

Brief

For those too busy:

The latest research, thinking
& news on growth pace and delivery
from around the world

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.

One edition of a Sunday paper contains more information than encountered in the life of a 17thC person. In 10 years, 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 reduces our cognitive ability and self-control, increasing the risk of error. We look at recent research for practical advice.

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

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

Scarcity, when harnessed, focuses the mind. Shorter meetings can produce better work – allow 15 minutes gaps to delegate actions and focus for the next meeting.

Give yourself space and quiet on a regular basis, unplug and remove distractions – essential for big problems or abstract ideas that require bandwidth. Try the park for fresh air and calm.

The multi-tasking trap: Once distracted by an email it takes 22 minutes to return to a task.

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

Too much scarcity narrows focus and bandwidth. For leaders, this is often due to dealing with 'urgent' over 'important' - so protect meetings and projects that solve the 'important'.

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

The firefighting trap: Most large organisations have firefighting cultures: too many problems taking up all the time for removing the long-term cause of the fires.

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. It is not about having the answers, but keeping the eye on the North Star, compass in hand, understanding what is happening around you. Articulating this helps others stay focused.

The complexity trap: Complexity is used as a shield and to keep control. (JP Morgan had '123 principles for staff to follow every day!') As a leader you set the tone by staying simple.

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

Bill Clinton said: "I made my mistakes when I was tired. You make better decisions when you are not. That is my only advice." An empty stomach also narrows bandwidth and reduces cognitive ability. One bank asked employees to break regularly for walks, sleep well and eat right - and measured improved individual and team performance on a range of metrics.

The late-night trap: Three-mile Island, Chernobyl, Challenger and Exxon Valdez happened in the middle of the night. Big decisions after a long day are much better left to the morning.

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 that which confirms our views. Effectiveness of decisions is also driven by how self-aware we are about our emotions and mood. Monks train in 'mindfulness' - to observe and note (not judge) our emotions and biases. Stopping for a few moments to be mindful can make a big difference.

The confirmation-bias trap: Data that strongly confirms our views creates a dopamine rush like chocolate or sex – it takes conscious effort to seek out and listen to alternative evidence.