

James Flaherty's Flow Model

James Flaherty, founder of New Ventures West and author of *Coaching: Evoking Excellence in Others*, developed the Flow of Coaching model as a structured, developmental approach to coaching individuals and teams. Unlike Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's psychological concept of "flow" (which refers to optimal experience), Flaherty's model is about how coaching unfolds over time, a process that enables individuals to grow in competence, awareness, and alignment with organisational goals.

The model is grounded in ontological coaching, which views individuals as holistic beings shaped by language, emotions, and body. It integrates insights from phenomenology, linguistics, and systems thinking, and is often used in leadership development, organisational change, and executive coaching.

The Seven Stages of Flaherty's Flow Model

Flaherty's model outlines a seven-stage coaching process, each building on the previous to create a coherent developmental journey:

1. Establish the Relationship

- The foundation of effective coaching is mutual trust, respect, and freedom of expression.
- This aligns with relational leadership theory, which emphasises the quality of interpersonal connections in leadership effectiveness.

2. Recognise the Opening

- An "opening" is a moment when the coachee becomes receptive to change, often triggered by a challenge, breakdown, or aspiration.
- This stage echoes transformative learning theory (Mezirow), where disorienting dilemmas prompt critical reflection and growth.

3. Observe and Assess Performance

- The coach observes behaviours, moods, and patterns, assessing both competence and commitment.

- This is informed by ontological assessment, which considers not just what people do, but how they are being.

4. Enrol the Coachee

- The coach and coachee co-create a shared commitment to the coaching process, including goals, boundaries, and expectations.
- This stage draws on self-determination theory, which highlights the importance of autonomy and relatedness in motivation.

5. Conduct the Coaching Conversation

- The core of the model: structured conversations that explore breakdowns, generate new interpretations, and design practices.
- Influenced by speech act theory (Austin, Searle), where language is seen as action, what we say shapes what becomes possible.

6. Provide Feedback

- Feedback is both observational and developmental, helping the coachee reflect on progress and adjust behaviours.
- This aligns with Kolb's experiential learning cycle, particularly the stages of reflection and active experimentation.

7. Agree on Future Steps

- The coach and coachee identify new practices, commitments, or areas for further exploration.
- This stage ensures continuity and accountability, reinforcing the coaching as a dynamic, iterative process.

Theoretical Foundations and Linkages

Flaherty's model is integrative by design. It connects with several key theories:

Theory	Connection to Flaherty's Model
Ontological Coaching	Core framework; sees people as shaped by language, mood, and body.
Speech Act Theory	Coaching conversations are performative, language creates reality.

Adult Development Theory (Kegan, Loevinger)	Coaching supports vertical development, shifts in meaning-making capacity.
Systems Thinking	Coaches consider the individual within broader organisational and relational systems.
Integral Theory (Wilber)	Flaherty's model resonates with the "I-We-It" perspectives: self, relationships, and systems.

Business Application: A South African Example

Let's consider Nedbank Group, one of South Africa's largest financial institutions, known for its investment in leadership development and sustainability.

Applying Flaherty's Flow Model at Nedbank:

- **Establishing the Relationship:** Executive coaches work with senior leaders to build trust and psychological safety.
- **Recognising the Opening:** A strategic shift (e.g. digital transformation) creates a need for new leadership behaviours.
- **Observation and Assessment:** Coaches assess how leaders show up in meetings, decision-making, and stakeholder engagement.
- **Enrolment:** Leaders commit to coaching goals aligned with Nedbank's purpose-driven strategy.
- **Coaching Conversations:** Sessions explore how leaders can embody values like accountability and innovation.
- **Feedback:** Coaches provide real-time feedback on communication style, emotional tone, and strategic alignment.
- **Future Steps:** Leaders design new practices, such as stakeholder dialogues or reflective journaling, to embed learning.

This approach supports adaptive leadership, enhances emotional intelligence, and aligns personal growth with organisational transformation.

Conclusion

Flaherty's Flow Model offers a rigorous yet human-centred approach to leadership development. It provides a structured roadmap for coaching that integrates personal insight, behavioural change, and systemic awareness. Its relevance is particularly strong in complex,

fast-changing environments, like those faced by South African corporates navigating digital, social, and environmental transitions.