Focus

*The Hidden Driver of Excellence*

Daniel Goleman

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**Key Concepts**

Psychologist and journalist Daniel Goleman provides insight into the many ways attention and focus drive the success or failure of people in all walks of life. He maintains that successful people master three main types of attention:

1. *Inner focus* attunes people to their intuitions, guiding values, and better decision making. It involves *self-awareness*, which is one of the most important tenets of success, bringing an internal control that helps people choose what to do and not do in life.

2. *Other focus* smooths connections to the people in a person’s life. It involves *emotional empathy*, allowing people to feel what others might be feeling. It brings *cognitive empathy*, which gives people the ability to understand another person’s way of seeing and of thinking, even if they do not feel the same. And it fosters *empathic concern*, enabling people to put another person’s feelings above their own.

3. *Outer focus* lets people navigate the larger world. The most successful people are able to navigate systems and understand their impact on the world.

**Summary**

**Introduction**

In *Focus*, Daniel Goleman discusses the many attributes of attention and how important it is in a person’s daily life. Without focus, it is nearly impossible to thrive in the modern world, but paradoxically, the modern world has created so many distractions that it is becoming increasingly more difficult to do so. Goleman’s analysis shows how high-performers in all areas (sports, education, business, etc.) must be masters of three types of focus: *inner,*
other, and outer. By becoming experts in these three areas, leaders in any field will improve their habits, gain new skills, and achieve excellence.

The Subtle Faculty

The study of people’s attention spans and their ability to focus started diligently during World War II, but has taken off in more recent years. While the link between attention and excellence usually remains hidden, it plays an important part in nearly everything people seek to accomplish. Yet attention still remains a little-noticed and underrated mental asset. Leaders who wish to perform at their best and see results need to be aware of three different kinds of attention: inner, other, and outer focus.

Focus is critical in today’s digital world. But technology, in the form of smartphones, tablets, and other devices, disrupts normal connections. Teens in particular are becoming completely unaware of what is happening around them and clueless about how to interact with others because of the time they spend on their devices. Even adults are finding it more difficult to sustain concentration on anything else when they are constantly checking emails and social media.

Part I: The Anatomy of Attention

There are two main types of distractions: sensory and emotional. Sensory distractions can be as simple as sounds, shapes, colors, tastes, smells, and other sensations. Emotional distractions are more difficult to manage. When something tumultuous happens, it can often overtake a person’s thoughts for a long period of time, making it difficult to focus on other tasks.

Additionally, the brain has two semi-independent systems:

1. **Bottom-up thinking** originates primarily in the lower part of the brain, and works to notify the brain’s upper regions when necessary. It operates constantly, helping people solve their problems. Bottom-up thinking is fast, involuntary, intuitive, impulsive, and the executor of habitual routines.

2. **Top-down thinking** is voluntary, slow, and effortful; it is the seat of self-control and helps people learn new models and make new plans. It helps with self-awareness, reflection, and deliberation. When people choose to focus on something, they are using their top-down minds.

The greatest minds distribute tasks between both systems. The automaticity of the bottom-up mind helps free up space for the top-down mind to focus on what needs extra attention.

Every type of attention—even a wandering mind—has its uses. While it may hurt a person’s immediate focus, it often moves toward resolving problems. A drifting mind also allows for self-reflection, planning, and organizing memories.

Many people talk of having brilliant discoveries while on vacation, taking a walk, or having a bath. Open time where the mind is free to wander can lead to great things. Tight schedules, on the other hand, can kill the creative spirit. Tightly focused attention gets fatigued. The antidote to this is rest. People can start by switching from top-down thinking to more bottom-up activities, preferably in a relaxing setting. Surfing the web, playing video games, and answering emails do not count. Instead, unplugging is important, for it regularly restores focus and composure. Even better is to fully focus on something relaxing.

Rapport demands joint attention—mutual focus. Our need to make an effort to have such human moments has never been greater, given the ocean of distractions we all navigate daily.
**Part II: Self-Awareness**

When making decisions, people's subtle physiological reactions reflect the sum total of their experiences relevant to the decisions at hand. Self-awareness represents an essential focus on the subtle murmurs within that guide their way through life.

People can test their own self-awareness by doing a *360-degree evaluation*. This process involves people rating themselves on a range of specific behaviors or traits and comparing their results to what others think of them. Interestingly, the higher a person's position in an organization, the less self-aware they tend to be. “Tuned-out” leaders tend to see themselves as being more effective than they really are.

*Groupthink* is a phenomenon in which people ignore evidence and create a shared self-deception. Leaders can avoid groupthink by expanding their circles of connection. Discounting crucial data drives blind spots that lead to poor decisions. Better decisions are made when leaders take *smart risks*, which are based on wide and voracious data gathering checked against a gut sense. Poor decisions can result, however, when the base of inputs is too narrow. Candid feedback from those a person trusts and respects creates a source of self-awareness that can help guard against skewed information.

Self-awareness, including awareness of emotions, leads to self-control. Attention regulates emotion. During an emotional outburst, distraction can work to calm the emotions down. Staying focused on this distraction until the brain's amygdala is calm is an important attention maneuver that most people learn as children. This executive attention holds the key to self-management, and leads to will power and self-discipline.

Willpower is one of the most important factors in navigating through life. When a person pits self-control against instant gratification, three varieties of attention are at play: voluntarily disengaging focus, resisting distraction, and remaining focused on a goal in the future.

Studies have shown that children with greater self-control grow up to have better financial success and health and commit fewer crimes. It is just as powerful a predictor as social class, family wealth, or IQ.

**Part III: Reading Others**

Some people exhibit great empathy; they are keenly attuned to others' signals. There are three distinct types of empathy:

1. **Cognitive empathy** is when people take on other people's perspectives, comprehend their mental states, and still manage their own emotions. This is a top-down mental process.
2. **Emotional empathy** occurs when a person feels the same feelings as another. A bottom-up process, it evolves in early infancy. A person is wired to feel another's pain or joy before he or she can even think about it.
3. **Empathic concern** is when a person is led to care about another and mobilizes to help that person if needed. This compassionate attitude builds on bottom-up systems for caring and attachment, while mixing with more reflective, top-down circuits that evaluate how much the person values another's well-being. However, it can be double-edged—for example, helping professionals who become too emotionally involved may suffer greatly.

Empathy is best experienced in person; it can be challenging to exhibit when working online. Without seeing one another's nonverbal cues, people are flying blind. Online, people must rely solely on cognitive empathy.
There can be darker sides to empathy. Sometimes people use it to spot weaknesses in others and then take advantage of them. This strategy is typical of sociopaths, who use their cognitive empathy to manipulate. About 1 percent of the population is sociopathic. Any empathy on their part is a top-down process.

Compassion builds on empathy, which in turn requires a focus on others. People who are self-absorbed simply do not notice other people. Additionally, some people are blind to social cues, or nonverbal messages that others send. One brain test requires people to look at photos of faces and identify what emotion is being shown. Those who are very socially sensitive do well on the test, while people with autism do not. Every person falls somewhere within this broad range. Those most alert to social situations have stronger activity and connectivity in their brain circuits than those who are not. The brain’s hippocampus is where social circumstances are processed. The hippocampus is what makes people act differently with family than they do at work, for example.

Studies have shown that people with more wealth and power have the ability to dismiss inconvenient people with ease. Since the poor depend on one another for assistance more than wealthy people do, they are often more engaged and empathic. The same is often true for higher-ranking versus lower-ranking people in an organization. Higher-ranking people tend to monopolize conversations and have less empathy toward others.

**PART IV: THE BIGGER CONTEXT**

The parietal cortex in the brain handles pattern recognition. There is no similar part of the brain that is dedicated to understanding systems, which are a cohesive set of patterns. Navigating systems requires the neocortex. It is more of a top-down process and requires more focus and effort.

Systems are, at first glance, invisible to people, although they may understand them indirectly. For example, the Polynesian art of “wayfinding,” which is piloting a double-hulled canoe (often thousands of miles) using only the lore in a person’s head, is a system of understanding wave swells, constellations, the flight of seabirds, and so on. With more modern systems available, wayfinding is dying out, as are many other native systems.

The human brain does not have the ability to fully grasp the concept of global threats, at least not in the same way it can focus in on social cues. Global threats are simply too big or seem too distant to comprehend.

Because emotions guide attention, humans tend to veer away from anything negative. A better way to address possible global threats is to focus more on the positives of making environmental improvements. By increasing their handprints (positive changes), people can reduce their overall carbon footprints (negative behaviors) and have a positive effect on the world.

**PART V: SMART PRACTICE**

While it is often stated that 10,000 hours are required to master most skills, this is only partially true. If a person is doing the something incorrectly during those 10,000 hours, his or her skill level will not improve. Mechanical repetition is not the key. By adjusting his or her execution over and over, however, a person will get closer to the goal. Concentrating appropriately and obtaining feedback are more important than simply putting in the hours.

Many people need to store a great deal of information to be effective at work. The secret to remarkable memorization is chunking: A person persistently studies one chunk of data until it is memorized, then moves on to another chunk of data and adds it to the first one, and so on. Memorization and concentration are excellent ways to expand one’s attention span.
Lately there has been much discussion about gamification. Some experts believe video games cause people's attention spans to decrease, while others say the opposite. Essentially, video games are like food: Some are good for people and some are not. The specifics of the game make all the difference. For example, games with hyperactive auto races and rapid-fire battles have been shown to enhance visual attention, speed of processing information, object tracking, and the ability to switch from one mental task to another. Games that offer increasingly difficult cognitive challenges drive positive brain changes.

However, sometimes these skills do not necessarily transfer well into the real world. For some children, the overstimulation may make them feel bored in school. In a Singaporean study, children who became extreme gamers showed increases in anxiety, depression, and social phobia, as well as a drop in grades. Once the gaming stopped, all of those problems decreased.

Specific brain-training apps, however, can slow the loss of key cognitive functions. Games like Tenacity strengthen selective attention. When it comes to video games, selection and moderation are important.

A program designed to help children self-regulate by doing deep breathing exercises and other relaxation techniques during the school day is known as Breathing Buddies. It is part of the Inner Resilience Program, a legacy of the attacks on the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001. After implementing the techniques, the schools that use them report that kids have fewer emotional outbursts and are more interested in school, and the overall atmosphere is calmer. Similar attention-training programs that also work well for school-aged kids have also been implemented in workplaces like Google.

**Part VI: The Well-Focused Leader**

Directing attention toward where it is most needed is a fundamental leadership task. However, everyone needs to be on the same page in order to truly achieve success.

Organizations have limited capacity for attention. They need to choose exactly what to focus on and what to ignore. Each core function within an organization may have a separate focus as well. Organizational “attention deficit disorder” causes flawed decision making. To avoid this, leaders must effectively capture and direct the collective attention toward what has meaning. An organization’s strategy represents the desired pattern of organizational attention.

For example, when Steve Jobs came back to Apple in 1997 after a 13-year hiatus, the company was floundering. It had, in fact, lost its focus. Jobs decided that instead of having dozens of products, they needed just four: one computer and one laptop for consumers and one computer and one laptop for businesses.

The best leaders have systems awareness, which helps them understand where and how they should proceed. Good leaders check potential strategic choices against everything they know. They also gather data that might be relevant to a key decision from a large variety of sources—more than most people might think are necessary. They then combine this data with gut feelings. The perfect combination for making smart decisions is to be a domain expert and to have high self-awareness.

Inspiring leaders are those who can articulate shared values that resonate and motivate a group. People love to work for inspirational leaders. Pacesetters, on the other hand, are leaders who simply give orders and expect obedience. If this is a leader’s primary way of managing, it creates a toxic environment. These leaders are so focused on systems or process that they are blind to their impact on the people around them.
Studies often cite that truly successful leaders in the workplace require non-academic qualities like empathy and self-awareness as much as intelligence. More specifically, good leaders are recognizable because they:

- Take time to mentor and advise.
- Listen and set clear expectations.
- Coach others based on what those people say they want out of their lives and careers.
- Accept advice and are collaborative in their decision making.
- Celebrate wins and build emotional capital.

Systems awareness in the absence of self-awareness and empathy will not be sufficient for outstanding leadership. All three need to be carefully balanced.

**PART VII: THE BIG FUTURE**

Reinventing business for the future could mean finding shared values supported by all stakeholders—what some call *conscious capitalism*. Leaders need to expand their focus to a further horizon line while taking their systems understanding to a much finer focus. Their leadership should reshape the systems themselves.

If a company sees itself as little more than a machine to make money, it ignores the web of connections to its employees, the community it operates in, its customers, and society as a whole. Leaders with a wider and longer view bring these relationships into focus.

**FEATURES OF THE BOOK**

**Estimated Reading Time: 4–5 hours, 320 pages**

*Focus* by Daniel Goleman discusses the importance of focus and attention in a person’s daily life. Anyone who aspires to be a high achiever or in a position of leadership, whether in business, education, the arts, or sports, can benefit from the information found in this book. Goleman cites scientific studies throughout the book to provide evidence for his claims, and presents nearly 30 pages of notes backing up his data. Real-life examples of business leaders, educators, and sports stars are also provided. The book includes recommended resources should the reader like more information on the topics discussed.

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Daniel Goleman, a former science journalist for the New York Times, is the author of 13 books and lectures frequently to professional groups and business audiences and on college campuses. He cofounded the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning at the Yale University Child Studies Center (now at the University of Illinois at Chicago). He lives in Massachusetts.