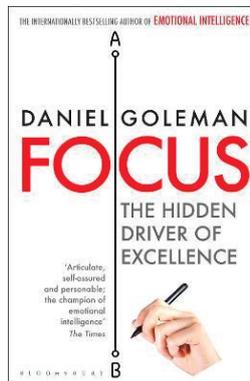




FOCUS: THE HIDDEN DRIVER OF EXCELLENCE
BY DANIEL GOLEMAN



THE BOOK


Focus: The Hidden Driver of Excellence
by Daniel Goleman


INTRODUCTION

Almost a decade after its release, Daniel Goleman's *Focus* remains one of the authoritative texts on focus, attention and their effects.

Focus is an in-depth dive into the tools we can use to navigate an increasingly distraction-filled world. Goleman brought decades of experience as a psychologist and journalist to write his 2013 bestseller, and it shows.

Using a highly readable blend of scientific research, colourful case studies and practical techniques, this book will open your mind to new ways of focusing. You will learn that focus is a multifaceted beast and that wandering attention can actually be as valuable as laser focus. More than a lesson in paying attention, Goleman explores how and when to harness attention and when to let it slip.

Told with compassion and empathy, *Focus* is an essential read for anyone who ever wondered why their mind wanders. The lessons within will teach you some basic tricks to improve your concentration, while helping you to understand the importance of focusing on the broader picture.



5 BEST QUOTES

“Daydreaming incubates creative discovery.”

“The antidote for mind-wandering is meta-awareness, attention to attention itself, as in the ability to notice that you are not noticing what you should, and correcting your focus. Mindfulness makes this crucial attention muscle stronger.”

“It's not the chatter of people around us that is the most powerful distractor, but rather the chatter of our own minds. Utter concentration demands these inner voices be stilled. Start to subtract sevens successively from 100 and, if you keep your focus on the task, your chatter zone goes quiet.”

“Directing attention toward where it needs to go is a primal task of leadership.”

“Mindfulness helps especially for those of us for whom every setback, hurt or disappointment creates endless cascades of rumination.”



10 BIG IDEAS

1. ATTENTION

Attention is a tool that guides human awareness of the world. It is complex and works on multiple levels. Some people appear to be exceptionally good at focusing, while others struggle. However, it is always more complicated than it seems.

Attention is like a muscle, in that it needs to be worked out to stay strong. In the same way you lose muscle mass when you stop going to the gym, failing to work out your attention skills leads to decline.

A healthy mind needs work!

2. THE THREE KINDS OF ATTENTION

Goleman boils attention down to a handy triad; inner, other, and outer focus.

INNER focus involves intuition and instincts

OTHER focus is about social interactions

OUTER focus helps us navigate in the larger world

To enjoy a well-lived life, you need to be nimble in all three. Fortunately, each type of attention can be taught, managed and exercised.

3. ATTENTION DESTROYERS

Distractions come in two forms; sensory and emotional. It might help to think of sensory as external and emotional as internal.

Both can derail you in an instant.

Sensory distractions are all the little (or big) things that go on around you, The couple talking loudly at the next table over, a notification on your phone, a beeping alarm. While they can be tuned out, such external stimuli can also quickly derail you from your hard work.

Emotional distractions, on the other hand, come from within. That sudden realisation that you need to pay a bill, growing feelings of incompetence, ruminating on an argument with your spouse, a nagging desire to check your phone. While these things go on inside the mind, they are just as capable of causing an intense distraction as external stimuli.

Emotional distractions can be even more insidious than sensory ones. You can hop up and turn off a buzzing light or move away from a noisy environment. Wherever you go, though, your emotional distractions come with you.



10 BIG IDEAS

4. TOP-DOWN AND BOTTOM-UP

The human brain has two ways of thinking, top-down and bottom-up. Bottom-up thinking is, evolutionarily speaking, far older. It is often called the ‘lizard brain’, and refers to the instinctual and effortless thoughts you won’t even realise you are having.

Top-down thinking is one of the things that separates humans from the rest of the animal kingdom. It is the ability to rationalise and think slowly. To make decisions based on reason and not on pure instinct.

If you hear a rustle in the bushes, pure bottom-up thinking might convince you to run away. Top-down thinking enables you to deduce that there are no tigers in the suburbs and go calmly about your day.

Bottom-up thinking can be instrumental during certain activities. The next time you are walking, analyse every movement and make sure you are doing it correctly. You will soon struggle. Once you have mastered a skill, you can often let the bottom-up brain take over. Many athletes will perform more poorly when asked to think about their pace or swing. Trying to think about it takes over from the bottom up mind that already knows how to do it perfectly without you.

Of course, the top-down mind allows for thoughtful decisions and careful planning. These are skills that also need to be practised in everyday life.

5. THE MIND ADRIFT

One of the more fascinating facets of attention is that the lack of it can be massively beneficial. Have you ever been stuck on a problem, only to have the answer come to you out of the blue during a walk or a shower? This is the bottom-up mind at work.

A lack of focus opens up new pathways in the brain and often results in greater creativity than active mental striving. People with ADHD, whose focus tends to be all over the place, often show greater creative abilities because they are masters of letting their minds wander.

6. BRINGING IT BACK

Of course, if your mind is wandering too much of the time, you will never get anything done. You must know how and when to bring your mind back on track. Spending too much time trying to force concentration can result in attention fatigue, which will lead to your mind wandering when you need to focus.

Goleman advocates giving yourself a break and letting the mind operate bottom-up for a short while when you start to experience attention fatigue. A restful setting with minimal external distractions is the best place to reconstitute and get your mind back on task. Allow yourself time to breathe and relax before getting back to work.



10 BIG IDEAS

7. SELF-AWARENESS

In *Focus*, Goleman dives into self-awareness. Some people have it in spades, some don't have so much, and some think they have it but don't. Being self-aware is a key step to effective focus.

The best way to know yourself is to see yourself through others' eyes. It might be a little jarring, but talking to the people who know you best can help you pinpoint areas where you might need to improve.

8. WILLPOWER

Another invaluable part of attention is willpower. Anyone who lacks willpower is unlikely to knuckle down and concentrate when things get tough. Adults who demonstrated higher levels of willpower when they were children tend to be more successful and happy in their adult life.

Like attention, you can train willpower. Goleman teaches some simple tricks to help improve willpower, such as picturing a delicious piece of cake as a picture in a frame. Little tricks like dissociation can do wonders for willpower.

9. READING OTHERS

Attention also relates to how we see others. Other people necessarily take up a considerable part of our focus. People deserve and need your attention. Goleman says that to succeed in life, you need to develop empathy and manage how you pay attention to other people.

Successful people often know what to say and do by paying attention to the subtle cues of others. An empathetic boss who pays attention to her workers will likely have a more productive team. Goleman calls to mind a doctor who is brusque and dismissive. You will feel far worse after a consultation with a physician like this than one who takes the time to express concern for you.

10. THE BIG PICTURE

The final facet of improving your attention skills is knowing what you should pay attention to. All too often in business, for example, attention is paid to the bottom line and not to the future or the people who make the business work. Where people focus their attention is key to the survival of the planet and the human race.

The largest lens for focus is on the whole world. The time for focus that is self-interested and insular has passed. Goleman dreams of a world where the world's attention is all-inclusive and forward-thinking.

**3 ACTION STEPS****1. LINK YOUR HABITS**

Before you can take any action towards managing your focus, you need to know yourself. It's impossible to work on issues you aren't even aware of. Try to see yourself as others see you, and you will start to understand where you can improve.

2. FIND STRATEGIES

Mindfulness is one of the best strategies for staying focused. Taking a break from the thing you are trying to focus on is another. Whatever works for you, try to use your self-awareness to keep yourself on task.

3. HONE YOUR FOCUS

Focus is about paying attention to your work or study, and the world. Learn what is important around you that deserves your focus and expand your mind to include others.

**1 KEY TAKEAWAY**

Focus is complicated, and there is no one answer when it comes to improving your ability to pay attention. The key is to know yourself and harness the right strategies for you.

The human brain can do a lot on its own, but there are also times when you need to be mindfully in the driver's seat. You might let your brain take over when you are in flow. But when there are important decisions to be made, you must take control.



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