

Peak performance experts say things like, “You should focus. You need to eliminate the distractions. Commit to one thing and become great at that thing.”

This is good advice. The more I study successful people from all walks of life—artists, athletes, entrepreneurs, scientists—the more I believe focus is a core factor of success.

But there is a problem with this advice too.

Of the many options in front of you, how do you know what to focus on? How do you know where to direct your energy and attention? How do you determine the *one thing* that you should commit to doing?

I don't claim to have all the answers, but let me share what I've learned so far.

"Until Something Comes Easily..."

Like most entrepreneurs, I struggled through my first year of building a business.

I launched my first product without having any idea who I would sell it to. (Big surprise, nobody bought it.) I reached out to important people, mismanaged expectations, made stupid mistakes, and essentially ruined the chance to build good relationships with people I respected. I attempted to teach myself

how to code, made one change to my website, and deleted everything I had done during the previous three months.

To put it simply, I didn't know what I was doing.

During my Year of Many Errors I received a good piece of advice: "Try things until something comes easily." I took the advice to heart and tried four or five different business ideas over the next 18 months. I'd give each one a shot for two or three months, mix in a little bit of freelance work so I could continue scraping by and paying the bills, and repeat the process.

Eventually, I found "something that came

easily” and I was able to focus on building one business rather than trying to find an idea. In other words, I was able to simplify.

This was the first thing I discovered about figuring out what to focus on. If you want to master and deeply understand the core fundamentals of a task you may, paradoxically, need to start by casting a very wide net. By trying many different things, you can get a sense of what comes more easily to you and set yourself up for success. It is much easier to focus on something that's working than struggle along with a bad idea.

Make a Call About What to Focus On

Assuming you're willing to try things and experiment a bit, the next question is, "How do I know what's coming easily to me?"

The best answer I can give is to pay attention. Usually, this means measuring something.

If you're an entrepreneur, track your marketing and promotion efforts.

If you're trying to gain muscle, track your workouts.

If you're learning an instrument, track your practice

sessions.

Even when you do
measure things, however,
there comes a point
where you have to make a
call and decide what to
focus on.

In my mind, this moment
of decision is one of the
central tensions of
entrepreneurship. Do we
continue trying new
things or do we double
down on one strategy? Do
we try to innovate or do
we commit to doing one
thing well?

Everyone wants to know
the right time to simplify
and focus on one thing,
but nobody does. That's
what makes success so
hard. Entrepreneurship
isn't like baking a cake.
There is no recipe. There

is no guidebook.

At this stage, your best option is to decide. You can't try everything. At some point, you don't need more information, you just need to make a choice.

A Volume of Work

Now we have reached the stage where figuring out what to focus on becomes a real possibility.

You have experimented with enough ideas to discover one or two options that seem to provide better than average results for you. You've overcome the hurdle of wanting more information and the fear

of committing to something and now you've made a choice. You took the job. You started the business. You signed up for the class. You're ready.

Welcome to the grind. It's time to put in a volume of work. Not just once or twice. Not just when it's easy. But a consistent, repeated volume of work. You have to fall in love with boredom and stay on the bus.

It is through this sheer number of repetitions that you'll come to understand the fundamentals of your task. You might know what greatness looks like before this point, but you won't understand how to

achieve greatness until
you've put the work in
yourself.

In the words of Ira Glass,
“your taste is good
enough that you can tell
that what you're making
is kind of a
disappointment to you.”
You'll bridge that gap
between what you know
is good and what you can
produce yourself by
putting in the reps.

This applies to so many
areas of life.

Want to dress well and develop killer style?

You're going to have to try
on a lot of clothes before
you can simplify down to
the essentials. You'll
probably have to buy a lot
of clothes before you can
really get a feel for what

your day-in, day-out style is. I'm not a fan of promoting rampant consumerism, but if that's the skill set you want to develop then it's likely going to take some experimentation and effort.

Want to become a great cook? How many bad meals do you think you need to make before you can whip up a “simple, but tasty dinner” whenever you feel like it? I'd say hundreds at least. I don't know many people who are amazing cooks after making their tenth meal ever. Developing a deep understanding of the fundamentals of cooking takes a while.

Want to write an

amazing book? You're going to have to write and write and write some more. You need to write hundreds of thousands of words to find your voice, maybe millions. Then you need to edit those words and whittle them down to the most powerful version possible.

Only after the repetitions have been completed will you understand which pieces of the task are fundamental to success.

Getting to Simple

Now, finally, after trying many things and figuring out what to focus on and putting in enough reps, you can begin to simplify. You can trim away the fat

because you know what is essential and what is unnecessary.

As the Frenchman Blaise Pascal famously wrote in his Provincial Letters, “If I had more time, I would have written you a shorter letter.”

Mastering the fundamentals is often the hardest and longest journey of all.

FOOTNOTES

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