

Why Focus Wins — Brian Balfour

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12-15 minutes

I have come very close to a few very big wins in my career. **Close**, is the key word in that sentence. My first company was a college specific social network prior to Facebook existing. My [second company](#) was in virtual goods a year before social gaming really existed. Both were in the right place at the right time, but neither turned into “home runs.”

Outside of my own companies I’ve been fortunate to advise and consult numerous companies on growth. Some have made incredible progress. Others have struggled.

Reflecting on my career thus far I’ve had periods where I feel like I made 10X the progress, and other times where I feel like I’m running in place.

I could probably come up with many reasons for the wins. Intelligence, ambition, luck? I could also probably come up with a lot of excuses for the misses. Lack of knowledge, wrong environment, bad investors, competitors?

Honestly though I think that it was none of those reasons. In hindsight, everything boiled down to one factor:

Focus (or the lack thereof)

What Is Focus, Really?

I’ve haphazardly given (and heard) the advice “you need to focus” many times in my career. On the surface I’ve always accepted it, but until recently I don’t think I really understood it. Focus is a big part of [my approach to growth](#), and [how I build growth machines](#).

Focus gets misinterpreted a lot. It isn’t about being short sighted. You need broader context to understand what and why you are doing something in the moment. It also isn’t about sticking to the same thing for a really long period of time. Achieving something great requires you to make smart iterations and changes based on lessons learned.

To me [focus means four things](#):

1. [Identifying one longer term meaningful goal \(not multiple goals/paths in parallel\)](#)
2. [Distilling the most important thing you need to be doing right now to make progress towards that goal](#)
3. [Doing that one thing for a long enough period to get information/data](#)
4. [Editing the longer term goal based on the information you receive](#)

Maybe the best way to explain focus is simply this - ***zoom out, zoom in, zoom out.***

Some individuals thrive on doing a lot of things at once. But they are the exception not the rule. A lot of startup founders are in this camp by nature. The mistake these founders make is to draw the conclusion that because they personally thrive on being unfocused, that their company/organization will to. Here is why...

The Five Advantages Of Focus (And Why Focus Ultimately Wins)

There are five main reasons why focus wins in building companies, careers, and growth strategies:

1. ***You Move Faster***

We spend a lot of time in our companies and careers making decisions between different options. Without focus there is no one filter to put the options through. It is much harder to decide if one thing is better than the other if you aren't comparing it against the same focal point. Smart humans are exceptionally good at creating reasons to justify an option just because they came up with the idea, not because it is the right thing to do. People can argue why one option is "better" than the other on two completely different planes. You end up comparing apples to oranges.

As a result, one of two things typically happens. One, the person who invests the most energy into arguing typically wins. This is toxic in a team environment. Or two, a compromise is made to try a little of both options. This is just avoiding a decision.

With focus, the decision between multiple options comes down to one simple question. Which one contributes to our focus the most? The conversation is forced through a single filter. As a result, you, your team, and your company spend a lot less energy and time deciding, and more time doing.

On [our growth team](#) at Hubspot we focus on one metric in 30 - 90 day periods. During those periods we are likely coming up with a ton of good growth ideas, but if they don't contribute to the metric we are focusing on those ideas are put in a backlog and we get back to the task at hand.

2. You Learn More

When you are proactively focused you learn more at a faster rate. Given a fixed amount of resources and time, pursuing multiple paths in parallel dilutes the lessons learned. You can't dig as deep on each path which leads to only scratching the surface. Real insights do not happen by scratching the surface. Real insights come from digging to the deeper layers. The quicker you break through the surface, the quicker you get real insights that will steer you towards a successful path.

3. You Make More Progress

The Rhodes Scholarship is regarded as the most prestigious post graduate scholarship in the world. Rhodes Scholars tend to have accomplished far more than their peers. Cal Newport studied the question how they accomplished more than others in such a short period of time? One of his key findings were that [Rhodes Scholars did not do things in parallel](#). They focused on things serially with little to no overlap between endeavors.

It seems the best way to get nothing done is to try and get everything done at once. In startups and growth you start with a hypothesis of what you think is the "right" answer. Typically your first hypothesis is always wrong but the goal is to get to a right answer as quickly as possible through learning and quick iteration. Since you learn more and move faster with focus you end up accomplishing more vs other companies that are not focused.

4. You Build Confidence

Confidence has been studied many times over in relation to success. Study after study shows that [confidence is a better indicator of success over raw talent](#). Confidence is heavily under rated in startups in my opinion. By definition we are pursuing something that has higher odds of failure than success. Having confidence that we can make the impossible possible is what keeps us going.

What is the best way to build confidence? [Progress and learning](#). We can see that our actions are actually producing results. Each result is a proof point that that builds our foundation of belief. As focus produces deeper learning and more progress we build confidence reinforcing the cycle of focus.

5. You Become More Valuable

About a month ago I was talking to a friend that runs a profitable company in the mobile gaming space. I asked him:

"What is the one thing that was within your control that you wish you would go back and change?"

His answer? Focus on one type of game versus building a diverse portfolio. They initially chose to build a portfolio because they thought it would make them more valuable in the long run. But the opposite has played out. Instead of making one acquisition for a portfolio of games, acquirers are making multiple acquisitions and hand picking the best of breed in each vertical. Makes sense. Why buy a portfolio of "ok" games, when you can have the best in each vertical?

Author Jim Collins expressed this in his book Good To Great (highly recommended read btw) with the Hedgehog Concept. Companies that focus on a speciality they can be world-class at consistently

performed financially better than their competitors and market average over a period of 20+ years.

Focus makes you more valuable not only as a company but as a professional. The best path to become a **customer acquisition expert** is not to try and understand all the different marketing channels at once, but to focus and go deep on one or two.

As you build value, opportunities increase. For companies - easier funding, hiring, and partnerships. For individuals - recognition, personal brand, job opportunities, network. Better opportunities lead to even faster learning and the cycle builds on itself.

Why Most People (Probably Including You) Don't Focus

The biggest issue with focus seems to be that it looks easy. But focus is hard. Really really hard.

Three things seem to make focus hard.

1. Choosing A Focus

The decision process in choosing a focus is where it all starts and there tend to be only three certainties about this process:

- a. You'll always have multiple options
- b. You'll never have perfect information
- c. You'll never be 100% certain in any of the options

As a result, instead of choosing a focus, the common "solution" is to resort to doing a little of multiple things. By doing multiple things the only decision that you are making is that you aren't going to focus.

Why do we commonly choose not to focus? Fear is the likely answer. The fear of being wrong. The fear of missing out on one of the alternative options we didn't choose. But here is the thing. You don't have to be right out of the gate. It's once again about the speed of learning and iteration that leads to the right answer.

There are times where focus is forced upon us. Most of us can probably remember cramming for a college exam. The constraint of having limited time until the exam forced us to focus. The only alternative is get a terrible grade and flunk out. In the "real world" outside of college we don't have exam deadlines for our careers or companies that force focus. Startup accelerator programs like Y Combinator and Techstars are another manifestation of this. But It is up to you to have the discipline to choose a focus when there isn't a forcing function.

2. Sticking With A Focus

Remember the three certainties above - imperfect information, less than 100% certainty, and multiple options. This is a recipe for different opinions. Different opinions from friends, co-founders, team members, advisors, and investors. Once you choose a focus there is always pressure from many directions that try to side track you. Defending and sticking with a focus can be brutal and exhausting.

Since there is imperfect information, rational arguments can always be made for alternatives. It is very easy to rationalize taking on another project by thinking it won't be that distracting or time consuming. This is especially true when you aren't the one that is executing (i.e. Investors/Advisors).

But if there is one thing I've learned, new alternatives are often cloaked in deception. The shiny object syndrome as it is commonly referred to. It looks nice and shiny on the surface, but once you start digging deeper the faults and complications start to expose themselves.

When we aren't deep on a particular option we tend to overestimate ease of execution while under estimating the problems and issues with that path. In comparison to the path we are currently deep on where we know the dirty details, the new alternative almost always looks better.

3. Knowing When To Change Focus

The third reason focus is hard is an error in the other extreme - sticking with a focus when you really shouldn't. As you invest time and resources into something, it naturally gets harder to abandon it. It becomes easier to justify staying on the same path due to sunk costs. Striking the balance between not changing focus too often, and knowing when to change focus because it isn't working is incredibly difficult.

Moving Forward With Focus

This situation might sound pretty grim. Choosing is hard. Sticking with it is hard. Knowing when to change is hard. All while having imperfect information, lack of 100% certainty, and multiple options.

But I think there is one key from above, focus leads to faster learning. As a result, even if you pick the initial wrong focus the act of focusing produces a higher likelihood that you will pick the right focus next time based on what you learned.

If this is true, then it seems that you should worry less about choosing the “right” focus and concentrate more on having a repeatable system that helps you:

- a. Absorb available information and distill it into a leading focus hypothesis
- b. Identify the assumptions in that hypothesis
- c. Identify a way to measure progress against those assumptions
- d. Set a forcing function (time period) to try and make progress against those assumptions
- e. Extract the learnings
- f. Feed the learnings back into the first step

I personally use the framework of [OKR's](#) for a lot of my personal and team goals. I also [customized a framework](#) for my [growth team](#) specific to growth endeavors. But you should find what is right for you.

Find a process that contains the above elements and have the discipline to stick to it. If you do those two things I think you will win in the long run.