CHAPTER FIFTEEN

One Thing at a Time

The renowned psychologist David Lykken defined mental energy as "the ability to persist for long periods thinking productively about a problem, to shut out distractions [and] to persist in search of a solution."

On the one hand, many researchers now believe that regardless of your inborn talent, you can achieve excellence in almost any domain through single-minded focus and practice. On the other hand, mobilizing sustained, single-minded focus is a difficult, energy-draining, often uncomfortable process and it doesn't come to us naturally. We're hardwired to be alert, vigilant, and quickly attentive to every new potential danger and threat. We also face more distractions in our lives than ever before. Though few of them are truly threatening and most are relatively trivial, they're often very seductive and compelling.

Unfortunately, there are no shortcuts to excellence, including the advantage of inborn talent. Think back to Anders Ericsson's study of the young violinists at the Berlin Academy of Music. The most significant difference between the best violinists and the others was the total number of hours they'd invested in their craft. "The goal of deliberate practice is not doing more of the same," says Ericsson. "It involves engaging with full concentration in a special activity to improve one's performance." The top two groups both practiced approximately twenty-four hours a week. But the future soloists had logged a total of 7,410 hours by the time of the study. The future orchestra members had invested 5,301. The least accomplished—the future music teachers—had practiced 3,420 hours, or less than half as much as the best violinists. Several researchers have found that achieving true expertise requires at least 10,000 hours of deliberate practice over at least ten years. The most crucial ingredient, after motivation itself, is sustained absorbed attention—whether that consists of prac-

ticing to improve or actually performing. Small wonder that excellence is the exception rather than the rule.

The first step in taking more control of our attention is recognizing what happens when we don't. First, we're less effective at whatever we're doing. Beyond that, the more we allow ourselves to be distracted, the more diminished our capacity for absorbed attention becomes over time. Much like an unused muscle, our attention grows weaker and shorter with disuse.

There are two kinds of distractions that fracture our attention. One is internal—the endless chatter of our own minds—and the other is external—what's going on around us. We struggle with both, but we arguably have less ability to influence the latter. Given the varied demands at work, many of our clients tell us that external distractions are simply a fact of life and not something they're in a position to control.

The most common and relentless source of interruption in most workplaces is e-mail. The numbers alone make this case. In 2009, worldwide e-mail traffic averaged 147 billion messages each day. By 2013, that figure is expected to more than double to 500 billion a day. The average U.S. office worker receives between 50 and 100 e-mails a day. Over eight hours, that's an interruption approximately every five to ten minutes. When e-mail pours into our inboxes, we must contend with an undifferentiated sea of important messages, alongside pitches, promotions, material copied to broad distribution lists and all kinds of spam. Just deciding what to delete is time-consuming. At least a third of all workers say they check their e-mail constantly throughout the day. According to a study by the American Management Association, U.S. workers spend an average of an hour and forty-seven minutes a day on e-mail alone.

Why exactly does e-mail exert such a magnetic pull on our attention? There are two primary reasons our clients tell us they feel compelled to check it as frequently as they do. The first is that they need to stay current in order to do their jobs effectively. The second is the expectation, both within their organizations and among their clients, that they will be highly responsive to requests.

At least equally powerful, we believe, is the mostly unconscious and Pavlovian impulse we have to respond to a sound which signals

that someone wants our attention. Resisting that ping is akin to ignoring a ringing phone, a fresh chocolate chip cookie, or a crying baby. Since resisting is counterintuitive, it requires our will, the reservoir of which is diminished each time it's exercised. When something enters our field of attention, simply responding to it is the path of least resistance.

There are at least four other primary benefits our clients tell us they derive from responding quickly to e-mail. First, it's a way to keep their inboxes from getting even fuller. Second, it's a means by which to feel at least briefly efficient and productive, usually without significant effort or discomfort. Third, answering e-mail often provides a source of relief—a defensible reason to distract ourselves from more difficult and challenging tasks at hand.

Finally, while most e-mails ultimately prove to be inconsequential, each new ping also carries, at least briefly, the promise of a potential reward. As long as the pings keep on coming, there's always a chance that the next one you check will prove to be an interesting opportunity, a note of thanks or praise, an invitation to an event, or a friend checking in and making a connection. The only thing more horrifying to most of us than an inbox with two hundred new e-mails is one that doesn't contain any. We want to be wanted.

Our responsiveness to distractions is powerfully and often unconsciously influenced by our desire for pleasure—and our instinct to avoid pain. If there's an external expectation that we'll answer quickly, we don't want to take a chance of being chastised for not responding. In reality, we have considerable power to set people's expectations about how quickly we'll answer e-mails. Often, our compulsion to answer is just a reflection of our need to stay connected in order to feel productive in the short term with minimal effort. Answering e-mail is also a way to avoid the pain of mobilizing the sustained focus that more challenging tasks require. Gaining more control of our attention, it turns out, is intimately linked to our capacity to delay gratification.

We need only watch a toddler's attention skittering from one bright and shiny object to another to recognize that absorbed focus is not our genetic birthright. Toddlers are fueled largely by primitive emotions and lack the benefit of a fully developed prefrontal cortex.

They want what they want right now. But, if that pattern continues for very long into their lives, it doesn't bode well. Early attentional control turns out to be at the heart of later success and satisfaction.

DELAYING GRATIFICATION

The psychologist Walter Mischel first demonstrated this phenomenon in his deceptively simple and now famous "marshmallow" test. Mischel conducted his research in the late 1960s at the private Palo Alto, California, nursery school that each of his three daughters attended. He and other researchers have continued to explore the implications of his findings to this day.

Interested in understanding what made delayed gratification possible for some children and not for others, Mischel devised a challenge that he eventually posed to a succession of 650 four-year-olds over a period of several years. Each child was offered the chance to eat one marshmallow immediately, or two if the child was willing to wait while the researcher stepped out of the room for an unspecified number of minutes. Children who decided they couldn't wait were invited to ring a bell, at which point the researcher would return. The majority of the children gave up in less than three minutes, rang the bell, and settled for a single marshmallow. Thirty percent, however, held out for a full fifteen minutes, until Mischel or one of his researchers returned.

The primary distinction between those who waited and those who didn't became clear over time. It had to do with attention. The children who succumbed to temptation couldn't keep their eyes off the marshmallow and often stared directly at it. As a consequence, they very quickly burned down their limited reservoirs of will and discipline. The children who were able to wait somehow figured out that consciously resisting temptation wasn't going to work. Instead, they found a variety of ways to shift their focus away from the marshmallow, by turning their chairs around, covering their eyes, or distracting themselves by singing or playing a game.

The successful children managed to push the marshmallow, and therefore the temptation to eat it, out of their awareness. Mischel came to call this skill "strategic allocation of attention." "If you're

thinking about the marshmallow and how delicious it is," Mischel told a journalist years later, "then you're going to eat it. The key is to avoid thinking about it in the first place."

This is where attention and emotions become intermingled. For most of the children, the marshmallow prompted an emotional response—intense desire—that overrode their capacity to think, much the way that intense fear prompts the fight-or-flight reaction. This is what Mischel calls "a hot stimulus." The hotter the stimulus—and fear and desire are among the hottest—the more difficult it is to control our attention and ultimately our behavior. "Young kids are pure id," says Mischel. "They start off unable to wait for anything—whatever they want, they need."

In 1981, more than a decade after his initial experiment concluded, Mischel decided to send a questionnaire to parents and teachers of all his original subjects, asking a series of questions about how the children had fared. It turned out that the ones who had been able to delay gratification at the age of four grew up to be more confident, self-reliant, trusting, dependable, and persevering. They also developed more lasting friendships, responded more resiliently to stress, and eventually scored an astonishing average of 210 points higher than the low delayers did on their SATs. The low delayers also turned out to be more stubborn, indecisive, self-critical, resentful and likely to have behavioral problems in school. They were also more likely to be overweight, to abuse drugs, and to be less resilient in the face of stress. In short, they continued to struggle with controlling their impulses. As a consequence they had less control of their attention.

Why do some kids—and adults—learn to take charge of their attention more successfully than others? Mischel and his colleagues ultimately discovered a fascinating correlation between the way toddlers dealt with separating from their mothers at the age of nineteen months and how they performed on the marshmallow test at the age of five. The toddlers who cried the most when their mothers left were also more likely to have trouble resisting the marshmallows when they got older. In both instances, we might hypothesize, the children were reacting to a desire for something they felt they urgently needed and felt they couldn't do without. Marshmallows replaced mothers.

In John Bowlby's research, the more secure children feel, the more emboldened they are to separate from their mothers and explore the

world. Lacking what the developmental psychologist Erik Erikson termed "basic trust," the insecure nineteen-month-old cries when her mother leaves, out of fear that the mother will never return. The insecure five-year-old opts for the single marshmallow out of a similarly urgent desire for something sweet and soothing. It promises to make her feel better right now, and in her world, that's all that matters. The more secure five-year-old, less dominated by fear-driven impulses, has the capacity to move her attention away from the marshmallow in exchange for a bigger reward later. The prefrontal cortex overrides the amygdala.

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi captures this brilliantly in *Flow:* "Preoccupation with the self consumes psychic energy because in everyday life we often feel threatened. Whenever we are threatened we need to bring the image of ourselves back into awareness, so we can find out whether or not the threat is serious, and how we should meet it." Conversely, the safer and more secure we feel, the more attention we can allocate to our long-term goals. "Self-consciousness, which is the most common source of distraction, is not a problem for such a person," Csikszentmihalyi goes on to explain. "Instead of worrying about how he is doing, how he looks from the outside, he is wholeheartedly committed to his goals." A growing body of research suggests that we may have a genetic predisposition to different levels of intrinsic anxiety, but it's also clear that our security is profoundly influenced by our experiences with attachment.

This is a profound lesson for parents and teachers, but also for leaders and managers. If you want those in your charge to be effective at delaying gratification and focusing their attention effectively, it goes a long way to make them feel cared for and secure. It can also help to specifically teach attentional skills, which are rarely an explicit part of any school curriculum, much less of the learning agenda in organizations. Mischel and his colleagues, for example, have experimented by teaching poor delayers among children simple mental tricks to help them redirect their attention away from a hot stimulus such as a marshmallow, in the same way that more successful delayers do instinctively. After relatively modest training, many of the kids who hadn't been able to hold off eating a marshmallow for more than a minute could wait for a full fifteen minutes.

We rely on a similar principle in our own work to drive more en-

during behavioral change. As we explained in chapter 3, we teach our clients to build "rituals," highly precise behaviors performed at specific times so they become automatic and no longer require conscious will or discipline. In effect, we're teaching them how to turn their attention away from other potential distractions. In the case of e-mail, for example, many of our clients build rituals around turning it off altogether for certain defined periods of time in order to focus in a more absorbed way on the most challenging task at hand.

Steve Wanner, the partner at Ernst & Young who was working twelve- to fourteen-hour days when we first met him, typically arrived home in the evening feeling exhausted. He found it difficult to fully engage with his wife and four children in the evenings. One of the primary drains on Wanner's energy was his habit of answering e-mails constantly, either on his BlackBerry or his computer, from the time he woke up until he went to bed at night. Much as most four-year-olds can't resist a marshmallow if they stare directly at it, most of us struggle to resist e-mail if we constantly watch or hear it enter our inbox. At our urging, Wanner created a ritual of answering his e-mail only at specific times of day and otherwise turning it off altogether.

Wanner's main concern was that clients or colleagues would see him as unresponsive or that he might miss an urgent message. To address that concern, he added an away message explaining that he answered only at designated times but that if anyone had a more urgent need to reach him, to simply reach him on his cell phone. He also called each of his most important clients to explain what he was doing and why. Where previously he had been unable to keep up with all his messages, Wanner discovered that the new ritual made it possible to clear his inbox each time he opened it—the reward of fully focusing his attention on one task at a time, for designated periods of time. While he invited anyone who needed him to call his cell phone, almost no one did.

Dozens of our clients have adopted some form of Wanner's ritual. As he did, they find that the concern about missing something important almost invariably proves to be unfounded. E-mail, it turns out, creates its own sense of artificial urgency. When you're not checking it constantly and you tell key people in your life, "Feel free to call me if it's urgent," it forces them to ask, "Do I really need an instant response?" In most cases, the answer turns out to be no.

PRIORITIZING OUR ATTENTION

It's not simply e-mails that fracture our focus. We create plenty of distractions for ourselves by juggling tasks, making ourselves perpetually available to others, opening several windows on our computers, and focusing on whatever feels most urgent at the moment, without regard to whether what we're doing is really important. In our reactive rush to stay ahead of a wave we fear will drown us, we're forever racing to keep up with external demands. We're far less effective at setting our own agenda and sticking by it.

Assume for a moment that you can learn to resist distraction and to do one thing at a time. You're still left with a key challenge: having collected your attention, where ought you to put it? That's a question we ask each of our clients, in part because it's one they rarely pause to ask themselves. Often as not, the initial response to our question is an uncomfortable silence. Most of us just don't spend much time thinking long term. Do you? Where does it make most sense for you to be investing your attention? Given a few moments to reflect, most of our clients arrive at some variation on this simple answer: whenever possible, I ought to be putting my attention in the service of what's most important.

Obvious as that may seem, the act of prioritizing—focusing on what's likely to add the greatest value over the longest term—doesn't come to us naturally. It requires both awareness and intentionality. At a practical level, it means setting aside regular time to reflect on and define priorities, rather than simply plunging into the next task that comes into your mind or reacting to the next request that flashes up on your computer screen.

The single most effective mental ritual we've discovered is one we call "Doing the most important thing first." Clients design their own versions of the ritual, but the basic elements are always the same. The first step is to decide in advance the most important thing to do on any given day. Typically, that means reflecting on it the night before or, if it's a longer project, at the beginning of a week. Most clients find that this ritual works best when they schedule the task as the very first thing they do when they arrive at work each morning. Obviously, the number of potential distractions and interruptions tends to in-

crease throughout the day. Moreover, most of us are freshest in the morning and progressively lose the energy necessary to tackle difficult challenges as the day wears on.

As with all rituals, we've found that specificity is a key to success. That means setting not only a clear starting time but also a clear stopping time, no more than ninety minutes later. The goal is to be fully engaged throughout whatever period time you choose to work. It's also helpful to allot *no less* than forty-five minutes to the task. It takes time to become mentally absorbed, especially in challenging work. It's also essential to eliminate potential distractions by turning off e-mail, not answering calls, and letting others know that you don't want to be interrupted unless something literally can't wait. Finally, when you've reached your designated stopping time, it's important to take a true renewal break. If you've really absorbed yourself in a difficult task, you should be sufficiently mentally depleted that you crave an opportunity to rest and refuel.

Many of our clients are surprised to discover how powerful this ritual can be. Above all, it's a way to ensure that you devote time each day to your most important and challenging work. It's also energizing. By launching each day with a strong dose of focused productivity, you head into the rest of your day secure that no matter what else happens, you've already accomplished something significant.

QUIETING THE INTERNAL DIALOGUE

Powerful as it is to learn to shift attention away from external distractions, we must also contend with the relentless chatter in our own minds. On the face of it, we should have more control over what's going on inside ourselves than we do over what's going on outside. In fact, our minds seem to have minds of their own. Even as we're working on a project, our attention is often drawn to the past and the future: hopes and regrets, fears and fantasies, daydreams and disappointments, ambitions and insecurities. The capacity to stay fully present—to do one thing at a time—is a challenge contemplative traditions have been grappling with for thousands of years.

To get a quick sense of how your own mind operates, get a pen and a piece of blank paper and put it by your side. Now find a comfortable

place to sit, if you don't already have one. I'm going to ask you to close your eyes and focus on your breath. Don't think about anything else. Just follow your breath as it goes in and out, and don't seek to influence it in any way. Do this for whatever feels like approximately two minutes. You can put this book down and begin now. When you're done, pick it back up.

Okay, you've now finished the first part of the exercise. Pick up your pen and paper. Here's your assignment: write down everything you thought about during the time you were just following your breath and ostensibly not thinking about anything. Do your best to re-create the sequence of your thinking, even if the thoughts seem trivial. Put this book down one more time, and then pick it up again when you've finished writing.

If you're like 95 percent of our clients, you've compiled a reasonably robust list of what was on your mind. A couple of the items might have something to do with thinking about your breath, how you felt while you were doing the task, or whether you'd done it long enough. In all likelihood your mind also went off on several other tangents. Maybe you noticed noises in the room, or you remembered something you need to get done. Perhaps you felt anxious or uneasy or found yourself musing about what you're going to be doing later today. It's possible you noticed a pain in your back, your neck, or your knee, or a growling in your stomach. Maybe something you thought of reminded you of someone you know, and you started thinking about that person and something you'd done together. Perhaps you scolded yourself for having so many stray thoughts, or wondered if others doing this exercise were having as hard a time focusing as you were.

The answer to that last question is yes. Not everyone remembers a string of thoughts, but it's rare that anyone claims to have stayed exclusively focused on the breath. William James once sagely observed that the human mind won't focus on any one object for more than a few seconds. More accurately, it won't do so without significant training.

We build the muscle of attention much the way we do our biceps or

triceps: by subjecting it to increments of intense stress—and then relaxing. The stress, when it comes to our attention, is staying singly focused on one thing at a time. Many of us associate meditation with spiritual practice, but at a more practical level, it's simply attentional practice. The most basic form is often referred to as "concentration" meditation. There are many variations, but a simple one is to sit in a comfortable position and count your breaths. For most of us, that's easier than trying to follow the breath in and out. The more deeply we breathe, the more relaxed and less vigilant we become and the easier it is to focus attention on one thing, such as counting.

To experience the difference between counting and following your breath, you might try the exercise we did back in chapter 3. Close your eyes and breathe in through your nose to a count of three. Then slowly breathe out through your mouth to a count of six. Focus solely on the counting, and do it for thirty seconds or a half-dozen breaths. You can put the book down again and start now.

In all likelihood, you found it easier to stay focused this time than you did during the earlier breathing exercise following your breath. One reason is that counting gave you a clear object of attention. A second is that intentionally extending the outbreath prompted deeper relaxation. The third is that you did the exercise for just thirty seconds, rather than a minute or two. Most teachers of meditation recommend that students practice for at least twenty minutes at a time. We believe that's usually far too demanding when you're first starting out, and often counterproductive.

BETWEEN BOREDOM AND ANXIETY

Csikszentmihalyi has described "flow" as a state of absorption balanced delicately between boredom and anxiety. When we have too little challenge, our attention wanders because we're bored. When the challenge is too great, anxiety overwhelms our capacity for continuous attention. Trying to focus on one thing for twenty minutes at a time, we've found, leads most beginners to either boredom or to anxiety that their minds are wandering so much. It's more effective, we be-

lieve, to focus in a highly concentrated way for thirty or sixty seconds than to wander in and out of absorbed attention over longer periods of time. As the muscle of attention gets stronger, you can increase the length of your practice by increments, much as you might progressively increase the weight you lift in a strength-training program.

Like many other clients, Fujio Nishida, the president of Sony Europe, instituted the breathing ritual we mentioned earlier as a way to manage stress. He found that even a few minutes once or twice a day gave him a sense of calm that allowed him to think more clearly and effectively, especially in the wake of a challenging event or a difficult interaction.

"Mindfulness meditation" is a second form of attentional training that can be valuable. Rather than trying to quiet the mind of all thought, mindfulness emphasizes simple awareness. As thoughts, feelings, and sensations arise, the practice is simply to note each one and then let it pass without dwelling on it. Building this skill of self-observation, sometimes referred to as "witnessing," allows us to step back from the ongoing drama our mind constantly creates. Instead, we learn to view whatever arises with more equanimity, or what the Buddhists call "nonattachment." Here again, attention and emotions are deeply interconnected. On the one hand, decreased anxiety frees us to pay more focused attention to the task at hand. On the other hand, increased capacity for absorbed attention decreases our anxiety.

One of the symptoms of schizophrenia is an inability to focus intentionally. Schizophrenics typically perform poorly on tasks requiring vigilance, quickness of response, or sustained attention. Often, that's because they're preoccupied by emotions such as fear, paranoia, and depression. In a study conducted at Montefiore Medical Center, researchers administered attentional training to a group of twenty-seven inpatients diagnosed with chronic schizophrenia. After a baseline assessment, each patient received eighteen sessions of training conducted on a computer over a six-week period.

On average, the participants became more focused, less distractible, and quicker in response time compared to their baseline scores and to a control group of other schizophrenics. Perhaps more surprising, the experimental group experienced broad improvements in their psychological well-being, including fewer hallucinations, less emotional withdrawal, and less somatization, meaning the manifestation

of psychological distress in physical symptoms. The more focus the subjects were able to mobilize on the external task, the less preoccupied they became with their own distress. If patients with a severe psychological disorder can improve their attention in a matter of weeks, what does that suggest about the average healthy person's potential for training attention?

Jon Kabat-Zinn and his colleagues at the University of Massachusetts Medical School have conducted a series of studies about the everyday value of mindfulness meditation. More than a decade ago, Kabat-Zinn developed an eight-week protocol that includes a two- to three-hour class each week followed by a one-day retreat—some fourteen hours of meditation in all. His early work was aimed at helping people suffering from various forms of chronic pain that had been resistant to traditional medical intervention, such as back and neck pain, headaches, and gastrointestinal disorders. In a series of studies, subjects who went through his protocol showed significant decreases in pain, less need for medication, and more physical mobility.

In a later study, Kabat-Zinn was able to demonstrate that patients suffering from anxiety or panic disorders experienced significant improvements after going through his program. Most recently, collaborating with the neuroscientist Richard Davidson at the University of Wisconsin, Kabat-Zinn took workers at a biotechnology company with no specific symptoms through his mindfulness protocol. The participants reported decreased levels of anxiety and increased positive emotions compared to a control group. In a study by another group of researchers, two sets of Chinese university students were trained for three months in concentrative and mindfulness techniques, and both significantly outperformed a control group of nonmeditators on tests of sustained attention. Interestingly, the mindfulness meditators, taught how to observe but not react to distractions, outperformed the concentrative meditators when both groups were subjected to an unexpected stimulus. One potential implication is that mindfulness is a more practical form of attentional training for people working in an open office environment where distractions and interruptions occur at random times throughout the day.

Relatively few of our clients have had any formal attentional training, but here's what one CEO, who declined to let us use his name out

of a concern about what some of his conservative clients might think, had to say about his practice.

"I didn't start meditating because I was interested in higher states of consciousness. My goal was practical. My job involves dealing with all kinds of different people and activities, and it's hard to stay focused on any one. I'd always find myself ruminating about the last meeting or anticipating the next one. I took up meditation because I wanted to see if I could learn to slow down my mind. I began with breath counting, simple concentration. It's not like all my thoughts went away, but my mind definitely got quieter and I felt calmer. Beyond anything else, it helped me to stay more focused on whatever I was doing.

"After about a year I was introduced to mindfulness, and I was immediately drawn to it. Breath counting was fine, and it really helped me, but it wasn't very interesting. Mindfulness was much more intellectually engaging. It was fascinating to actually learn to observe my own mind the way I might watch a movie or a play. It was a revelation to discover that I could observe an emotion—anger or frustration or irritation or even sadness—without feeling like I had to react to it. No matter how intense the emotion, I got so I could name it—'anger, anger' or 'impatience, impatience'—and then just watch it pass by, which it almost invariably did. It wasn't as relaxing as breath counting, but ultimately I think it's had even more impact on my life at work. I'm much less reactive, more able to hold my fire and let things play out.

"What's really interesting is that it's *not* like learning to ride a bicycle. I have to keep practicing. If I let it go for a week or two, I start to see the difference in my focus, and also in how I feel. I don't need to meditate for very long—even a few minutes a day makes a big difference—but I need to do it regularly. I really believe now that focus is a skill every bit as foundational as reading or writing. Every school should build in meditation from the first grade. They could just call it attentional training. It ought to be part of companies too. I'm not yet fully comfortable saying that to our clients, but I talk about it all the time inside our company. Control your attention, and you control your life. I truly believe that."

CHAPTER FIFTEEN ACTION STEPS

- The most common source of external distraction at work is e-mail. Think about how you're currently managing it. Write down the costs and benefits of managing e-mail the way you do. Now list the ways you might retain those benefits while minimizing the costs.
- A second source of distraction is internal—the chatter in our brains. Meditation, or quieting our mind, is one way to gain more control of our attention. It takes practice. Start out by counting your breaths in and out up to ten. It shouldn't take you much longer than a minute. Can you stay focused on counting your breaths? Add more sets of ten as your concentration gets stronger.
- Once you're able to focus more effectively, the next challenge is where to focus. That means consciously defining your priorities. Schedule time at the end of the workday to identify the most important task you could address the following day. In the best of worlds, make that task the first thing you do the following morning, for at least sixty minutes, without interruptions.