

BOOK

Focus: The Hidden Driver of Excellence

AUTHOR

Daniel Goleman

PUBLISHER

Harper Collins

PUBLICATION DATE

October 2013

SYNOPSIS [From the publisher]

“Combining cutting-edge research with practical findings, *Focus* delves into the science of attention in all its varieties, presenting a long overdue discussion of this little-noticed and under-rated mental asset. In an era of unstoppable distractions, Goleman persuasively argues that now more than ever we must learn to sharpen focus if we are to survive in a complex world.

“Goleman boils down attention research into a threesome: inner, other, and outer focus. Drawing on rich case studies from fields as diverse as competitive sports, education, the arts, and business, he shows why high-achievers need all three kinds of focus, and explains how those who rely on Smart Practices – mindfulness meditation, focused preparation and recovery, positive emotions and connections, and mental “prosthetics” that help them improve habits, add new skills, and sustain greatness – excel while others do not.”

While the link between attention and excellence remains hidden most of the time, it ripples through almost everything we seek to accomplish.

All that can be boiled down to a threesome: inner, other, and outer focus. A well-lived life demands we be nimble in each. The good news on attention comes from neuroscience labs and school classrooms, where the findings point to ways we can strengthen this vital muscle of the mind. Attention works much like a muscle – use it poorly and it can wither; work it well and it grows.

Inner focus attunes us to our intuitions, guiding values, and better decisions. Other focus smooths our connections to the people in our lives. And outer focus lets us navigate in the larger world.

Attention, from the Latin *attendere*, to reach toward, connects us with the world, shaping and defining our experience. “Attention,” cognitive neuroscientists Michael Posner and Mary Rothbart write, provides the mechanisms “that underlie our awareness of the world and the voluntary regulation of our thoughts and feelings.”

All of this was foreseen way back in 1977 by the Nobel-winning economist Herbert Simon. Writing about the coming information-rich world, he warned that what information consumes is “the attention of its recipients. Hence a wealth of information creates a poverty of attention.”

That focus in the midst of a din indicates selective attention, the neural capacity to beam in on just one target while ignoring a staggering sea of incoming stimuli, each one a potential focus in itself. This is what William James, a founder of modern psychology, meant when he defined attention as “the sudden taking

possession by the mind, in clear and vivid form, of one of what seems several simultaneously possible objects or trains of thought.”¹

The dividing line between fruitless rumination and productive reflection lies in whether or not we come up with some tentative solution or insight and then can let those distressing thoughts go – or if, on the other hand, we just keep obsessing over the same loop of worry.

The ability to stay steady on one target and ignore everything else operates in the brain’s prefrontal regions.

Failure to drop one focus and move on to others can, for example, leave the mind lost in repeating loops of chronic anxiety.

The power to disengage our attention from one thing and move it to another is essential for well-being.

We learn best with focused attention. As we focus on what we are learning, the brain maps that information on what we already know, making new neural connections. If you and a small toddler share attention toward something as you name it, the toddler learns that name; if her focus wanders as you say it, she won’t.

“The most precious resource in a computer system is no longer its processor, memory, disk or network, but rather human attention,” a research group at Carnegie Mellon University notes.

Our social capital – and range of attention – increases as we up the number of social ties through which we gain crucial information, like tacit knowledge of “how things work here,” whether in an organization or a new neighborhood.

The big question: When you get up in the morning, are you happy about getting to work, school, or whatever it is that occupies your day?

One key to more flow in life comes when we align what we do with what we enjoy,

Through what amounts to an optical illusion of the mind, we take what’s within our awareness to equal the whole of the mind’s operations. But in fact the vast majority of mental operations occur in the mind’s backstage, amid the purr of bottom-up systems.

The peak of automaticity can be seen when expertise pays off in effortless attention to high demand, whether a master-level chess match, a NASCAR race, or rendering an oil painting. If we haven’t practiced enough, all of these will take deliberate focus. But if we have mastered the requisite skills to a level that meets the demand, they will take no extra cognitive effort – freeing our attention for the extras seen only among those at top levels.

Overloading attention shrinks mental control. It’s in the moments we feel most stressed that we forget the names of people we know well, not to mention their birthdays, our anniversaries, and other socially crucial data.

Another example: obesity. Researchers find that the prevalence of obesity in the United States over the last thirty years tracks the explosion of computers and tech gadgets in people’s lives – and suspect this is no accidental correlation. Life immersed in digital distractions creates a near-constant cognitive overload. And that overload wears out self-control.

The brain finds it impossible to ignore emotional faces, particularly furious ones.¹⁷ Angry faces have super-salience: scan a crowd and someone with an angry face will pop out.

In a complex world where almost everyone has access to the same information, new value arises from the original synthesis, from putting ideas together in novel ways, and from smart questions that open up untapped potential. Creative insights entail joining elements in a useful, fresh way.

Our mind holds endless ideas, memories, and potential associations waiting to be made. But the likelihood of the right idea connecting with the right memory within the right context – and all that coming into the spotlight of attention – diminishes drastically when we are either hyperfocused or too gripped by an overload of distractions to notice the insight.

“The intuitive mind is a sacred gift and the rational mind is a faithful servant,” Albert Einstein once said. “We have created a society that honors the servant and has forgotten the gift.”

Catching a wandering mind in the act is elusive; more often than not when we are lost in thought we fail to realize that our mind has wandered in the first place. Noticing that our mind has wandered marks a shift in brain activity; the greater this meta-awareness, the weaker the mind wandering becomes.