

Focus Is Power: Effectively Treating Executive Attention Deficit Disorder

By Jeremy Hunter and Marc Sokol



The world is not spinning faster; it just seems that way. Businesses operate 24/7 and expect constant performance. Workers multitask through myriad projects, teams, and time zones, trying to keep up with too many “top priorities.” Many silently long to “stop the madness” and wonder why results don’t change. An answer lies in our ability and choice to focus our attention, which may be the most critical management skill of the 21st century.

“Real Men Don’t Meditate”

Billy is the quality assurance director for a manufacturing company, based in rural Iowa. He constantly generates ways to improve processes across the company, but struggles to communicate them. “I have so many ideas in my head, and seem to jump from one to the next. Sometimes I jump between them instead of staying focused on just one at a time,” he said. When asked how he focuses his mind, and if he has any meditation-like routines to help him focus, he replied, “We don’t do those things around here, you know. And if someone did, they certainly wouldn’t boast about it.” For Billy, we suggested this simple stealth method:

When your thoughts are getting jumbled, pause and try deep breathing for just a single minute: breathing from a point two inches below your navel, inhale slowly to the count of six, hold for a count of two, exhale slowly to the count of nine, and repeat three times if you can. You can do all of this in just one minute. Focus on the count; no one will know you are privately calming your thoughts. At the end of this time, see what bubbles up.

We went on to incorporate basic presentation techniques, such as enumerating ideas and pausing between key messages, but for Billy the first thing was learning to calm his mind and focus.

Paying Attention to Attention

Have you thought about what makes you effective? Most people answer something like

leveraging their strengths, intelligence, or even their winning personality. These are certainly helpful, but there’s an answer that many people, like Billy, often overlook. From our experience, the fundamental basis of effectiveness is the quality of your attention.

What is attention anyway? Most managers would smile at you and quip, “It’s the thing that is most often interrupted in my day.” Not that they truly mind, as they feel committed to being responsive to the business. Probe a bit more, and they will reveal frustration at being unable to focus their attention as much as they would like.

To some researchers, attention is a kind of psychic energy¹, the medium we use to make sense of and organize our experience. Attention is also a limited resource. Of the 11 million bits of information the nervous system can process, we are only consciously aware of 40.² So, the ability to control and focus attention is the starting point for both managing ourselves and everything else in our lives. Focused attention is the building block for any sort of complex learning, decision making, thinking, and creating. Focused attention is focused energy. Scattered attention is scattered energy. Try writing, driving, or meaningfully connecting without it. You’ll quickly see that focused attention is the productive basis for human action.

Most of us haven’t thought much about how we use attention because our schooling tends to cultivate rational thinking above other human capacities. Modern Western institutions train people to think, but fail to enhance their ability to perceive and be present. Many of us simply assume everyone already has the capacity to control their attention. However, if you are involved in sports, arts, or music, where quality of attention is essential, then it becomes startlingly clear how the quality of

your attention directly affects the quality of your performance.

Other cultures, like Japan, historically started in a different place. For the Japanese, strong, stable, present-centered attention is the starting place for effectiveness. Think about the samurai warrior who must face a potentially lethal opponent. The capacity to be intensely present in the face of mortal threat was the key to surviving. One distracted flinch and he would be cut down. Developing attention to be effective, if not merely alive, was understood as essential.

How Attention Connects to Results

A simple map can reveal the relationship between how you use attention and the results you achieve.

Intention » Attention » Awareness » Choice » Action » Result

The map begins with intentions. What do you want? What is your goal? Intention influences where you put your energy or how you use your attention. What you attend to informs your awareness. What you know, how you interpret an event, and what your gut tells you are all part of awareness. This information influences the palette of choices you believe you have, which, in turn, informs actions that bring about a result. Was this the result you wanted? The more these elements are in alignment, the better the chance that intentions turn into results.

Agendas are intentions that focus attention. However, attention can be distracted in ways that can sabotage your intention. I became aware of the red light blinking on my phone telling me there’s a message waiting.



However, my intention is to finish this article, so I'm choosing to focus my attention on writing instead. Where you put attention signals what your priorities are.

Research finds that people who are heavy multitaskers, quickly shifting their limited attention back and forth between several duties, are less able to prioritize action. Life becomes like the person who only sends email with the red urgent exclamation point; everything becomes a high-priority item. This is fundamentally paralyzing. When everything is a high priority, nothing is a high priority. Nothing can happen because we can't do everything at once, no matter how hard we try.

For an executive whose primary role is to make and execute decisions, fragmented attention is a poison pill to effectiveness and a fast track to a damaged reputation. Consider the case of a distracted executive writing a letter to his HR head about firing an employee who mistakenly sends the note to the employee instead. Is this a situation you want to find yourself in? Here are some examples of how we have helped people effectively structure their attention to generate better results.

Treating Executive Attention Deficit Disorder

Frank leads a business unit providing sales, service delivery, and after-sales customer support. He is full of enthusiasm, committed to increasing organizational performance and, like many executives, he is widely extended

across multiple teams, projects, and initiatives. His energy seems limitless. He is also constantly multitasking.

As part of an executive development program, Frank participated in a 360-degree feedback process. His team admired Frank's business savvy and energy. However, they struggled with his habit of pausing to take a call or check his email in what seemed like every single encounter. They joked that he was the executive embodiment of Attention Deficit Disorder.

The impact of Frank's distractibility was that others felt their issues were unimportant compared to anything that might randomly come up while talking with him. Upon hearing the Attention Deficit Disorder analogy, Frank could see his own behavior and wasn't happy with the effect it was having. At the same time, he felt he had to be constantly available to the company president, who sometimes had a question for him. Frank's conflicting good intentions had him in a bind.

Do you know anyone who reminds you of Frank? We'll come back to this story in a bit.

Manage Attention, Not Time

If you know someone like Frank, you may have seen them try out different time-management tactics, only to give them up—because none of them work when you have so much work to get done. From our perspective, these efforts don't work because they're trying to manage the wrong thing.

Unless you possess god-like powers, no one actually "manages time." What we can do, however, is manage attention in time. Time provides the boundaries where attention is used. You might "manage time" by allotting an hour to finish an important report, but if the phone rings and takes your focus away for 45 minutes, what have you actually done? How we use attention in time is the key to effectiveness.

Two guiding principles drive the way we think about ways to manage attention:

1. There is no "best" way; different approaches can work well. What matters is selecting an approach that suits you and your situation. Some methods operate at a personal level of increasing focus, while others are geared for interpersonal attention, or designed for a group to use together.
2. The key is to try something, experiment, and adapt to produce the desired result. The best ways fit like a glove that stretches and conforms to you.

Find a Role Model of Attention

Let's return to our multitasking hero, Frank. How did we help him become less distracted? We knew that he admired the company president as a leader and explored what made him worthy of respect. Frank noted that the president never looked distracted when you met with him; he was completely focused. If he did become distracted during a meeting with you, it was over. So staying on topic and in the moment mirrored how Frank could also behave. He liked the idea of being more attentive as a leader, but worried how to maintain his commitment of being responsive to others.

Structure Attention According to Need

To address his competing commitments, we experimented with two things: technology and requests Frank would make to others. First, as Frank received unending calls and emails on his smartphone, we used technology to segment his most important calls from other distractions. Frank got a separate phone that only the president and his executive assistant had access to, so if that phone rang he could answer it, and then choose which other calls to take and which to return.

Focus Energy by Negotiating Agendas, Expectations, and Time Boundaries

Like many executives, Frank's day was an unending series of 30- and 60-minute meeting blocks with little to no time in between to respond to issues. We had Frank renegotiate the length of his meetings, so he



could have time to focus and time to respond. He said to one colleague, “I will give you 45 minutes of absolutely uninterrupted time (unless the president calls), provided you are ready to start on time and commit to not exceeding the 45-minute point.” Most were thrilled with the prospect of having Frank’s full attention. In the 15 minutes between meetings, Frank found time to respond to other requests. Similarly, the 30-minute meetings became 20-minute highly focused meetings, leaving Frank a brief block of time between appointments.

Frank had the same number of meetings each day but was more focused. Over time, he accumulated as much as two hours throughout the day to respond to other issues. Seeing the results, Frank became more mindful of how he used his attention.

After some months, he discovered that his added focus was a benefit to others as well as to himself. He also learned that the president

was fine with Frank getting back to him within the hour, not in a matter of seconds, when he had a question. It was as if Frank discovered that focus can foster power.

Focusing Attention in Team Meetings: Getting Distractions on the Table

Have you been in a meeting where someone’s cell phone rings and they step out? Or how about when someone abruptly stands up, apologetically explains he or she has something more pressing, and leaves? You find yourself thinking, “I have important things to do, too!” Each situation is an example of how a group’s focus can get hijacked mid-meeting.

One tool to use at the beginning of meetings is to ask if anything is going on that might keep someone from being fully focused. Someone may say that he had a fender-bender on the way to the office, and if a call comes in pertaining to that he needs to step out. Another might indicate that a big deal is pending and, if someone from the team calls, that she will need to respond immediately. Others may say there is nothing pressing for the next hour. This sets an expectation that team members will be accountable to one another and remain focused on the meeting and in the moment.

Becoming mindful of how and when your attention and your accompanying internal dialogue shift is a step toward seeing the triggers of distraction.

For a team that regularly meets and wants to develop greater focus, you might briefly inquire at the end, “How did we do staying focused today? When were we most focused, and when did we seem more distracted? How did it impact our results?” Don’t try to fix it; just try to increase awareness of how you use your time. Most groups will self-correct in light of the emerging information.

Negotiating Attention in Short Meetings

Time-pressed managers sometimes struggle to hold efficient update meetings with their staff, while also allowing for spontaneous conversation. For these managers, we recommend 10-10 meetings, “10 minutes for you; 10 minutes for me.” The employee has responsibility for the first 10 minutes and any agenda or set of topics for discussion; these can be task-related or personal, team or organizational. The manager’s role is to be fully focused and engage in the employee’s agenda for these 10 minutes.

Then they switch. The manager controls the next 10 minutes, covering topics that he or she wants to emphasize, and the employee is fully focused on this agenda. Both parties have to discover how much can actually be covered in 10 minutes, which also helps them learn to prioritize topics. Managers tell us that over time they see their staff come to these meetings excited, organized, and eager to cover a specific agenda, and that employees seem more attentive and engaged when it is their manager’s turn. And all in 20 minutes!

How could you use this tactic with your own staff? How could you use this with your manager?

Distraction Games We Play

How often do we start to focus on one task, only to find a sudden need to rearrange the books on a shelf from being organized by subject area to being organized alphabetically by author? Or why do we suddenly notice the lawn is unevenly cut, paid bills haven’t been filed, or that there are so many interesting cat videos on the Internet?

These are games we play to distract ourselves when focus is a challenge—or when the answers we seek aren't quickly appearing, and we could be doing something else. It's familiar to any author who has struggled with writer's block.

So what to do? Rather than fight it directly, rather than unproductively self-criticize, try to notice the moment when your attention shifts away from your intended action. Becoming mindful of how and when your attention and your accompanying internal dialogue shift is a step toward seeing the triggers of distraction. Because developing attention is like developing any skill, you have to be patient and do it over and over again. We call it the Intention-Attention Mindset, and it follows the map presented earlier:

1. Declare intentions, even if just to yourself: "I need to be on 100 percent in this call."

2. Take a small step in the direction of your intention: "I'll shut down my computer so it won't distract me."

3. If you can't take that step after several attempts, it might be a sign you need to take a break. Remember, research shows that attention works best in 90-minute intervals.

4. Notice and appreciate when you have been successful. Say, "I can do this," instead of "I can't."

A Final Thought

As new realities of the 21st century settle in, it is time for a reset of how we attend to the topic of attention. Paying attention to your own attention is a critical leadership skill that all of us can develop and enhance. As for those who fail to manage their attention, unfortunately,

they may not even notice how far they have fallen behind. **P&S**

Endnotes

- ¹ See Mihaly, Csikszentmihalyi. (2008). *Flow: The psychology of optimal experience*. New York, NY: Harper Perennial Modern Classics.
- ² See Wilson, Timothy. (2004). *Strangers to ourselves: discovering the adaptive unconscious*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press.

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