


Peter Thiel's Unorthodox Management Philosophy of Extreme Focus : iDoneThis blog

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“What are your top five priorities for this week?” “What are the top three objectives and key results you’re using to measure how you’re doing for the quarter?”

These are questions that get thrown around by managers at work to help their teams prioritize and focus on achieving the most important accomplishments.

 In Peter Thiel's view, this doesn't go far enough. As the founder of PayPal, Thiel developed an unorthodox, extreme philosophy on focus and prioritization. Instead of focusing on five things, or three things, the magic number is one. You only focus on one singular thing.

As PayPal executive Keith Rabois recalls, Thiel “would **refuse to discuss virtually anything else with you except what was currently assigned as your #1 initiative.**” Every employee, for instance, had to identify their “single most valuable contribution to the company” on PayPal's 2001 annual review forms.

Extreme focus worked, because Thiel gave it teeth. With distractions cleared away, Thiel empowered every person in the company to pursue their only priority “with extreme dispatch and vigor.” Giving each individual in the organization a singular focus drives people to work on only those goals that will help achieve true excellence.

As Rabois explains:

The most important benefit of this approach is that it impels the organization to solve the challenges with the highest impact. **Without this discipline, there is a consistent tendency of employees to address the easier to conquer, albeit less valuable, imperatives.** As a specific example, if you have 3 priorities and the most difficult one lacks a clear solution, most people will gravitate towards the 2d order task with a clearer path to an answer.

As a result, the organization collectively performs at a B+ or A- level, but misses many of the opportunities for a step-function in value creation.

(via Is Peter Thiel's “one thing” management philosophy a good model for startups? - Quora)

To Thiel, if you allow yourself to have more than one focus, you’ve already blinked. You’ve determined that mediocrity is an acceptable outcome. With Thiel's singular focus philosophy, the solutions may not be clearer but the paths to excellence and value are.

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