

# Focus Summary

By Daniel Goleman

In today's world, attention might just be the new form of human capital.

*Focus* is an essential text and a manual for learning how to increase awareness and attention span. Using a range of case studies, Daniel Goleman offers practical advice on adopting a positive mental attitude, training willpower, and ultimately leading more focussed and productive lives, for the good of ourselves and the planet.

As you read, or listen to this summary, your mind will probably wander 20-40% of the time, and this "zoning-out" will affect what you remember. We'll check this at the end. The point here is that our attention is a scarce resource, and that all of us could benefit from increased focus.

Author Daniel Goleman is a renowned lecturer, and former science journalist. In *Focus*, he explains how we're continually fighting internal and external distractions, that make it difficult to concentrate on the tasks at hand.

The Nobel-winning economist, Herbert Simon, predicted this in 1997, when he warned that living in the information age, creates a poverty of attention. Not only do we struggle with constant internal and sensory distractions, but we also have to cope with the continuous stream of technology, which leaves us little to no time to reflect. This often makes it difficult to focus, especially when we need to complete tasks such as, reading for meaning, thinking deeply, or communicating carefully. As Goleman says, we can often "hopscotch" or "multi-task," which

negatively affects our well-being, and our capacity to excel in whatever we do.

In this brief summary, Goleman makes a strong case for the need to focus, and build up our attention spans. And, it's not just about self-improvement; it's also about paying attention, and shifting focus towards the bigger picture, such as the sustainability of our planet, our own futures, and the futures of younger generations. Hence, he argues that it's not only about individual focus; it's also about entrenching the need for a collective focus. By explaining the neurobiology of different types of attention, how self-awareness underpins our ability to focus, and what we can do to strengthen our awareness at any stage of life, we're given guidelines to help us be more disciplined.

## **Attention isn't a Straightforward Concept**

We're continually told to "pay attention," and this is because our minds tend to wander throughout the day. The point is that our minds are continuously moving between selective attention, and open awareness.

When we start a project, we're often advised to start broad, and then narrow our focus. This same logic applies to our attention and awareness. Open awareness is peripheral and panoramic, and it allows different stimuli to move through our consciousness, whereas selective attention, allows us to bring focus to a specific stimulus. The ability to consciously select an object of focus, and our ability to sustain this attention, is ultimately what helps us to learn.

When we're distracted, there's a lot of mental chatter, about all sorts of things unrelated to what we're doing. This makes it very difficult to retain

information. Unfortunately, this sharp focus isn't like a stretchable balloon, it's more of a narrow pipe, which means that we can't just switch attention on a whim, or sustain our focus indefinitely.

On the other hand, open and spontaneous awareness is very different, but just as important. This panoramic awareness pulls us away from sharp focus, but can open us up to broad thinking. The open awareness of a drifting mind, makes us receptive to different insights, breakthroughs, and novel solutions. This mode of thinking creates the ideal platform, to then decide where to apply our focused attention. We often think that this is just mind-wandering, but it can pull us towards something that we're trying to work out. It helps us to solve problems and to be creative. If you're always trying to hold onto cognitive control, you may have trouble switching easily to mind-wandering creativity. This could hinder self-reflection, social navigation, new ideas, and planning future scenarios. The systems involved in mind-wandering, are particularly active just before a creative insight. Interestingly, adults with attention deficit disorder (ADHD) are particularly good at this kind of creative thinking. They exhibit very high levels of original creative thought, and are generally more successful at creative achievements than those without ADHD. They do well despite their zoning out, or maybe, because of it.

Open mode attention, also helps our interior focus. We notice our feelings, sensations, and memories, with a panoramic awareness that we do not have when focusing on the shopping list. So the process is to be open to possibility, and then apply a conscious focus to decide which insights to use, and then to deliberately move from open awareness, to narrow focus.

# Mind-Wandering Should be an Active Choice

Mind-wandering isn't always a bad thing, but it should never be an unnoticed default position. The ideal is to find a balance between the two, and deliberately shift to open awareness, rather than being pulled off task by distractions that cause mind-wandering.

Our minds wander most frequently when we're at work, on the computer, or commuting. These thoughts are generally skewed towards the unpleasant, which tends to make us unhappy, stressed, and anxious. Therefore, we need free time in order to sustain an open awareness, or what Goleman refers to as, "a creative cocoon." All of us should find a space, or allocate time to embed ourselves in a creative cocoon where we can have protected time to think creatively.

As with all things, our capacity for focused attention, does have its limits, and we often get fatigued. Stephen Kaplan's work on attention restoration theory, suggests that we take relaxing breaks in restful surroundings in order to rejuvenate our minds, in order to focus again. However, it's important to note that not all activities help with fatigue, and things such as surfing the Internet, playing video games, or answering emails, are not conducive to recharging the mind. We need to focus on activities and pursuits that engage with our senses, such as meditation, where the internal chatter is at its lowest.

## Find a Balance

Part of the secret is to find balance, but our neural wiring can make this difficult. For example, Albert Einstein said that 'The intuitive mind is a

sacred gift, and the rational mind is a faithful servant. We have created a society that honors the servant and has forgotten the gift.'

To understand the neurology behind the two types of attention, let's think about it as cognitive scientists do, i.e., in terms of "bottom-up" and "top-down" focus.

A full focus leads to being fully engaged, without being aware of what's happening around us, and this is also known as "flow." When we're not fully focused, we're often disengaged and lack motivation and purpose. Being disengaged can also cause us to feel extremely frazzled, with an overloaded nervous system. The secret to maintaining full focus, is to manage the great neural divide. This helps you enter a state of flow.

We all have two minds at work, the "bottom-up," and, the "top-down." The bottom-up neural machinery of the lower-brain is intuitive and impulse-driven. It's also non-stop operational, and the master of our habits and preconceived ideas. On the other hand, the top-down, or neocortex, is the master of self-control, takes on planning and new behaviors, and manages the bottom-up impulses.

The problem with finding a balance, is that it takes effort and practice. It takes effort, because the more impulsive bottom-up brain likes to take control. From a scientific point of view, the circuitry of the bottom-up functions of the brain, reacts far quicker than the prefrontal cortex. The prefrontal cortex, i.e. the top-down mind, is geared towards safety, nutrition, and procreation. Hence, we're most prone to impulsive behavior when we're distracted, or when too much information is overwhelming us. And, in a technological world, with so many distractions creating cognitive overload, our self-control wears down, which is why we tend to react rather than to reflect, or mindlessly reach for chocolate.

When we're bombarded by sensory and emotional overload, parts of our brain trigger neural hijacks. Messages are sent to both the right and left sides of the brain, and we have to wait for the left side to calm the right side down. Goleman says that resilient people, can have as much as 30 times more activation in the left prefrontal cortex area, than those who are less resilient. The good news is, that all of us can build the strength of the neural circuitry responsible for focus. In fact, research indicates that paying deliberate attention to our own attention spans, is essential for excellence.

## **Focus, Trumps IQ**

Did you know that our ability to focus, is a better predictor of success than our IQ?

From the age of about three years, a toddler begins to develop what's known as executive attention. Executive attention is the ability to focus deliberately, to ignore distractions, and to halt impulses. This form of cognitive control, is crucial for self-management, and it forms the core of

willpower, which is the essence of self-regulation. Success is determined by how we manage our lives, and the interesting thing is that this is visible from early childhood.

The Dunedin study, carried out in New Zealand, revealed that our willpower is our destiny. It's probably the most significant study on the contributing factors to success. Over a year-long study, just over a thousand children were studied intensively during early childhood. Then, over two decades later, the research subjects were tracked down, and only 4% of the original sample were not reassessed. The subjects were then studied in terms of their overall health, wealth, and any criminal records. This data was then linked to the batteries of tests carried out in the earlier childhood study. The findings were fascinating, and showed that those with higher self-control in early childhood, were a lot healthier, achieved greater financial success, and were law-abiding citizens. It was also revealed that self-control is just as important as social class, the wealth of family of origin, and even IQ when it comes to later financial success and good health. Other studies have supported this, indicating that high self-control means better grades, positive emotional adjustment, good social skills, and adaptability. So, although we think that IQ is a key factor in success, focus is actually a much better predictor of overall intelligence and aptitude.

The bottom line is, that we need to work hard to increase children's self-control levels because this is a key factor in determining their future success. Instant gratification is everywhere we look, but let's take a lesson from none other than the Cookie Monster from *Sesame Street*. As his name suggests, the Cookie Monster is obsessed with cookies, but even he tries out new strategies for holding out on his favorite treat. For example, he may try to distract his mind from the temptation in front of him, or he may opt for delayed gratification because he realizes there are

better cookies around the corner.

These are important lessons, not only for children, but for all of us, and they've resulted in a growing industry. Brain training games, especially online activities, show promise in teaching us to focus. Some Silicon Valley tech experts are also developing what's known as "calming tech," which can bring more balance to the online world. Calming technology includes apps with the aim of helping children to build their focusing skills. Meditation techniques for children are also growing in popularity, as are apps like Tenacity, which boost the capacity to focus.

Goleman says that being able to stop on cue, is the holy grail of cognitive control, and he offers some excellent methods to shift from bottom-up, to top-down responses.

## **Exercise Your Attention Muscle**

Developing the attention muscle of adults is also crucial, particularly when it comes to leadership.

Interestingly, our different types of focus form a trio. First, there's inner focus, which helps us guide our intuition, values, and decisions. Then there's other focus, which allows us to form good connections to those around us. Finally, there's what's known as outer focus, which allows us to manage complex systems in the external world. You need to think of this trio as an equilateral triangle, because deficits in any of these, can leave us either rudderless, clueless, or blindsided.

Some experts describe today's business leaders as, being under siege. This is because success in any leadership position depends heavily on



these three areas of focus, and how leaders understand and balance the focus trio. Balancing the trio means prioritizing reflective time, and being mindful of what we need, i.e. focussing on our inner selves. Having a strong focus on others, by way of other focus, helps us to form good connections to those around us. Focusing on others also develops empathy.

Empathy also comes in three forms. Cognitive empathy is our capability to understand other people's viewpoints, emotional empathy is our ability to respond physically and emotionally to how someone is feeling, and empathic concern, is whether or not we're motivated to take action to help people. The final aspect of the trio is outer focus. This is important because it involves being mindful of long-term outcomes, as well as taking into account the long-term consequences of our actions. In an increasingly globalized world, this is absolutely vital because we need to shift focus, and be aware of global systems that influence our planet's very survival.

Shifting focus isn't always easy, because it takes us out of our comfort zones. Do you remember the days of BBM, and sending BBM pins to your friends and family? Whatever happened to BlackBerry? Blackberry is a company that didn't focus on the magic trio, and who didn't manage to transition out of their comfort zone. Apple, on the other hand, has a history of weathering storms and adapting to market changes. The basic fact is that companies have to pick up on approaching changes, and not to squander time before adapting to a world that has already changed. These acts of attention, take what scientists call, cognitive effort.

This book shows us, that there's a strong case to be made for leaders to have the full range of inner, other, and outer focus in order to excel. Furthermore, if any one of the focus areas is weak, this will throw

everything off balance. The key is to balance the trio, and to use each type of focus at the right time, in the right way.

## **In Conclusion**

When you ask yourself, 'What's holding you back?' it's likely that it's your attention span and the fact that you're distracted. Many of us procrastinate, or try to multitask, and it's killing our productivity and our passion for work. We're often unhappy, simply because we lack a positive attitude towards our work, and our daily lives. And this lack of work ethic, and feeling of being constantly distracted and disinterested, makes us stressed and anxious.

The power of this book, is that it shows us how to retrain ourselves to reach high levels of focus. In doing so, we might find ourselves rekindling the passion that we have towards our work, projects, life, self, and other people. What's more, it attempts to encourage us to shift our focus, so that we can start considering global systems, and consider the long term needs of everyone around us, including the powerless and the poor, as well as our own peers.

And we haven't forgotten the mind-wandering check. Let's see if you can answer these questions?

What's the name of the character in Sesame Street who battles with self-control?

What three areas of focus make up the trio needed to lead effectively?

What was the name of the significant study that assessed the importance

of self-control in children?

Where was this famous study conducted?

The key message is that it's time we all stop measuring IQ, and start measuring levels of focus.