

The Rise of Superman Summary

By Steven Kotler

Have you ever looked at another person and thought, 'Wow! What they're doing is *actually* magic.' We often think talented people have superhuman abilities. Whether they're athletes, tech gurus, authors, or musicians, we've all been in awe of someone else's talent.

The Rise of Superman is a fascinating and inspiring culmination of fifteen years of research, and first-hand reporting. Steven Kotler argues that at the heart of human performance and true mastery is "flow," and he guides us through its history and shows us how we can tap into it.

Steven Kotler is a true master of flow. He's a bestselling author, an award-winning journalist, founder of the Flow Genome Project, and Executive Director of the Flow Research Collective. Inspired by his work as a journalist, he delves into the science behind optimal performance. In the early 90s, action and adventure sports were a burgeoning industry, and were becoming mainstream. Through his research, Kotler found that extreme athletes are perfect case studies because they embody flow, and exhibit new ways to achieve mastery.

When Kotler interviewed athletes like Laird Hamilton, Danny Way, and Travis Rice, he found that extreme athletes push themselves, and through doing this, they push the boundaries of their sport. Their feats of impossibility and "superhuman" abilities are used to show how the impossible can become possible. This snowball effect has a profound impact on the human psyche, and therefore hacking flow is something we can all benefit from.

We'll briefly explore that it's not just about becoming a top-performing athlete; it's about how to apply the flow mindset of these extreme athletes to our own lives. Based on neuroscience, Kotler shows how flow manifests, and how chemicals in our brains allow us to push ourselves, provided we have the bravery to take risks and face our fears. Finally, we look at how harnessing the addiction of flow is one of the most powerful motivators we have at our disposal.

A Brief History of Flow

Flow is a high that pushes us to extraordinary levels of performance.

William James coined the phrase "stream of consciousness," which is a precursor to the idea of flow. Stream of consciousness is when we experience an internal monologue with ourselves, and our thoughts flow through our minds. Building from this, Abraham Maslow developed the "peak experience," which occurs when we're self-actualized.

Have you ever experienced a high once you've achieved something you didn't think possible? Have you ever felt wholly and utterly exhilarated by knowing you've done the very best you can?

This is what's known as a peak experience. It's the rush we feel when we succeed at something. It's knowing we've maximized our full potential. While peak experiences result from actual events, flow is a little different.

Flow is a state of mind proposed by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi. It's the idea that when we're entirely focused on a task, and using maximum concentration, we lose track of everything around us, including time. This

state of immersion is described as the optimal state of consciousness where we're so absorbed in a task that it's almost as if we're on autopilot. Not only are we utterly absorbed, but we also feel at our very best. It's during this state of consciousness where physical and mental performance goes through the roof.

The Power of Flow

Did you know that according to one study, a whopping 83% of American workers are disengaged at work? Given that we spend a significant portion of our lives at work, it's extraordinary to think that 4 out of 5 people essentially hate what they're doing.

One of the most profound messages in this book is that if we face the impossible, we'll raise the bar, and be able to serve the world and ourselves a lot more profoundly. What if more of us engaged at work, and found passion in what we do? What if we could consistently strive to master our crafts, and accomplish things that we thought impossible? Imagine the unbelievable effect this would have on society?

People who structure their lives around flow, consistently outperform others. Furthermore, companies that focus their efforts on encouraging flow, show a massive increase in productivity and output.

Findings show that if we prioritize flow, performance will go up by up to 500%. Studies run by the US military revealed that, snipers in a state of flow learned to optimize their accuracy and target skills 500% faster than usual. Furthermore, if we look at a company like Patagonia, they developed a company culture that embodies the principles of flow. Yvon Chouinard, the founder and owner of the company, believes that

employees should be allowed to surf whenever the surf comes up. He argues that as long as the work gets done, he doesn't care how it gets done. This spirit of independence is at the heart of flow. The flexibility at the core of Patagonia's ethos, means immense job satisfaction and complete freedom and trust. And the company performance speaks for itself.

So we can see the power of flow, but how do we get into this state of consciousness where we're optimized to capacity?

Kotler identifies eighteen internal and external triggers that allow us to get into a state of flow. They're based on our evolutionary biology, and our brains identify them as crucial to maximizing output.

From an evolutionary perspective, it's not difficult to see how risk is a massive trigger in our behavior. Whether emotional or physical, risk is a substantial motivating factor. We are all aware of "risk versus reward," but this concept is crucial to developing a state of flow. Creativity is also a profound trigger.

Have you ever started a crossword puzzle somewhat slowly, and then hit your groove?

Hitting our groove comes from pattern recognition, and linking ideas is a massive part of the creative process. Furthermore, we get dopamine hits from solving problems, or linking ideas together. All of this encourages the process of flow. You may also notice this when you hit your stride in writing. Sentences begin knitting together, argument flows, and the right words appear as if by magic. You are in the zone.

Let's explore some other ideas.

The M's in Mastery

There are three popular theories around mastery – the 3 M's.

The first M is that mastery comes from "mothers," or through nurturing. If you've ever heard of the phrase "Tiger Mom," you'll know how effective firm parenting can be for developing skills. The second M stands for "musicians." This is the idea of the 10 thousand hour rule. You'll be familiar with this if you've read *Outliers* by Malcolm Gladwell. The premise is that mastery is achieved through 10 thousand hours of structured and deliberate practice. Finally, there's "marshmallow." The marshmallow test is a famous study on delayed gratification. The theory is that if you seek instant gratification, you won't achieve mastery.

The 3 M's focus on grinding, and the underlying belief that misery equates to mastery, and mastery comes from misery.

Kotler's research with extreme athletes shows that the 3 M's leave a lot to be desired. For example, many extreme athletes come from disadvantaged backgrounds, or backgrounds where parents were mostly absent. When it comes to practicing, extreme athletes admitted to practicing a lot, but that it was neither deliberate nor structured. And then, when it comes to exhibiting delayed gratification, the majority of extreme athletes are incredibly impulsive, gung-ho, and gravitate towards thrill-seeking behavior.

Extreme athletes do what they love. Their ability to get into the state of

flow, and their attitude of pushing themselves makes mastery addictive. This instant gratification makes these sports addictive, and this passion means skill levels increase exponentially. All of these athletes showed that the 3 M's were not part of their formula for success.

Kotler argues that misery shouldn't be part of mastery. So often, we believe that work is work and play is play. Why shouldn't work be fun? The extreme athletes demonstrate that the dichotomy between work and play can be eradicated.

It Just Takes 4%

Imagine a graph where the y-axis represents challenge, and the x-axis represents skill level. Flow is the midpoint between x and y. So, flow is found exactly between challenge and skill level, i.e., flow occurs when the challenge and skillset are evenly matched.

We experience anxiety when the challenge is greater than our skillset, and boredom when we don't have the challenges to match our skills. Hence, flow is also the sweet spot between boredom and anxiety.

Now imagine that you continue functioning in a state where your challenges and skills are equally matched for your whole life. You won't improve, will you? You'll coast and remain in your comfort zone. This is where the 4% rule comes into play.

The idea here is that your challenge needs to be 4% higher than your current skill level.

Think about something that you'd like to improve at. Do you think that

you're currently in your comfort zone? The challenge is to up your game by just 4%. 4% is just enough to challenge you, without leading to undue anxiety and stress. The cool thing is that if you constantly build on 4%, this has a compound effect. And, over time, the impossible will become possible. So remember, not 3%, not 5%, all it takes is 4%.

Frustration Means You're Doing It Right

Upping our game by 4% shouldn't feel easy, but it shouldn't be so difficult that it makes us anxious and overwrought.

The first stage of flow requires us to struggle, and this is where our emotions have a history of playing tricks on us. Kotler argues that often our emotions mean the opposite to what we think they mean. We saw this with the work paradox where we've been led to believe that work should be work, and leisure time should be fun.

The struggle phase of flow is when we move from the conscious state of mind, to the subconscious state of mind. Our subconscious has a much bigger memory and works a lot faster, so we need to tap into our subconscious for optimum performance. However, to tap into our subconscious, it has to be loaded with information from our conscious.

Have you ever tried to learn a new language? It's not easy, is it? Perhaps it took you ages to get into the swing of things, or maybe you gave up altogether. There's a reason for this.

When we learn something for the first time, we often try to do too much too quickly, and bombard ourselves. If we adopt the 4% rule, we'll still feel like we're struggling, but it'll be the right kind of frustration. We've

been led to believe that frustration is a negative emotion, and we need to reframe it. Frustration is a sign that we're outside of our comfort zone, and we're pushing ourselves. Frustration reminds us that we're doing exactly what we should be doing, at precisely the right intensity. So keep at it, and you'll move onto the next step in the flow process.

Flow is a state of struggle and high concentration, where we release numerous neurochemicals. Norepinephrine, dopamine, endorphins, anandamide, and serotonin provide us with heightened levels of focus, pain-blocking capabilities, and that feel-good state of mind. However, these neurochemicals are in limited supply, so recovery is essential to the flow cycle. It's unsustainable to be in a constant state of flow, so we need to factor in rest and recovery.

Kotler suggests sleeping for at least eight hours per night, and to ride both the highs and the lows associated with deep and concentrated work. Never underestimate the power of sleep, and don't be fooled into thinking that losing sleep makes you a more committed individual. If you place flow at the center of your life, you also have to make sleep a significant part of your life. Research shows that if a baseball team travels through 3 time zones to get to a game, before the game even begins, they have a 40% chance of winning. This example shows that sleep literally gives you the winning edge.

Let Fear and Struggle Guide You

We've learned that struggle is an essential component of flow. Struggle, frustration, and fear are states of mind that we can use as a compass. Extreme athletes harness their fear in order to get out of their comfort zone.

What are some of the fears that hold you back?

We need to reframe our perceptions of fear, because we have been conditioned to believe that we should run away from it and avoid it. However, Kotler argues that having some element of fear is good. Once we cross over the threshold of pain and fear, this is where we'll find our potential. We need to revisit our relationship with fear, and learn to face it head-on.

But, remember the 4% rule?

We need to learn to cultivate a healthy relationship with fear, and if we feel a rush of too much adrenaline, that means we should back off. So push yourself to 4%, and soon you'll be doing things that you thought were impossible.

The Bannister Effect

In 2019 Eliud Kipchoge ran a marathon in just under two hours. Many people believed that to be impossible.

If we go further back in time to 1954, no one believed that anyone could run a four-minute mile. For the previous 50 years, the time it took to run a mile came down about a tenth of a second per year. The most brilliant

minds believed that it was physiologically impossible to run a mile in under 4 minutes, and that it might even result in death.

Yet in 1954, Roger Bannister ran a mile in under 4 minutes. The snowball effect of this event was remarkable, and within ten years, other people followed suit, including a teenager. The physiology of the human body didn't change, but the change in mindset allowed people to believe in the impossible. The "Bannister Effect" shows how it's possible to reframe the impossible.

Reframing the impossible is essential for anyone who is trying to succeed. For those at the top of their game, finding out that someone else has done something extraordinary has a knock-on effect. Many things look impossible, and then after a while, people accomplish these so-called impossible feats, which significantly raises the bar.

In Conclusion

This book's challenge is to examine our own lives and ask ourselves what we think is impossible.

Whatever you challenge yourself to, reframe it from impossible to possible, all the while remembering the 4% rule. And, while possible is an achievable goal, this doesn't mean that it's an easy process. Flow is difficult, there will be struggle, there will be fear, and there will be frustration.

Gandhi famously said, 'Be the change you want to see in the world.' Imagine if all of us rose to life's challenges and upped our game by 4% every day. Imagine the compound effect this would have?

So make space for concentration and focus. Schedule your work and block out all noises and distractions. What's more, know when to call it a day. Stopping work when we're enthusiastic and excited is a good idea. We usually reach peak excitement levels when we only have a bit more fuel in our tanks. Therefore, it's worth conserving the excitement for when we wake up. That way, we can begin each new day with fervor and excitement. Remember to keep lists. Most people who are successful have mastered some form of focus. However, even the most focused people battle to move between tasks. Lists help with this. Don't get tripped up by transitions. Create boundaries. And remember, it's about consistency over intensity.

If we go back to the 10 thousand hour rule, studies show that flow cuts this time in half, while also cutting down on misery. So, what are you going to work 4% harder at, and how are you going to master the art of "feverish compulsion?"