administrators to make effective use of focus. Goleman (2013) notes that "attention works much like a muscle—use it poorly and it can wither; work it well and it grows" (p. 4). He also indicates that the *research on*

*the science of attention* “tells us these skills determine how well we perform any tasks. If they are stunted, we do poorly; if muscular, we can excel” (p. 2). Goleman (2013) also observes the positive link between attention and excellence, indicating that it “ripples through almost anything we seek to accomplish” (p. 3). *Sustained attention* is particularly important for higher education administrators in the context of focus because it represents the dedication of uninterrupted time to sufficiently understand what is being studied. *Selective attention* means that higher education administrators can *hone in* specifically on what needs to be the focus of their attention to gain essential information, meaningfully interact with others, and effectively perform the task at hand. *Voluntary attention* is what higher education administrators use when they consciously focus on something such as the verbal and nonverbal meaning communicated by staff members and others in meetings. Higher education administrators control voluntary attention; however, they do not control *involuntary attention* such as reacting to loud, unexpected noise (e.g., fire alarms) while in meetings. As Bailey (2018) observes, “When it comes to focusing at work, there is no shortage of scapegoats to blame for our mind wandering” (p. 105R). Although the skill of channeling involuntary attention has become more difficult in the high-tech age of electronic devices (e.g., smartphone), higher education administrators can improve involuntary attention by consciously striving to do so. Further, through conscious effort, they “can overcome distractions and develop the ability to concentrate on demand” if they are willing to put forth the effort (Zahariades, 2017, p. 14).

Higher education administrators have no direct control over *involuntary attention* because the body’s “safeguard system” puts out alerts based on humans’ genetic make-ups (Zahariades, 2017). Such administrators can have some impact over involuntary attention by seeking work environments that preclude these types of interruptions if doing so does not pose a danger. Disconnecting the emergency warning light in a conference room is *not* an action a higher education administrator should take. However, locating a meeting in a room that has no “street noise” (e.g., sirens), posting a “please do not disturb” sign, and requesting participants to preferably turn off, or at least silence, non-essential electronic devices are logical ways for a higher education administrator to address involuntary attention.

Proactive higher education administrators focus their efforts “on things they can do something about, and their energy is positive” (Covey, 1989, p. 83). This compares to reactive higher education administrators who often focus attention on circumstances over which they have minimal or no control. This sometimes leads to a feeling of *victimization*, prompting the higher education administrator to wallow in self-pity—which is unproductive. Duhigg (2016) points out the need for higher education administrators “knowing where to focus and what to ignore” (p. 102).

After weighing the pros and cons of a situation and concluding they are about equal, it is most advantageous for higher education administrators to focus on the potential benefits (pros) and identify the needed actions to realize these benefits (Cuddy, 2015). This compares to higher education administrators in the same situations focusing on the negatives (cons) and not pursuing actions needed to make the situations workable. However, before proceeding with implementing the actions, the cost and available resources must be considered.

*Mindfulness* is the skill set of higher education administrators being fully present, aware of where they are and what they are saying and doing so through a heightened state of involvement and *wakefulness* (Langer & Moldoveanu, 2000; Boyce, 2018). Powers (2019) anchors mindfulness in self-awareness and being “grounded in the present moment to determine what your next best action may be” (p. 87). Mindfulness also includes higher education administrators acutely

understanding the perspectives of others as to the intent of communications, verbal and nonverbal, to understand their context (Bartz, 2018). Higher education administrators practicing mindfulness "are likely to choose to be positive and will experience both the advantages of positivity and the advantages of perceived control or well-being" (Langer, 2009, p. 279).

*Novel distinctions* in the context of mindfulness mean that higher education administrators have consciously open minds, do not automatically categorize information based on past experiences, and understand the subtleties of the information being communicated to identify creative or "novel distinctions" of the present information to solve problems (Langer, 2014). Bartz (2018) notes that mindfulness also means higher education administrators are truly comprehending their purposes while performing tasks and tracking where they place their attention. Higher education administrators practicing mindfulness have an acute *sense of presence*, meaning that they are attuned to situations and are comfortable, confident, and passionately enthusiastic "in-the-moment" regarding what is taking place and how they should behave and react (Cuddy, 2015).

## Flow<sup>2</sup>

According to Csikszentmihalyi, "Flow is when people are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter; the experience is so enjoyable that people will continue to do it even at great cost, for the sheer sake of doing it" (as cited in Hemmings, 2018, p. 242). Flow is the ultimate condition of focus. Experiencing flow is advantageous to higher education administrators because it causes them to stretch skills and talents, and even to develop new ones. Flow enhances job productivity and helps higher education administrators *be their best*. In the context of positive psychology, flow is essential to higher education administrators' overall well-being. Flow represents specific situations in which a higher education administrator's "attention, abilities, and interests are fully engaged and challenged" (Warren, 2017, p. 256). The result of flow for higher education administrators is *optimized performance* through a truly enjoyable and self-rewarding process (Baitwell & McCarthy, 2016, p. 162).

Csikszentmihalyi (cited in Weiten, Dunn, & Hammer, 2012) describes flow as the holistic sensation of higher education administrators when they try to act with total involvement. They feel in control of their actions when they are *in flow*, and there is little distinction between themselves and the challenging work at hand. When they engage in flow, higher education administrators are intrinsically rewarded from moment-to-moment and are completely immersed in what they are doing. When this totally engaged state of focus evolves, time seems to slip away, and distractors dissipate. When higher education administrators engage in flow, they are totally and enjoyably absorbed in the challenges at hand (Charan, Willigan, & Giffen 2017, p. 165). Most importantly, this state also enables them to be extraordinarily productive and experience maximum job satisfaction.

Flow represents the "sweet spot" of where the challenge at hand is on the outer edge of, or perhaps just beyond, a higher education administrator's skill level (Stulberg & Magness, 2017, p. 50). This is called the *challenge-skill balance* because the skills stretch to meet the challenge. An overwhelming challenge usually brings major frustration, while too little challenge brings boredom (Tse, Fung, Nakamura, & Csikszentmihalyi, 2018, p. 284). The challenge-skill balance causes higher education administrators to be their best. This controlled stress causes adrenaline to "kick-in" and requires them to stretch their skills and apply creativity and innovation to solve problems. In such situations, while some doubt and uncertainty may be present in higher education

administrators' minds, they are not deterred but instead are motivated and inspired to achieve the tasks before them successfully.

Work is an excellent environment for higher education administrators to experience flow if they craft the environment to accentuate: (1) clear goals, (2) specifically-defined performance roles for themselves and staff members, (3) frequent feedback for themselves and staff members (formal and informal), (4) minimal distractions, (5) high expectation for concentrating on producing work, and (6) congruency of the work's difficulty with the talents and strengths of themselves and their staff members (Seligman, 2002, p. 175). He offers these ingredients for a manager to establish more flow experiences in the work environment: (1) identify your signature strengths, (2) choose work that lets you use them every day, (3) recraft your personality to use your signature strengths more, and (4) make room to allow staff members to recraft work within the bounds of your goals to maximize enriching their skill levels or strengths in meeting challenges (p. 176).

Craig (2018) indicates that higher education administrators *leading from purpose* spend “a good deal of time experiencing a sense of flow” (p. 264). More specifically, higher education administrators experiencing this sense of flow love what they are doing more frequently than those who do not (Goleman, 2013). Higher education administrators maximizing flow is often best attained by integrating their focus with being physically and mentally relaxed (Weiss, 2018). Boredom is the enemy of higher education administrators who are striving for the flow experience. Hence, it may be beneficial for them to *bundle together* the mundane tasks that they do daily within a common time period, thereby allowing a more conducive environment for flow to occur outside of this time frame. Most higher education administrators have a *peak performance time* in the workday in which they are more motivated and produce their best work (Pink, 2018). This is an excellent time for them to eliminate—or minimize to the extent possible—distractions and entirely focus on a job challenge that will prompt the “flow state” (Hemmings, 2018).

### **Realistic Optimism<sup>3</sup>**

Optimism in the traditional application of positive psychology is often contrasted with pessimism in the context of higher education administrators overcoming adversity. Bartz (2017) notes that there are two fundamental ways for higher education administrators to view adverse events: (1) imagine the worst and wallow in self-pity (pessimist); or (2) view such events as temporary, surmountable, and challenges to overcome (optimist). While optimists view an adverse event as merely a temporary setback that is not all encompassing to effective performance, pessimists believe that such an event makes them helpless, has a long-lasting impact, and is their fault.

Optimists are not fazed by defeats in the work environment but are motivated to work harder to overcome obstacles posed by such situations. Pessimists are likely to give up easily and get depressed when facing adverse events (Seligman, 2006). In essence, optimism is represented by a higher education administrator having a mindset and belief regarding an adverse event as: (a) the event has merely caused a temporary setback; (b) whatever caused the adversity is confined specifically to this particular event and nothing else in the person's life; (c) the results flowing from the adversity are not the person's fault; (d) the adverse event happened for multiple reasons, many of which the

individual could not control; (e) is unfazed by what others might perceive as defeat from the adverse event; and (f) perceives an adverse event as a challenge to try harder and do better in the future. (Seligman, 2006; Seligman, 2011)

Gordon (2017) concludes that optimism is a competitive advantage for higher education administrators which prompt them to view the future in a positive light and work harder toward creating a brighter and better future. Realistic optimists demonstrate trust and confidence in those they supervise and nurture them to perform at high levels.

Gordon indicates that pessimistic higher education administrators give up because of the struggle, negativity, frustration, fear, rejection, naysayers, and circumstances. Such administrators also give up because they do not have the optimism, positivity, and confidence to keep moving forward. The philosophy of *Blue Ocean Shift* counters pessimism by advocating that higher education administrators should “see opportunities where before only constraints were visible” (Kim & Mauborgne, 2017, p. 54). Shore’s (2017) philosophy in *Conscious Communications* is also pertinent to higher education administrators combating pessimism. Shore (2017) states that “*Conscious Communications* is a simple process that consists of eliminating negative language, using words that work, and focusing on what you want” (p. 4).

Higher education administrators work in environments that require a mindset of being realistic about possible outcomes. As Dalio (2017) states, “There is nothing more important than understanding how reality works and how to deal with it” (p. 133). Can the realistic and optimistic mindsets be merged, so they have the benefits of each, or are they mutually exclusive? Schneider (2001) answers that question in the affirmative through the concept of realistic optimism which she defines as “the tendency to maintain a positive outlook within the constraints of the available measurable phenomena situated in the physical and social world” (p. 253). Put simply, realistic optimism is being hopeful within the scope and limitations of plausible possibilities. It can also mean higher education administrators are focusing on the favorable aspects of a situation and believing, as well as striving, to nurture these aspects to accomplish desired results. A leader applying realistic optimism answers the question: “What does an objective analysis of the available data and information reveal in relation to the realm of possible outcomes?”

Bass and Bass (2008) and Wade (2008) summarize a manager’s mindset representative of realistic optimism as: (1) being lenient about past failures to meet expectations and accepting what cannot be changed (the benefit of the doubt principle); (2) appreciation for the present, concentrating on the positive aspects of the current situation (the appreciation of the moment principle); and (3) seeking opportunities for the future (the window of opportunity principle) (Bass & Bass, 2008, p. 1070; Wade, 2008, p. 2). The purely optimistic manager, as contrasted to a realistic optimist, can suffer from *optimistic bias* that is indicative of self-deception by convincing oneself of the desired outcome without the support of relevant data and information.

Higher education administrators that are realistic optimists have a sense of self-control that leads to enhanced confidence and the motivation to create solutions for overcoming difficult situations. They develop solutions by expanding their field of vision where opportunities exist to overcome adversity and inspire others to support and work hard to implement such solution (Kim & Mauborgne, 2017). They also seek out what is needed to make goals happen (Kim & Mauborgne, 2017; Charan, Willigan, & Giffen, 2017).

Higher education administrators practicing realistic optimism remain positive about the future, even when the present circumstances turn against them. As Collingwood (2016) notes, “Realistic optimists are cautiously hopeful of favorable outcomes, and they do as much as they

can to obtain the desired results” (p. 2). Some realistic optimists adhere to the adage “hope for the best, but prepare for the worst” (Collingwood, 2016, p. 3).

Higher education administrators with realistic optimism set challenging goals for themselves and those they supervise, anticipate obstacles, and take proactive measures to eliminate or minimize these obstacles. A higher education administrator with realistic optimism also knows that, on some occasions, there is a fine line between a challenge and an impossible situation. As time progresses, when objective data and information reveal little to no likelihood for success, she/he must know when to terminate pursuit of a goal.

### **Closing Thoughts**

Higher education administrators today work in an environment which accentuates accountability in the form of performance indicators such as graduation rates, student learning outcomes, students’ satisfaction of the learning environment, and performance-based funding. It is imperative that they systematically review their skill sets to perform their duties effectively and significantly contribute to the vision and mission of their institutions. Focus, flow, and realistic optimism are three skill sets from the discipline of positive psychology which will significantly aid higher education administrators in being their best and helping those with whom they work to maximize productivity.

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### Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> Based in part on Bartz, D. E. (2018-2019). Managers/leaders managing themselves through purpose, focus, and resilience. *National Forum of Educational Administration and Supervision Journal*, 36(1, 2, & 3), 35-42.

<sup>2</sup> Based in part on Bartz, D. E. (2018). Managers utilizing mindfulness and flow to maximize job performance and satisfaction. *International Journal of Education and Social Science*, 5(7), 15.

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