

The Power of Focus

What's in it for me? Learn practical techniques to boost your business and achieve your potential.

Most people have both long- and short-term dreams and goals they want to achieve. And yet at some point, many end up lamenting that they didn't get what they wanted for either their business or themselves. The truth is, most of these disappointments were caused by one primary blunder: a lack of focus. Most people simply don't know how to stay on track, and in the pursuit of achievement, it's crucial to stay focused on exactly what you want. These blinks will equip you with the tools you need to lead a fulfilling life and manage a profitable business. You'll learn to avoid common mistakes and figure out how to use your natural talents to reach your potential. In these blinks, you'll learn

how your habits today affect your life tomorrow; why entrepreneurs and managers often struggle to delegate tasks; and how to ensure clients stick around by nurturing win-win relationships.

To become more productive, establish successful habits.

Each day, you get up and brush your teeth. Take a shower. Get dressed. Chances are, if you're a creature of habit, you don't spend hours deliberating over how to do these things. They're ingrained in your daily routine, so it just happens. Since these behaviors are habits and you don't have to waste time thinking about how to do them, you have more time to focus on more important matters. Other habits, on the other hand, can hold you back from achieving your goals. Some bad habits, like frequently misplacing your car keys, have immediate consequences. The long-term effects of others, such as lack of sleep or eating too much fast food, might not appear until later. Either way, your habits today will define your quality of life in the future. And one effective way to improve your prospects is to convert your bad habits into successful habits. The key message here is: To become more productive, establish successful habits. No matter who you are, productive habits will help you get the most out of your day. To develop some, or add to those you already have, try adapting the Successful Habits Formula to suit your needs. Before creating productive habits, you first have to identify which unproductive habits you already have. These might include being late for meetings, wasting time on the web, or snoozing your alarm in the morning. Ask friends or family for feedback. If several people say you don't respond to emails on time, then that's probably one of your bad habits. So let's say you're in the habit of falling for very risky investments or get-rich-quick schemes. What could the future consequences be? Well, it'll probably cause your net worth to decrease. You'll also have some embarrassment, stress at home, and extra work to make up for the lost money. Next, it's time to change this bad habit into a productive habit. If you're stuck, look to others for inspiration. Successful people nearly always have successful habits. So by studying the habits of successful people, you'll gain better insight into the most effective types of habits. To tackle your weakness for foolish investment opportunities, make it a goal to only invest in areas or companies you already know well. Write out the benefits of changing this habit. For example, that might mean financial security, better concentration, and less

stress at home. Last, create a three-step action plan to make your goal a reality. It might look like this: hire a trustworthy financial mentor; design a financial plan that matches your desired risk level; and program your bank account to automatically save or invest 10 percent of your monthly income.

Instead of trying to do everything, focus on your natural strengths.

Imagine you've just become an entrepreneur. Convinced you can sell greeting cards better than anyone else, you've started a business doing just that. As someone managing a budding small business, you're deeply involved in the day-to-day tasks that will get your company up and running. You meet clients, make deals with suppliers and distributors, and coordinate with IT experts. It's all very exciting. But you soon hit a roadblock: you're so caught up in daily operations and administrative responsibilities that you barely have time for anything else. You're not an accountant or an IT expert, though; you're an entrepreneur with a great idea. And as long as you continue trying to wear many hats in areas that aren't your natural talents, you miss bigger opportunities to grow your business. The key message here is: Instead of trying to do everything, focus on your natural strengths. When people spend more time focusing on their weaknesses than they do on their strengths, they tend to end up with a bunch of slightly stronger weaknesses. Unfortunately, that also tends to mean that they never discover their greatest talents. And all too often, this is especially true for entrepreneurs and managers, who find that they need to be in control of every aspect of a business, even if it's not an area they're talented in. These same entrepreneurs have trouble delegating responsibilities to other employees. While it might feel like a harmless way to ensure that quality work is done, this practice tends to hurt the entire business. Learning to focus on your natural talents and block out everything else is invaluable, and an easy technique called the 4-D Formula can help you do it. It works like this: Whenever you're having trouble sorting out your top priorities, choose one of the four Ds: dump it, delegate it, defer it, or do it now. If it's not necessary, there are no clear benefits, or you don't want to do it, dump it. Or perhaps someone else is better suited for the task, like an accountant or graphic designer. If that's the case, delegate it. Is it urgent, or can it wait a couple weeks? If it's not pressing, defer it. And finally, if it's absolutely crucial and time-sensitive, do it now. Of course, delegating tasks to someone else costs money. But with the time and effort it saves, you can use the opportunity to be more productive with your true talents.

The Problem Solver method helps you approach challenges and setbacks productively.

When you hear the word setback, what comes to mind? Maybe you think of a financial setback, like the last time you got a surprise bill in the mail, or a time when one of your stocks dropped 25 percent the day after you invested in it. It could be that you think of a personal setback, such as a physical injury or the loss of a close friend or family member. Or you might just reflect on something that didn't go your way. No matter what the specifics are, it's challenging to push through a crisis of any kind. But one thing is

always true: the outcome depends on how you approach the situation. And while burying your head in the sand will almost always make things worse, it can be hard to know exactly what action to take. Luckily, to come out of any crisis on top, you just need to become a problem solver. The key message here is: The Problem Solver method helps you approach challenges and setbacks productively. Unfortunately, there are no quick fixes when it comes to overcoming setbacks. Instead, it's all about starting a process that will take you through this challenging period. Next time you encounter a challenge, consider using a tool called the Problem Solver. It's a series of questions that will help you achieve the best possible outcome from a less-than-ideal situation. First, what's your challenge? Write a short description. For instance, let's say that your fictional company, Greeting Cards Inc., has had fewer orders than normal. To get a good look at the challenge, put your desired outcomes down on paper in detail. What would you like sales numbers to look like next month? What should the benefits of your solution be for you and your employees? How will you feel once you've hit these sales targets? Now it's time to find information that will help you achieve these outcomes. Read about how other companies have emerged victorious from past slumps. Then research the current market for greeting cards in general. By getting a better idea of what customers want, and why they typically purchase greeting cards in the first place, you'll find a realistic short-term target for your company. Once you determine what changes need to be made, decide which you can do yourself, and which tasks should be delegated. Locate people with the required expertise to help you through these changes. Then it's time for the most important part: the game plan. Write out the steps you'll need to take to make this goal a reality. Be as painfully exact as possible. In our example, let's say the solution is a temporary 25 percent discount on all birthday cards. Who's it for, and how will they find out about it? How will you profit from it? Finally, set start and end dates for your timeline, and get to work!

Maintaining excellent relationships is essential for future success.

Let's say you own an engineering company. You work with clients to adapt their ideas and make innovative products. You've established yourself as a reliable, go-to consultant for any job. You have a loyal base of returning clients, and business is good. Last year, a young entrepreneur approached you to ask for guidance developing a prototype. Over time, you helped her with your own expertise, and in return, her project gave you inspiring ideas. In the end, the entrepreneur ended up scoring a multimillion-dollar contract with her final prototype. Eventually, the product became wildly successful. One day, you get a call. It's the same young entrepreneur thanking you for your continuing advice, and she offers you 10 percent of all future profits. What started as a simple collaboration became a win-win for both you and the entrepreneur. Sound like a dream? It's not. Because when businesspeople focus on relationships, great things happen. The key message here is: Maintaining excellent relationships is essential for future success. Ideally, all professional and personal relationships are wins for both sides, but that's not always the case. Yet you and the entrepreneur you helped established something called an upward spiral. When both sides regularly give each other valuable help, their success spirals upwards. So how can you ensure that your relationships with clients look like this? If you're not sure where to get started, try out a technique called the Double Spiral Task. First, think of an important past relationship – personal or professional – that didn't last. Why didn't it work out? Write out a few significant turning points when you noticed the connection starting to fray. Perhaps there was an

event that damaged your trust in each other, or you couldn't agree on a decision. Second, reflect on an excellent relationship. If it turned into a long-term business cooperation, what steps kept it thriving? Perhaps you worked on a big project together or helped each other develop a successful product. Third, take a moment to recognize that while it would be fantastic to have win-win relationships with every client, it's best to focus on your core client base – those who keep returning for business, who rave about your services, and who recommend you to others. Identify your top ten clients. Then jot down how much time you spend with each of them in an average month. Is it more or less than with non-core clients? They've already chosen your business time and time again, so to make sure these relationships stay excellent, try to prioritize your clients accordingly.

Boost your business by asking the right questions.

When Lisa Petrelli was told that her kidneys were failing, she knew that being hooked up to a dialysis machine every day wasn't a permanent solution. She needed a kidney transplant. Unfortunately, there was a six-year wait for a new kidney. Lisa asked her family, but her father didn't have the same blood type and none of her friends who volunteered fit the bill either. Scared for her survival, Lisa started asking random strangers if they'd give up a kidney for her. She even posted on the bulletin board at her church. Nobody said yes. One day, Lisa got a call from a woman named Rose, who'd seen her flyer and decided, on a whim, to donate her kidney. The key message here is: Boost your business by asking the right questions. Finding Rose taught Lisa an important lesson: it never hurts to ask. After all, asking friends and strangers alike cost her nothing, and the eventual reward was literally life-saving. The lesson applied to business too, and Lisa realized that if she could successfully ask a stranger for her kidney, she could ask for a lot of other things, too. As CEO of her own company, she didn't need to be afraid to ask clients for more business. After all, the cost of missed opportunities – those opportunities you miss out on by not asking – can be high. Just take the research on sales data done by marketing specialist Herbert True of Notre Dame University, which shows that 94 percent of all salespeople quit trying after four calls or fewer. So what types of asking will boost your business? First, it's helpful to ask for information. If you're trying to win a new client, learn about her current challenges and goals before pitching your product. The best way to do that is just to ask. Next, it may seem obvious, but remember to ask for clients' business. Research shows that less than 40 percent of salespeople actually ask potential clients for an order after giving a full presentation about their product. If someone declines your offer, they might know someone else who needs your services. That brings us to a third form of asking: requesting referrals. If you continue to maintain excellent relationships with your core clients, most are happy to introduce you to contacts of theirs. Referrals like these are an easy way to grow your business, and they're often free or at least inexpensive.

Make successful decisions by eliminating procrastination.

One day, you get to the office and see that you have to write an important report by the end of the month. It's a straightforward task, and by sticking to a simple plan, you can

complete it over three phases of work. Great! But that's not what you actually do. Instead, you put the report off until the last week, and don't start writing until the day before it's due. You finish it in the nick of time, but the whole affair was incredibly stressful. The bad news? Like many people, you're a procrastinator. Procrastination is common, but – and here's the good news – like any bad habit, it can be changed. With practice, you can leave procrastination behind and become a proactive decision-maker. The key message here is: Make successful decisions by eliminating procrastination. Why do you procrastinate, and what can you do about it? It's usually for one of four reasons: boredom, too much work, unenjoyable work, or laziness. So perhaps you're bored. Just like entrepreneurs who don't focus on their natural talents, you might be starved for new challenges, stuck in the routine of mundane duties. If so, ask yourself this: If you could work on anything else to give you more energy and motivation, what would it be? Think big. Imagine closing a larger deal at your business than ever before. How could that become a reality? But maybe boredom isn't to blame. Perhaps you're just overwhelmed with all the work piling up on your desk. As your to-do list expands, you have to postpone more and more. To motivate yourself, visualize two possibilities. The first contains the negative consequences of inaction: what'll happen if you continue doing nothing? The second consists of the positive rewards of being proactive: for example, you'll feel more productive and less stressed. If you're not bored or overwhelmed, maybe it's just that you don't enjoy your work. When people stay in unfulfilling jobs, it's often because of financial security, or because the possibility of shifting to completely different work is frightening. The truth is, most success is to be found outside of your comfort zone. So while it might be scary to start looking for new opportunities, finding new challenges that really excite you could be your ticket out of your procrastination habits. Last, you might procrastinate because you're lazy or get distracted easily. There's no silver bullet for this one, but you can eliminate lazy habits from your repertoire. Acting decisively is a key ingredient to success, so the sooner you eradicate procrastination, the sooner you'll achieve your goals.

Living with purpose leads to long-term success and fulfillment.

At this point, you've taken several important steps towards success. You've established productive habits and excellent relationships. You now beat challenges and setbacks with ease. You've kicked the tendency to procrastinate. And you've started asking the right questions. So how do you put it all together to create a life – and business – that are personally fulfilling? In the end, what makes you happiest will depend on your focus – and to focus on the right things, you need a clear idea of your own life purpose. This is something that's different for everybody, but in general, your purpose should align with natural talents and motivate you to do whatever it takes to solve problems and move forward. The key message here is: Living with purpose leads to long-term success and fulfillment. You could make all the money in the world, but if what you do doesn't fill you with an enthusiasm to keep going, it's time to ask some honest questions. To elaborate on your purpose, write up a short purpose statement. This is similar to a business's mission statement, which works on a broader level rather than defining specific goals. Maybe your purpose statement is "to show children the wonders of science," or "to use my talents to help people achieve their own goals." In that light, take a look at your current life activities. Are you using your greatest talents regularly? Many people stick with safe jobs, even if the work doesn't engage their talents or give them the opportunity to grow by facing challenges. Also, consider this: Does your work address

an issue important to you, or does it not really make a difference in the world at all? In today's economy, the phenomenon of employee burnout gets a lot of press. But its less-famous cousin, rust-out syndrome, is equally widespread. If you too find your work to be meaningless, it'll kill your motivation to find activities more closely aligned with your purpose. Next, reflect on your goals from the past year. Are any related to your purpose? If not, how can you incorporate some into your life, starting today? Finally, critically examine the way you live. If you realize that you're not living your life to the fullest, take the opportunity to change and take full advantage of your potential rather than wasting it. In other words, start living on purpose today.

Final summary

The key message in these blinks is that: To reach your potential in business and life, you need to focus your efforts in the right direction. By focusing on your natural talents and turning your bad habits into successful ones, you'll ensure lasting success into the future. There's nothing to be lost and everything to be gained from asking the right questions; if you never ask, you'll never know. Finally, if you eliminate procrastination and live decisively, you'll align your work with your life purpose and find success sooner, rather than later or not at all. And here's some more actionable advice: Develop true integrity by consistently keeping to agreements. In today's fast-moving world, it's becoming increasingly difficult to keep to plans. However, breaking agreements regularly can lead to you and your business losing credibility. So keep to your commitments as consistently as possible, and remind people of your dependability, too. For instance, after promising a client you'll send him a price quote within the next 24 hours, email him and write something like, "As promised, here is the quote you requested yesterday."