

Sharpen Your FOCUS – Hit Your Targets

By Lee J Colan, Ph.D.



FOCUS is one of those concepts that is very easy to talk about and very hard to apply. This report provides practical, actionable steps you can take to sharpen your focus.

The Power of Focus

Consider two sources of energy: the sun and a laser. The sun is a *powerful* source of energy. It showers the earth with billions of kilowatts of energy every hour. Yet, with a hat and some sunscreen you can bask in the sunlight for hours with little negative effects. On the other hand, a laser is a *weak* source of energy. A laser takes a few watts of energy and focuses them in a cohesive stream of light. But with a laser, you can drill a hole in a diamond or defeat a cancer. That's the power of focus! It works the same for individual and team performance. A crystal clear focus requires less input (energy) to yield greater output (results).

If a clear focus is so powerful, why do so many leaders struggle with diffused efforts toward their goals? Today's competitive, change-intensive, information-loaded business world offers so many distractions, that it is hard to stay focused on our goals. These distractions themselves may not hinder your success, but the energy they steal from you can quickly derail success. I recently read this on a poster, "When winds of change blow hard enough, even the most trivial of objects can become deadly projectiles."

These "winds of change" often hurl leaders into the "Ship is Adrift" syndrome. There are three levels of this syndrome:

1. Organization Level – Have you ever heard a good brain surgeon say, "Hey, I have this brain surgery gig down pretty well. Let me see if I can break into heart, lung or liver surgery and become a general surgeon?" Of course this does not happen in medicine, but it often occurs in business.
2. Team Level – Your team goes adrift when they have unclear goals, priorities and roles.

3. Individual Level - Individuals go adrift when they do not have the opportunity to apply the highest and best use of their skills. Just as a land developer strives for the highest and best use of land, leaders have to ensure their return on human investment by ensuring the highest and best use of their people. Within the recent rash of downsizings of the past few years, many survivors in companies are currently under-employed.

Your team's focus starts with YOU. Your actions have ripple effects throughout your team and organization that reach farther than you would ever imagine.

Success Factors

There are three success factors for leaders who are able to sharpen their focus:

1. Find your One Thing.
2. Know when to say "No."
3. Keep it Simple.

1. Find your One Thing.

A clear leadership focus (and the resulting organizational focus) is a common theme for the most successful teams. Therefore, define the One Thing you will focus on to drive results.

A laser-sharp focus does not happen overnight. It takes time and effort to reinforce and refine it. Do not be too quick to find your One Thing. It crystallizes over time. In fact, for the most successful companies, it took several years to refine their One Thing. It can seem counter-intuitive that defining your One Thing typically broadens your opportunities rather than narrowing them. For example, Honda's One Thing is to "make the best engine in the world." This opens up a world of opportunity for them to place their engines in lawn mowers, cars, scooters, motorcycles, etc. Also, consider Disney whose One Thing is to "make dreams come true." This obviously opens a world of venues to deliver their One Thing.

- What are you **passionate** about?
- What can you be the **very best** at?
- What is your **financial common denominator**?

Your team's One Thing might be: building leading edge products; creating relationships that customers just can't walk away from; making the world a cleaner, more efficient or friendlier place; creating defect-free products or providing the fastest service available. These are just examples – your One Thing has to be your One Thing. It should guide all your decisions and actions.

2. Know when to say “No.”

If you try to be everything to everybody, you will be nothing to nobody. Your time, energy and money are precious resources – if you spend them in one area, they are not available to be spent in another area. In other words, saying “Yes” to one thing always means saying “No” to something else. A clearly defined One Thing makes it easier to say No to non-value-added tasks and stay focused on your goal.

By not saying “No” to tasks that diffuse your focus, you can quickly find yourself drifting off course. The farther you drift off course, the more time, money and energy will be required to get you back on track. Here is a quick illustration.

One day, an expert in time management was speaking to a group of business students and, to drive home a point, used an illustration those students will never forget. As he stood in front of the group of high-powered overachievers, he said, “Okay, time for a quiz,” and he pulled out a one-gallon, wide-mouth mason jar and set it on the table in front of him. He also produced about a dozen fish-sized rocks and carefully placed them, one at a time, into the jar. When the jar was filled to the top and no more rocks would fit inside, he asked, “Is this jar full?”

Everyone in the class yelled, “Yes.” The time management expert replied, “Really?” He reached under the table and pulled out a bucket of gravel. He dumped some gravel in and shook the jar causing pieces of gravel to work themselves down into the spaces between the big rocks. He then asked the group once more, “Is the jar full?”

By this time the class was on to him. “Probably not,” one of them answered. “Good!” he replied. He reached under the table and brought out a bucket of sand. He started dumping the sand in the jar and it went into all of the spaces left between the rocks and the gravel. Once more he asked the question, “Is this jar full?”

“No!” the class shouted. Once again he said, “Good.” Then he grabbed a pitcher of water and began to pour it in until the jar was filled to the brim. Then he looked at the class and asked, “What is the point of this illustration?”

One eager beaver raised his hand and said, “The point is, no matter how full your schedule is, if you try really hard you can always fit some more things in it!” “No,” the speaker replied, “that’s not the point. The truth this illustration teaches us is:

If you don’t put the big rocks in first, you’ll never get them in at all.”

What are the 'big rocks' for you and your team? Say "Yes" to your big rocks (One Thing) first and you will say "Yes" to success!

3. Keep it simple.

C.W. Cerum said, "Genius is the ability to reduce the complicated to the simple."

Keeping things simple for your team helps them stay focused on your One Thing. For example, a study of 39 mid-sized companies found that only one characteristic differentiated the winners from the less successful companies: *simplicity*. Winners sold fewer products, had fewer customers and worked with fewer suppliers than other companies in the same industry that were less profitable. This study found that simple, focused operations were more profitable.

The 80/20 Principle (also known as the Pareto Principle) helps explain the power of simplicity. The 80/20 Principle is alive and well in most businesses:

- 80% of profits come from 20% of customers.
- 80% of problems are generated by 20% of employees.
- 80% of sales are generated by 20% of sales people.

The question is, how do you decrease complexity? The answer is focus on your best 20%. Don't just rely on your gut to identify your 80/20 rule. Use data to determine the truth about your team's performance. Look at your processes, systems, services and people and find the 20% of them (your "vital few") that drive the majority of your productivity, activity, waste, conflicts or down time.

Keeping it simple, keeps you focused!

Prepare for the Sharpening

A lunar voyage is about ¼ million miles to the moon and then back – that's a 500,000-mile voyage. More energy is spent in the first few seconds and miles of that voyage than in the remaining half million miles and several days. The gravitational pull of first few miles is tremendous (probably a lot like pulling my son away from the T.V. on Saturday morning!). It takes an internal thrust greater than gravity and the resistance of atmosphere to break out into orbit. BUT once it did break out, it took almost no power to perform the rest of the voyage. This is a powerful metaphor for describing what it takes to break out of old habits. It's very uncomfortable and effortful at first, then once you build a new habit, it feels comfortable and effortless. First, you form your habits, then your habits form you.

Successful people have successful habits and they sacrifice today's pleasure for tomorrow's rewards. Your actions, not your intentions, tell the truth! We judge *ourselves* by our intentions, but *others* judge

us by our actions. Thomas Edison, one of history's most inventive and productive people, summed it up best years ago, "Genius? Nothing! Sticking to it is the genius."

The book, Sticking to It: The Art of Adherence cuts through the clutter to help you consistently execute your plans and hit your targets. Remember, **you don't have to be great to get started, but you have to get started to be great.**

Good luck hitting your targets!

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