

The 4 Secrets To Seahawks NFC Success And How They Can Be Applied To Business

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The Seahawks posted one for the ages yesterday, overcoming the biggest deficit in playoff history and earning the rare chance to defend their Superbowl title.

And what was going on under the hood—what helped the Seahawks achieve their amazing rally—has a name: group flow.

If you're not familiar with the concept, it's the shared, collective version of a flow state. In group flow, there is a whole is greater than the sum of its parts effect. Cooperation and collaboration are amplified. Creativity as well. Overall team performance goes through the roof

For starters, thanks to fantastic research done by neuro-psychologist Keith Sawyer at the University of North Carolina, we now know that there are triggers that bring on group flow—many of which were in evidence in yesterday's game.

The first trigger visible yesterday was **shared goals**. This is obvious, of course, but critically important. For example, what we didn't see yesterday from Seattle was any one player hogging the spotlight. Everyone was on the same page. No one was trying to light up the stat sheet. They played as a solid unit—one goal, one mind.

Equally important was **blending egos**, the idea that everyone on the team is an integral part and no one person's contribution trumps the others. It's a sort of collective humility and it's arguably the defining characteristic of the Seahawks.

It's also why, in his postgame interview, Russell Wilson couldn't stop talking about his team. If Seattle was incapable of blending egos, then Russell's postgame interview would have been, well, much more arrogant. And, probably my favorite moment of the game, when Marshawn Lynch refused the typical touchdown celebration and instead opted for the "12th Man Handshake"—a tribute to the amazing fan base and an ego-blending moment that extended all the way through the stadium.

Equal participation is another trigger. It means everyone is involved. This means everyone's skill level needs to be comparable, but it also means everyone's skills are required. It's also the reason why Peter Carroll's fake field goal let the kicker—the member of the football team with the lowest status—throw an incredibly risky pass that gave them a touchdown that sparked the run that turned the game around.

Always Say Yes is both the most famous of group flow's triggers and a trigger that showed up yesterday in slightly more subtle ways. The trigger takes its name from the first rule of improv—where you always say yes to whatever your partners propose, no matter how awkward or uncomfortable or unlikely. It means always keeping the energy moving forward so you can create magic from adversity.

After the game, quarterback Russell Wilson described his teammates unwavering confidence in him, saying: “4 minutes left in the game, 4 interceptions, and just keep playing, and the guys just keep believing in me.” If any of them had said no. If any of them had stopped striving for the possibility, group flow would have been blocked and their astounding rally would never have happened.

Of course, even if you're not familiar with the concept of group flow, you arguably have some familiarity with the experience. If you've ever played in a band, sung in a choir, acted in a play, played a team sport, taken part in a great brainstorming session, or been part of a startup launch—to offer just a few examples—then you're familiar with the state.

In his 1990 book, *Flow*, psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi describes how this elevated performance plays out in an operating room: “Surgeons say that during a difficult operation they have the sensation that the entire operating team is a single organism, moved by the same purpose; they describe it as a ‘ballet’ in which the individual is subordinated to the group performance, and all involved share in the feeling of harmony and power.”

Not surprisingly, group flow is incredibly important to business teams as well—but how to apply these ideas in a corporate environment is a question we get at the Flow Genome Project (www.flowgenomeproject.com) all the time. The good news—it's simple. The bad news: just because it's simple doesn't mean it's easy.

For starters, you have to commit to the kind of training the Seahawks do—for the last several years, they've brought on Dr. Mike Gervais, the performance psychologist behind Redbull's Project Stratos space jump and more Olympic medals than you can count (and a dear friend of ours at Flow Genome Project). He works consistently to help the athletes get out of their own heads (so they can blend egos and participate equally), to deal with adversity and setbacks (so they can keep saying “yes”) and nail down their own personal reasons for striving to be the best team in the world (so they have a powerful shared goal).

In most companies, only top executives get coaching of this kind—and in most instances, that's too little, too late. It's seen as an expense to be minimized, or as a touchy-feely indulgence. But if a bunch of gritty pro-ballers see the investment in training their mental games, surely a bunch of button-down knowledge workers could get a boost from the same?

Once you commit as a company to training group flow, here's a few quick tips on making the most of those four triggers:

- 1) **Shared Goals:** seems so simple, but in a pedal-down company, it often gets lost. It's not enough to say “win the game” or “have a huge IPO”—everyone on the team

needs to understand the One Big Thing *that they can do something about* to achieve success. For the Seahawks, it might have been “shut down the run” or “pressure the quarterback”, for a company, it might be “get margins to 30%” or “dazzle our repeat customers.” If you can’t go down the hallways of your organization and get the same answer from everyone you ask “what’s our goal for this quarter/year?” then you need to figure it out, communicate it until your absolutely sick of it, and communicate it some more.

2) **Blending Egos:** easy to talk about, tricky to do. That’s why the Seahawks longterm commitment to the kind of work that Gervais is doing is essential to the “overnight success” we saw on the field yesterday. But as a leader, you can take one simple bit of advice drawn from Dr. Bob Kegan’s work at Harvard—balance all of your Advocacy with a whole lot more Inquiry. Rather than coming in with the perfect answers, show up with more interesting questions. And what kind of questions matter too—asking “Why should we?” can come across as challenging or even accusatory. Asking “How would it help?” “What would you do? What outcome are you looking for? Could you tell me more about how this would work? What would you want to achieve? Helps people get out of their own assertive/defensive positions and really puts their focus on implementing and trouble-shooting.

3) **Equal Participation:** the unlocking move for the Seahawks was letting their kicker throw the ball—something no one was expecting. In meetings and strategy sessions, your quarterbacks are usually your high-status leaders that everyone’s used to deferring to. Your running backs are those quick-on-their-feet extroverts who advocate their positions brilliantly and can sway the room. But what about your kickers? The introverts, the quants, the folks that prefer to reflect before speaking, or would rather follow up 1:1 after the meeting? Be sure to find the time to get their input too, and be sure to encourage different formats (in-person, email, white papers, after-hours) that get the most from everyone—you’ll be surprised who else can put points on the board.

4) **Always Say Yes:** Similar to asking the “How” and “What” questions above, that get people working on solutions, practicing “saying yes” means we accept the brutal facts of our present reality (like being down 19-7 with less than three minutes remaining) while still fully committing to the win. Carol Dweck at Stanford describes this outlook as a “Growth Mindset” where we experience setbacks as something to overcome with more hard work, in contrast to a “Fixed Mindset” where we might throw in the towel when the stress of current conditions threatens our own egos too much. Before the Seahawks rallied, and with all hopes of another Superbowl seemingly out of reach, Marshawn Lynch was caught on the Jumbotron dancing on the sideline—one FOX commentator wondered “maybe he knew something the rest of us didn’t.” When all the pundits were parsing Seattle’s “No,” Lynch was dancing his way to yes.

*If you’re interested in learning more about how flow can be applied to business, check out Steven’s latest book *BOLD: How To Go Big, Create Wealth and Impact the World*.