



Transcript

Episode

Episode 180: Flow States: Thriving in an AI World

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Host

Dr. Shari Simpson, Thought Leader, Paylocity

Guest

Steven Puri, Founder, The Sukha Company

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ANNOUNCER

You're listening to The HR Mixtape, a podcast for leaders who want to understand people, strengthen culture, and navigate change with clarity. Today's conversation starts now.

[00:00:15]

SHARI SIMPSON

Joining me today is Steven Puri, founder of The Sukha Company. Steven helps people and teams improve focus and wellbeing through practical tools that reduce stress and burnout. Steven, thank you so much for jumping on the podcast with me.

[00:00:34]

STEVEN PURI

Absolutely. We started talking about sonar operators. Now we're talking about serious stuff. Ready to go.

[00:00:39]

SHARI SIMPSON

Yeah. It's wild. There's always that pre-recording that I wish I could capture sometime, but we'll leave that for the mystery of our audience to know what we were talking about. So I was so fascinated when I came across your profile. You've led teams in film, TV, and tech. What did all of those different worlds teach you about motivating high performers? I want to start there because I think sometimes when we talk about our employee population and high performers, we just have this assumption of what we should do with them, but they look so different in all those different environments.

[00:01:15]

STEVEN PURI

Yeah, I appreciate you asking that. And for those listening, of the many episodes that The Good Doctor has done, the reason to listen to this one is I'm one of the few people you'll meet that has been a senior executive at a couple of motion picture studios, which is considered a very creative field. But I've also raised over \$20 million of venture and run three startups, one successful exit, two failures. And it's true, you learn more from the failures. So it is from that perspective that we were talking about, what are some of the things happening right now on teams, both as ICs and as people leaders.

[00:01:53]

STEVEN PURI

And one of the things that I think would be really germane to talk about right now is a lot of people are thinking, 'How do I adjust to the changing landscape of AI being introduced in my organization?' And let's be blunt, most people use AI and they conflate it with LLMs. Large language models. So there's still deep learning, machine learning, and stuff like that, but I think what we're really talking about here is LLMs. How are they reshaping this, and how do I retool my team, or how do I retool myself to be effective in this world? So I'd love to get into that. But back to you, doctor.

[00:02:32]

SHARI SIMPSON

Yeah. I do want to get into that. I wrote this article a few weeks ago called 'Foductivity.' That was the idea around it. We're getting more productivity out of people, but that isn't necessarily hitting the business because for a lot of us, we're just real quiet about it. We're not telling anybody that we've increased our productivity using tools. It's going to catch up. People are going to start to notice those types of things. And business has got to get more intentional because I'm starting to even hear conversations about, 'I've got 30 human FTEs and now I have 30 digital FTEs.' How do we see that changing the landscape right now?

[00:03:16]

STEVEN PURI

I have agents that are running on my Mac Mini. So here are some fundamental thoughts. I'm totally down to argue if you disagree, or if not, let's build upon them. When you think about the kind of tasks that an organization needs to accomplish, that organization can be you as a solopreneur, it can be you as the HR head of a 5,000-person sprawling operation. But there are basic tasks. Now, LLMs, which are forcing this conversation, they're the forcing function right now around productivity.

[00:03:57]

STEVEN PURI

They are like Google autocomplete on steroids. The same way when you were using Gmail a couple years ago and it knew the next character was probably an S because it's a plural you're going to type. LLMs are saying, 'I not only know the next character, I know probably the next word, and then probably the next thought.' And this is how you're going to structure it. Why? Because it is a pattern recognition and replication program. So when it does that well and it replicates the patterns of people that you would read or watch, it has the illusion of thought.

[00:04:33]

STEVEN PURI

This kind of AI, LLMs, is absolutely fantastic at doing your job if your job is the repetitive execution of tasks that can be very clearly defined. 'I take the data from this spreadsheet, I multiply them by four, and I put them in that spreadsheet.' That sort of thing. Your job's gone. Because the LLMs will do it all day long for free, 24 hours a day. No complaints, no PTO, no benefits, no 401(k)s you have to support. So that said, there's this debate about, well, what will humans do?

[00:05:18]

STEVEN PURI

And as you know, in the tech elite, the Elon Musks and the Andreessens of the world, in a very condescending way, say, 'Well, in the new world, there's basically just going to be us, the owners of these AI platforms, and we'll be the tech trillionaires. And then everyone else should stop being white-collar workers. They should just go be skilled laborers. Go be an electrician.' And I think you did an episode not that long ago talking about that. So you're basically making this huge bifurcation: wipe out the middle, and you should be a carpenter or you should be a tech trillionaire. But those places are claimed right now.

[00:06:00]

STEVEN PURI

So what is the alternative? A number of smart AI researchers are saying, 'You know what? This artificial general intelligence, AGI, like truly human-like thinking, we're not actually on the right path. We're pouring money and resources into these pattern replication machines called LLMs.' What they don't do is push forward the frontier. So if you or your team are going to do the human work that LLMs do not do, it really means saying, 'How do I go deep on something and create something that is not just a pattern from the past?' It also means having relationships, because LLMs are not great at having relationships. And it means creativity. So that's why I speak very frequently on this idea of flow states. How do you go into a deep state where you do the work that moves something forward, not just the repetitious work that an LLM can do today better than you and longer.

[00:07:23]

SHARI SIMPSON

I love the conversation around flow states. I had a leader once who gave me a really small piece of advice about dealing with the constant interruptions HR gets. She said, 'When I get texts, I don't reply for 10 minutes.' And I was like, 'What? You don't reply for 10 minutes?' She said, 'Usually most people have solved their own problem in the 10 minutes that I give them.'

[00:07:47]

STEVEN PURI

It was just easier for them to ping you because you're responsive, and they value your time at approximately zero pennies.

[00:07:56]

STEVEN PURI

I know part of your listenership are flow masters. They're like, 'Oh, I know what a flow state is.' There's probably a cohort that's like, 'I've heard about it. I know it's in the zeitgeist. What is it?' Should we define it really quickly?

[00:08:10]

SHARI SIMPSON

Yeah. I would love to hear your definition, but I'll tell you what mine is. My experience is I have two kinds of definitions of flow state. One is the time of day that I am most productive, so that's usually like 9:00 AM to about 12:00 PM Central for me. So I'm very specific about what gets booked in that time. The other kind of flow state to me is when I can turn everything off, there are no distractions, and I am just locked into what I'm doing.

[00:08:43]

STEVEN PURI

I love both parts of that. Let's just set the table for 60 seconds so we all know what we're talking about. There was a Hungarian-American psychologist, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, and he had a thesis. He said, 'It's strange the way if you talk to high performers in different disciplines, athletes and artists and scientists and inventors, about the concentrated states where they do the thing that makes them famous, even though they're in wildly different disciplines, they talk about this state in very similar ways.' He said, 'There's something to that.' So he did the research, did the interviews. At the end of it, he wrote a book called Flow. It's the seminal work on this.

[00:09:30]

STEVEN PURI

He said the greatest thing: 'I chose this word flow even though Michael Jordan talks about being in the zone, Einstein and Picasso have their own words for it.' He said, 'I chose flow because it was the most beautiful metaphor for what I found. We are all on the river paddling to move ourselves forward, but if you align your boat with the current, it carries you. It magnifies your efforts. You go further and faster.' And that's what these high performers have figured out how to do repeatedly. That laid the foundation for a lot of smart people since to dedicate their lives to understanding what are the conditions precedent that help you get into flow. Cal Newport, Kotler, and others. Anything smart that I say on this pod, let's attribute it to one of them.

[00:10:32]

SHARI SIMPSON

I love it. And we'll make sure to put a link to that book in the show notes. All right, let's marry those two ideas.

[00:10:45]

STEVEN PURI

Mihaly in his statement about flow said, 'Let me tell you the characteristics of it.' He said, 'You lose track of time. You lose yourself in the work, you become one with it.' You generally do your best work faster than you think possible, and at the end of it, you actually feel uplifted or a sense of joy rather than depletion. And that's a cool thing. Now, there was a great University of California Irvine study where they wanted to understand how interruptions affect your flow state. It takes about 20 to 23 minutes to drop into a flow state. You don't just snap your fingers. And if you get interrupted, it takes you another 20 to 23 to get back in. So your practice of blocking out time, if you try and book time with me, you can't book between 9:00 and noon, because that is my highest clarity time. I don't do client meetings, I don't do podcasts, I don't do internal meetings. I'm going to do in those three hours what would take me six hours in the afternoon.

[00:12:33]

SHARI SIMPSON

Yeah. All right, so let's marry these two things now. I definitely am the kind of person who can get into the 'I'm going to sit down with my computer and I'm going to explore Claude today.' So Claude is another AI model for those who aren't familiar, like ChatGPT. But I can get lost in figuring things out and there's actually no productivity coming out of me during that time. So how do we think about those two things: the tools we have with AI and the curiosity, and the time-suck hole you can get into trying to learn a new tool?

[00:13:16]

STEVEN PURI

Fantastic question because one of the conditions precedent for flow state is that you need a clearly defined task, and you have to have skills that apply toward that task. Michael Jordan's quote was, 'When I'm in the zone, it's just me and the ball.' But it's not Jordan painting, and it's not Picasso playing basketball. So it has to be something where you have skills that apply and you're doing it at a level that's challenging. An exploration of Claude Code or Claude Cowork may be a hard task to get into flow because you're figuring out, 'What is my task here?' As opposed to, 'I need to write a great blog post. I have mad blogging skills. I'm going to time box this and give myself 45 minutes.' The Sukha community, it's like a flow state app. Most of our members are writers, designers, and engineers, because they have very clearly defined tasks that they can accomplish if they focus.

[00:14:49]

SHARI SIMPSON

That's fascinating. As you were looking at designing your company and this app to help people get there, I'm curious how you see this helping roles potentially that aren't knowledge workers. Basketball is such a good example. That's not a knowledge worker role, but there's still the ability to get into that flow state. How do we start bringing that conversation up more so that people understand that some of the things we talk about feel like they only fit in this knowledge worker, remote, hybrid environment?

[00:15:27]

STEVEN PURI

I don't want to oversell flow states, because they are magical. I'll tell you a very short story. I didn't know the concept of flow state when I first experienced one, but in hindsight, that was it. I was flying from Austin to San Francisco, and I wanted to mock up a feature idea in Figma to pitch to my team the next day. Got on the flight. Alaska runs that nonstop, and the captain said, 'Sorry, kids, Wi-Fi's out.' I started working. About 15 or 20 minutes later, I thought we were descending into Dallas because something was wrong with the aircraft. Looked down. Two hours and 40 minutes had gone by. I couldn't tell you if the drink cart had come by. I couldn't tell you the name of the guy in the seat next to me. But my designs were done.

[00:16:45]

STEVEN PURI

When I got off the flight, I had prepared myself to grab a sandwich in the hotel lobby, go up to the room, try and finish this before I passed out. Instead, I got in the Uber and called a buddy in SF. I said, 'I have a free night. Do you want to go have dinner?' And it felt amazing to be ahead of my day for a change instead of chasing it. Now, you asked about non-knowledge workers. Yes, there are amazing artists that talk about being in the thralls of the muses all night. And it's true, you can get into that state. But I specifically, in building Sukha, was aiming at my own problem, which is I am a knowledge worker. I have to create blogs, write code, design things.

[00:17:27]

STEVEN PURI

I'll tell you this: a bunch of my friends who are founders, C-suite executives, tell me, 'I'm so distracted. I could use your app.' It is useless for them. If you spend your day in meetings, on Zooms, Google Meets, Teams, you are not going to be in flow. You're just going to be playing verbal tennis all day long. It's exhausting, and I wish I could help. What actually happens is I get incoming email from an engineering manager who says, 'Hey, four of my people use your tool. Should I get a site license?' Because they've heard about it from four of their engineers or designers. And what I counsel them is, here's the deal.

[00:18:25]

STEVEN PURI

If you set up your team's schedule so that you have client meetings sporadically during the day, you have standups where it's like, 'Well, what did I do yesterday and what am I doing today,' if you're doing that all day long, no one on your team is going to get into flow. You may have everyone turn in their TPS reports on time because you have a daily meeting about it. But has any billion-dollar company won because the TPS reports are on time?

[00:19:10]

STEVEN PURI

No. The billion-dollar companies come from someone saying, 'Yesterday I actually took two hours and I stared out the window and I thought deeply about that new feature our competitor launched, and there is a flaw in what they're doing, and I think if we move quickly, we could exploit this and launch this.' And everyone in the meeting goes, 'We should leave the meeting now and build that now.' That comes from flow state. That comes from deep thought. That doesn't come from, 'Yeah, in between my Zoom meetings, I had this great idea randomly.' And that's really what I try to encourage. I'm not here to help people who just need to be in board meetings and talking to investors. That is not something you're going to optimize in a flow state.

[00:19:55]

SHARI SIMPSON

That was such a good comment, naming reality as to when something's going to work and when something's not. I love that. I cannot believe we are almost at time. We have talked about so many different wild, exciting things.

[00:20:10]

STEVEN PURI

We did. All in English, all in color, as promised.

[00:20:13]

SHARI SIMPSON

All over the board. I'll leave you with this to answer. As you think about the audience, so this is HR and business leaders who are navigating the complexities of hybrid, fully remote, fully on-site employees, and the rise of AI in everything that they're supposed to be doing. What's your one piece of advice for them as they go forward?

[00:20:39]

STEVEN PURI

I love you're asking that, and I will say this. Fundamentally, the problem that most HR leaders have, and by HR leaders I mean leaders of people, you can define yourself as a chief people officer, an engineering lead, whatever. If you are a leader of people and you approached me in the past year or two, I will tell you almost everything comes down to this: did you hire well?

[00:21:02]

STEVEN PURI

Because the people who are very intentional about, 'This is our culture and this is our mission, and you have to be aligned with both of these before we let you in the door,' they have the greatest success. Because you think the person is great at this job, they want to cure cancer just like you do, they want to make robots to help paraplegics just like you do. And they want to treat each other and your collaborators a certain way. If you hire well, then when you say to someone, 'On Tuesdays and Thursdays, I want you to take two hours, block out your calendar, don't talk to anyone. I will not book a meeting with you. But I want you to go deep and find those ideas that turn us into a billion-dollar company,' that all starts with hiring, because you have to trust those people. And some of those conversations end up with the other person saying, 'Wow, I need to rethink a couple people on my team.'

[00:22:01]

SHARI SIMPSON

Yeah, for sure. I love that, and that helps to define better that concept around 'culture fit.' I've talked about that a lot on the podcast. There's nothing worse than a manager who comes out of an interview and says, 'Yeah, I could totally see getting a beer with that person.' It's like, that's not the job description.

[00:22:23]

STEVEN PURI

Right. It depends where you work.

[00:22:29]

STEVEN PURI

We had the most amazing restaurant manager. Everyone wants to have a beer with him.

[00:22:33]

SHARI SIMPSON

Right. Steven, this was amazing. I'm so glad we got to sit down. Thanks for taking time to chat with me.

[00:22:39]

STEVEN PURI

Hope this was helpful for people.



[00:22:41]

SHARI SIMPSON

Yeah. This was awesome. If somebody wants to learn more about your company, how do they do that?

[00:22:44]

STEVEN PURI

Easiest thing. Anything I've said where they want to go deeper, it does not have to be about my company. My email address is public. It's steven@thesukha.co. Sukha means happiness in Sanskrit, by the way. I will happily send you back a blog post, more to read from Cal Newport, whatever it is that'll help you. And if you do want to try flow states or incorporate it into your organization, the website is thesukha.co. It's free for three days. Use it all you want. If you get into a flow state and it's magical, drop it in the group chat and say, 'I heard you on HR Mixtape.'

[00:23:20]

SHARI SIMPSON

I love it. Thanks again.

[00:23:26]

ANNOUNCER

Thanks for tuning in to The HR Mixtape. Like, share, review, and subscribe to support the show and help more people discover these conversations. Until next time, keep the conversation going.