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Learn to be more of a monk?

Staying focused in a world with too many competing demands: the more senior you are, the greater your scarcity of time and bandwidth. And the more it matters.

We do not need anyone to tell us that working life today consists of too many meetings, too many emails and too many demands for immediate response. The more senior you are, the more it matters what you focus on and how. And leaders and their actions are more visible than ever – so people notice any sense of priorities. This is not just about managing time, it is about managing focus in an attention economy.

This issue is a quite concrete and tough one – based in biology. One edition of a Sunday newspaper today may contain more information than a typical person in the 17thC encountered in their entire life. In 10 years time, we will generate 44 times as much data as today. Our stone-age brains can't cope with this space-age deluge. Our scarcity of time and bandwidth is now well researched to reduce our cognitive ability, core capabilities and self-control – decreasing potential performance and increasing the risk of error. Some have argued that the 2007 banking crash was mainly a consequence of all this.

We look at recent research for practical advice on how to manage this challenge and improve how we manage our focus – including the new books by *Emotional Intelligence* author Daniel Goleman, the very smart Noreena Hertz's *Eyes Wide Open*, and a particularly interesting and well written book: *Scarcity* by Harvard Economics professor Mullainathan and Princeton Psychology professor Shafir. Other sources include the old standard by Covey and Merril: *First things first*. For a full list of sources see the end of the article.

Five ways to manage scarcity of time, attention and bandwidth – and stay focused

Psychologists have spent decades documenting the impact of 'bandwidth' or cognitive load on many aspects of behaviour. A range of aspects of what many people call 'personality' or 'talent', are often driven by pressure on our mental bandwidth: distraction and inability to focus, forgetfulness and inability to take in information, impatience, intolerance, lack of attention to detail – they are all a potential result of too many demands on our attention.

This means that as we look at managing the pressures on us, we should be aware that it is quite easy to get into a vicious circle trap, where scarcity of time, and pressure on bandwidth, cause even more pressure on time and pressure on bandwidth. Preventing or breaking, the vicious circle can be quite straightforward, and as is often the case, is a matter of a few good habits, very deliberately planned and managed. And for those of us who lead, we have the

benefit and opportunity to engage our support and our teams in doing all this together. It is very tough to do it alone.

1. *Short meetings and space in your diary – plus regular moments to unplug yourself*

Scarcity of anything important (including time), when harnessed, focuses the mind. Too much scarcity, or too little, reduces attention and performance. Like most 'bell' curves, success lies in finding that middle range where performance is at its most enhanced.

A very good, everyday example is meetings. One study of meetings found that across a whole range of different types and contexts, the second half of the meetings are more productive than the first half – that as people know time will be running out they become more focused and productive and more likely to reach good conclusions. Shorter meetings often produce better work. Planning in 20 minutes instead of 30, or 45 minutes instead of an hour for a meeting also allows us to use the 10 or 15 minutes gaps to delegate actions from the last meeting, attend to any urgent messages and find some minutes to stop and focus our mind for the next meeting.

While managing our diaries we should also give ourselves space and quiet on a regular basis. This means unplugging ourselves from electronic access and removing distractions – essential for big problems or abstract ideas that require bandwidth. Multi-tasking is fine for genuinely routine tasks, but otherwise a false economy. Try a walk in the park for fresh air and calm. And when we plan our diaries for completing certain actions, it is better we look at making enough time for the ones that are tough to think about, and try and find a slot, such as Monday morning, where you are more likely to be relaxed. That is why making a physical change in our situation (such as moving to a quiet place for a while) is such a good way to break a habit.

The multi-tasking trap: One study by Microsoft (backed up by many others) showed that once distracted by an email it takes an average of 22 minutes to return to a task – indeed in 27% of cases the disruption lasted two hours. Another piece of research showed that such disruptions temporarily reduce IQ by a noticeable amount. Neuroscientists have measured how disruptions reduce cognitive ability (thinking, reasoning, solving problems, handling big abstract ideas), and damages executive control (attention, planning and controlling actions). Most of us find it increasingly hard, but resisting distractions is like any other strong habit: it can be tough to instil but will stay once it is embedded.

2. *Managing urgent vs important – and reduce the range of decisions, and delegate*

Too much scarcity of time (or anything important) narrows focus and bandwidth. As Covey and Merrill's famous matrix described it, the central challenge for leaders, is how to balance dealing with 'important' over 'urgent'. Under pressure, most of us revert to a strong bias towards 'urgent, and so we have to work hard to protect meetings and projects that solve the 'important'.

Reducing minor decisions to a minimum, and delegating all but the most important acts and decisions, improves focus. President Obama described in an interview how he only has blue suits and white shirts: "So I can't get distracted".

One global accounting firm did a time and motion study on the secretaries of partners and concluded there was no justification to have one PA per partner and it would be more efficient for several partners to share. After a year they discovered that partners had become less efficient and productive as the secretaries no longer had the slack in their diaries to manage the unplanned adhoc urgent issues coming in – leaving the partner to be drowned by the urgent over the important. Indeed across a team, if there is a conscious effort to manage unnecessary pressure on others, everyone's bandwidth and capability will increase. A good junior will do this for their boss; a good boss will do this for their teams. Leaving some slack in resourcing and in diaries is essential.

The firefighting trap: Research into large organizations show that most have 'firefighting' cultures: there are too many problems taking up all the time, leaving no time for removing the long-term cause of those problems. The research shows the classic symptoms: most major projects start late, are under-resourced in the early stages (because people could not be released in time), and then needing major extra support close to deadlines, which lead to rushed and often poor decisions that in turn trigger delays, or errors later. It easily becomes a downward spiral – which in most cases means it is better to take a bit more time at the start, getting the essentials right, even if it means an initial delay.

3. Be simplifier-in-Chief – the most important way to help others manage their focus

One of our most important, continuous, roles as a leader is to empathise, distil and clarify on behalf of everyone else. It is not about having the answers, but keeping the eye on the North Star, compass in hand, and being very open and keen to understand what is happening around you in your market and the wider world. Articulating this helps others stay focused.

One study by Warwick Business School looked at 200 global businesses and in detail at how they worked and found that they were wasting 10% of their profit on needless complexity. They also found that CEOs of the companies that perform better financially were much more likely to manage complexity better. The more we can do that, the more we reduce the pressures on those around us and across the organisation – increasing everyone's capability and performance.

The complexity trap: Complexity is often used as a shield and also for leaders and organisations to try and keep control. Lawyers use it contracts, some leaders use it to strengthen their power because only *they* really understand the underlying 'rules', and can keep 'rivals' guessing for longer.

A classic example of unproductive complexity comes from the lead up to the banking crash when JP Morgan published '123 principles for staff to follow every day'. This was clearly likely to have little impact other than to build cynicism. (There are plenty of other examples, such as Cadbury Schweppes book with '144 rules for managers to live and breathe.) As a leader you set the tone by staying simple.

4. Eat, sleep and be merry – managing bandwidth is a physical skill

Henry Ford did the original study, looking at his car manufacturing plants that confirmed a 60 hour week led to lower productivity than a 40 hour week. These types of outcomes have been repeatedly confirmed over the past century in all sorts of contexts from manual labour through to senior leaders. To work well, mentally, as well as physically, requires rest.

Bill Clinton said in an interview reflecting on his presidency: "I made my mistakes when I was tired. You make better decisions when you are not. That is my only advice."

The next most important thing is eating: an empty stomach also narrows bandwidth and reduces cognitive ability. One bank did a study among a group of employees and asked them to break regularly for walks, to sleep well and eat right – and then demonstrated improved individual and team performance on a range of metrics.

The late-night trap: The nuclear reactor disasters at three-mile Island and Chernobyl, the Challenger space shuttle tragedy, the Exxon Valdez oil spill and the Costa Concordia cruise liner crash all happened in the middle of the night. The commission into the Challenger event showed that key managers had been getting only a few hours sleep a night in the run up to launch.

Big decisions after a long day are much better left to the morning after a good night's sleep. By the way, a strong cup of coffee may help us feel more alert and able to focus, but research shows it does not help us analyse information, or make decisions with more accuracy.

5. Be a monk, know your emotions and your bias

Our brain is hard-wired to dismiss evidence that causes us problems, in favour of evidence which confirms our views. Effectiveness of decisions is also driven by how self-aware we are about our emotions and mood. Monks train themselves in 'mindfulness' – the idea we should observe and note (but not judge) our own emotions and biases. Not only does it improve the mood-management thermostat, it also improves day-to -day judgement. We don't have to train as a Buddhist monk, but stopping for a few moments to be mindful can make a big difference. One recent neuroscience study showed that even novice meditators scored a clear increase in focus, concentration and cognitive ability.

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The confirmation-bias trap: Data that strongly confirms our views creates a dopamine rush similar to that from chocolate or sex – it takes conscious effort to be mindful and to seek out and listen to alternative evidence. The best leadership teams are ones with strong alignment, but also contain at least one or two who can be trusted to challenge the boss and defend against groupthink.

Sources

Sources used for this article include: Covey, Merrill: *First things first – coping with the ever-increasing demands of the workplace;* Gersick: *Time and transition in work teams* (University of California); Goleman: *Focus;* Hertz: *Eyes Wide Open – How to make smart decisions in a confusing world* (Cambridge); Mullainathan, Shafir: *Scarcity: why having so little means so much* (Harvard and Princeton); Mullainathan, Shafir: *Cut your company's fat but keep some slack: Why excess capacity leads to greater efficiency* (Booze & co). Seigel, Etzkorn: *Simple* Wageman, Fisher, Hackman: *Leading teams when the time is right: finding the best moments to act* (Harvard)