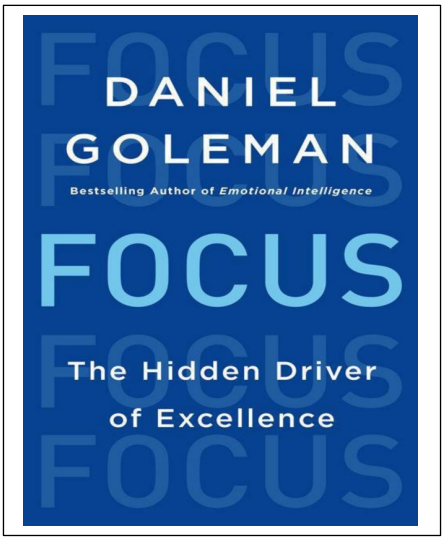
Excerpt from *Focus: The Hidden Driver of Excellence*, by Daniel Goleman

1. THE SUBTLE FACULTY



To watch John Berger, house detective, track the shoppers wandering the first floor of a department store on Manhattan's Upper East Side is to witness attention in action. In a nondescript black suit, white shirt, and red tie, walkie-talkie in hand, John moves perpetually, his focus always riveted on one or another shopper. Call him the eyes of the store.

It's a daunting challenge. There are more than fifty shoppers on his floor at any one time, drifting from one jewelry counter to the next, perusing the Valentino scarves, sorting through the Prada pouches. As they browse the goods, John browses them.

John waltzes among the shoppers, a study in Brownian motion. For a few seconds he stands behind a purse counter, his eyes glued to a prospect, then flits to a vantage point by the door, only to glide to a corner where a perch allows him a circumspect look at a potentially suspicious trio.

While customers see only the merchandise, oblivious to John's watchful eye, he scrutinizes them all.

There's a saying in India, "When a pickpocket meets a saint, all he sees are the pockets." In any crowd what John would see are the pickpockets. His gaze roams like a spotlight. I can imagine his face seeming to screw up into a giant ocular orb reminiscent of the one-eyed Cyclops. John is focus embodied.

What does he scan for? "It's a way their eyes move, or a motion in their body" that tips him off to the intention to pilfer, John tells me. Or those shoppers bunched together, or the one furtively glancing around. "I've been doing this so long I just know the signs."

As John zeroes in on one shopper among the fifty, he manages to ignore the other forty-nine, and everything else—a feat of concentration amid a sea of distraction.

Such panoramic awareness, alternating with his constant vigilance for a telling but rare signal, demands several varieties of attention—sustained attention, alerting, orienting, and managing all that—each based in a distinctly unique web of brain circuitry, and each an essential mental tool.

John's sustained scan for a rare event represents one of the first facets of attention to be studied scientifically. Analysis of what helped us stay vigilant started during World War II, spurred on by the military's need to have radar operators who could stay at peak alert for hours—and by the finding that they missed more signals toward the end of their watch, as attention lagged.

At the height of the Cold War, I remember visiting a researcher who had been commissioned by the Pentagon to study vigilance levels during sleep deprivation lasting three to five days—about how long it estimated the military officers deep in some bunker would need to stay awake during World War III. Fortunately his experiment never had to be tested against hard reality, although his encouraging finding was that even after three or more sleepless nights people could pay keen attention if their motivation was high enough (but if they didn't care, they would nod off immediately).

In very recent years the science of attention has blossomed far beyond vigilance. That science tells us these skills determine how well we perform any task. If they are stunted, we do poorly; if muscular, we can excel. Our very nimbleness in life depends on this subtle faculty. While the link between attention and excellence remains hidden most of the time, it ripples through almost everything we seek to accomplish.

This supple tool embeds within countless mental operations. A short list of some basics includes comprehension, memory, learning, sensing how we feel and why, reading emotions in other people, and interacting smoothly. Surfacing this invisible factor in effectiveness lets us better see the benefits of improving this mental faculty, and better understand just how to do that.

Through an optical illusion of the mind we typically register the end products of attention—our ideas good and bad, a telling wink or inviting smile, the whiff of morning coffee—without noticing the beam of awareness itself.

Though it matters enormously for how we navigate life, attention in all its varieties represents a little-noticed and underrated mental asset. My goal here is to spotlight this elusive and underappreciated mental faculty in the mind's operations and its role in living a fulfilling life.

Our journey begins with exploring some basics of attention; John's vigilant alertness marks just one of these. Cognitive science studies a wide array, including concentration, selective attention, and open awareness, as well as how the mind deploys attention inwardly to oversee mental operations.

Vital abilities build on such basic mechanics of our mental life. For one, there's self-awareness, which fosters self-management. Then there's empathy, the basis for skill in relationship. These are fundamentals of emotional intelligence. As we'll see, weakness here can sabotage a life or career, while strengths increase fulfillment and success.

Beyond these domains, systems science takes us to wider bands of focus as we regard the world around us, tuning us to the complex systems that define and constrain our world. Such an outer focus confronts a hidden challenge in attuning to these vital systems: our brain was not designed for that task, and so we flounder. Yet systems awareness helps us grasp the workings of an organization, an economy, or the global processes that support life on this planet.

All that can be boiled down to a threesome: inner, other, and outer focus. A well-lived life demands we be nimble in each. The good news on attention comes from neuroscience labs and school classrooms, where the findings point to ways we can strengthen this vital muscle of the mind. Attention works much like a muscle—use it poorly and it can wither; work it well and it grows. We'll see how smart practice can further develop and refine the muscle of our attention, even rehab focus-starved brains.

For leaders to get results they need all three kinds of focus. Inner focus attunes us to our intuitions, guiding values, and better decisions. Other focus smooths our connections to the people in our lives. And outer focus lets us navigate in the larger world. A leader tuned out of his internal world will be rudderless; one blind to the world of others will be clueless; those indifferent to the larger systems within which they operate will be blindsided.

And it's not just leaders who benefit from a balance in this triple focus. All of us live in daunting environments, rife with the tensions and competing goals and lures of modern life. Each of the three varieties of attention can help us find a balance where we can be both happy and productive.

Attention, from the Latin *attendere*, to reach toward, connects us with the world, shaping and defining our experience. "Attention," cognitive neuroscientists Michael Posner and Mary Rothbart write, provides the mechanisms "that underlie our awareness of the world and the voluntary regulation of our thoughts and feelings."

Anne Treisman, a dean of this research area, notes that how we deploy our attention determines what we see. Or as Yoda says, "Your focus is your reality."

THE ENDANGERED HUMAN MOMENT

The little girl's head came only up to her mother's waist as she hugged her mom and held on fiercely as they rode a ferry to a vacation island. The mother, though, didn't respond to her, or even seem to notice: she was absorbed in her iPad all the while.

There was a reprise a few minutes later, as I was getting into a shared taxi van with nine sorority sisters who that night were journeying to a weekend getaway. Within a minute of taking their seats in the dark van, dim lights flicked on as every one of the

sisters checked an iPhone or tablet. Desultory conversations sputtered along while they texted or scrolled through Facebook. But mostly there was silence.

The indifference of that mother and the silence among the sisters are symptoms of how technology captures our attention and disrupts our connections. In 2006 the word *pizzled* entered our lexicon; a combination of *puzzled* and *pissed*, it captured the feeling people had when the person they were with whipped out a BlackBerry and started talking to someone else. Back then people felt hurt and indignant in such moments. Today it's the norm.

Teens, the vanguard of our future, are the epicenter. In the early years of this decade their monthly text message count soared to 3,417, double the number just a few years earlier. Meanwhile their time on the phone dropped. The average American teen gets and sends more than a hundred texts a day, about ten every waking hour. I've seen a kid texting while he rode his bike.

A friend reports, "I visited some cousins in New Jersey recently and their kids had every electronic gadget known to man. All I ever saw were the tops of their heads. They were constantly checking their iPhones for who had texted them, what had updated on Facebook, or they were lost in some video game. They're totally unaware of what's happening around them and clueless about how to interact with someone for any length of time."

Today's children are growing up in a new reality, one where they are attuning more to machines and less to people than has ever been true in human history. That's troubling for several reasons. For one, the social and emotional circuitry of a child's brain learns from contact and conversation with everyone it encounters over the course of a day. These interactions mold brain circuitry; the fewer hours spent with people—and the more spent staring at a digitized screen—portends deficits.

Digital engagement comes at a cost in face time with real people—the medium where we learn to "read" nonverbals. The new crop of natives in this digital world may be adroit at the keyboard, but they can be all thumbs when it comes to reading behavior face-to-face, in real time—particularly in sensing the dismay of others when they stop to read a text in the middle of talking with them.

A college student observes the loneliness and isolation that go along with living in a virtual world of tweets, status updates, and "posting pictures of my dinner." He notes that his classmates are losing their ability for conversation, let alone the soul-searching discussions that can enrich the college years. And, he says, "no birthday, concert, hangout session, or party can be enjoyed without taking the time to distance yourself from what you are doing" to make sure that those in your digital world know instantly how much fun you are having.

Then there are the basics of attention, the cognitive muscle that lets us follow a story, see a task through to the end, learn, or create. In some ways, as we'll see, the endless hours young people spend staring at electronic gadgets may help them acquire specific cognitive skills. But there are concerns and questions about how those same hours may lead to deficits in core mental skills.

An eighth-grade teacher tells me that for many years she has had successive classes of students read the same book, Edith Hamilton's *Mythology*. Her students have loved it—until five years or so ago. "I started to see kids not so excited—even high-achieving groups could not get engaged with it," she told me. "They say the reading is too hard; the sentences are too complicated; it takes a long time to read a page."

She wonders if perhaps her students' ability to read has been somehow compromised by the short, choppy messages they get in texts. One student confessed he'd spent two thousand hours in the last year playing video games. She adds, "It's hard to teach comma rules when you are competing with World of WarCraft."

At the extremes, Taiwan, Korea, and other Asian countries see Internet addiction—to gaming, social media, virtual realities—among youth as a national health crisis, isolating the young. Around 8 percent of American gamers between ages eight and eighteen seem to meet psychiatry's diagnostic criteria for addiction; brain studies reveal changes in their neural reward system while they

game that are akin to those found in alcoholics and drug abusers. Occasional horror stories tell of addicted gamers who sleep all day and game all night, rarely stop to eat or clean themselves, and even get violent when family members try to stop them.

Rapport demands joint attention—mutual focus. Our need to make an effort to have such human moments has never been greater, given the ocean of distractions we all navigate daily.

THE IMPOVERISHMENT OF ATTENTION

Then there are the costs of attention decline among adults. In Mexico, an advertising rep for a large radio network complains, "A few years ago you could make a five-minute video for your presentation at an ad agency. Today you have to keep it to a minute and a half. If you don't grab them by then, everyone starts checking for messages."

A college professor who teaches film tells me he's reading a biography of one of his heroes, the legendary French director François Truffaut. But, he finds, "I can't read more than two pages at a stretch. I get this overwhelming urge to go online and see if I have a new email. I think I'm losing my ability to sustain concentration on anything serious."

The inability to resist checking email or Facebook rather than focus on the person talking to us leads to what the sociologist Erving Goffman, a masterly observer of social interaction, called an "away," a gesture that tells another person "I'm not interested" in what's going on here and now.

At the third All Things D(igital) conference back in 2005, conference hosts unplugged the Wi-Fi in the main ballroom because of the glow from laptop screens, indicating that those in the audience were not glued to the action onstage. They were away, in a state, as one participant put it, of "continuous partial attention," a mental blurriness induced by an overload of information inputs from the speakers, the other people in the room, and what they were doing on their laptops.8 To battle such partial focus today, some Silicon Valley workplaces have banned laptops, mobile phones, and other digital tools during meetings.

After not checking her mobile for a while, a publishing executive confesses she gets "a jangly feeling. You miss that hit you get when there's a text. You know it's not right to check your phone when you're with someone, but it's addictive." So she and her husband have a pact: "When we get home from work we put our phones in a drawer. If it's in front of me I get anxious; I've just got to check it. But now we try to be more present for each other. We talk."

Our focus continually fights distractions, both inner and outer. The question is, What are our distractors costing us? An executive at a financial firm tells me, "When I notice that my mind has been somewhere else during a meeting, I wonder what opportunities I've been missing right here."

Patients are telling a physician I know that they are "self-medicating" with drugs for attention deficit disorder or narcolepsy to keep up with their work. A lawyer tells him, "If I didn't take this, I couldn't read contracts." Once patients needed a diagnosis for such prescriptions; now for many those medications have become routine performance enhancers. Growing numbers of teenagers are faking symptoms of attention deficit to get prescriptions for stimulants, a chemical route to attentiveness.

And Tony Schwartz, a consultant who coaches leaders on how to best manage their energy, tells me, "We get people to become more aware of how they use attention—which is *always* poorly. Attention is now the number-one issue on the minds of our clients."

The onslaught of incoming data leads to sloppy shortcuts, like triaging email by heading, skipping much of voice mails, skimming messages and memos. It's not just that we've developed habits of attention that make us less effective, but that the weight of messages leaves us too little time simply to reflect on what they really mean.

All of this was foreseen way back in 1977 by the Nobel-winning economist Herbert Simon. Writing about the coming information-rich world, he warned that what information consumes is "the attention of its recipients. Hence a wealth of information creates a poverty of attention."