

Focus: The Hidden Driver of Excellence

Daniel Goleman

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Review by Teresa Christen

“**F**ocus” is the latest book from Daniel Goleman, author of 13 books including the international best seller Emotional Intelligence, and promises to present a ground-breaking look at today’s scarcest resource and the secret to high performance: Attention.

With the watchful eye of a newcomer to the field of the Solution Focus approach in organisations and in coaching, I scanned this book for nuggets of useful insight. I asked myself about best hopes for this book/review and decided that it would be worthwhile if I were to (1) collect up some new ideas that could be directly applied in SF, (2) find out the secret to high performance and how it leads to excellence, and (3) gain an understanding of the science of attention. My understanding of how we apply attention in SF is in ‘what we pick up’ and, for that matter, ‘what we leave out’. The success of coaching and organisational consulting depends on this carefully selected focus.

Daniel Goleman’s book opens with the story of John, a department store detective whose job is to identify and catch someone preparing to steal. “What does he scan for?” This reminds me of how we coach individuals or teams – in SF, we scan for what’s working, we scan for client resources, we scan for what useful change is already happening. John scans for an eye movement, a glance, or a motion in their body. He zeros in on one shopper among the fifty, managing to ignore the other forty-nine, and everything else. How many times have you begun a new assignment, only to be washed over with a sea of seemingly insurmountable details and issues and problems? How do you focus on what is important? After this engaging introduction story, I was already seeing SF implications arise.

What does the author hope to accomplish with this book? Goleman calls attention a little-noticed and underrated mental asset. While the link between attention and excellence remains hidden most of the time, it ripples through almost everything we seek to accomplish. His goal is in surfacing this invisible factor in effectiveness, to let us better see the benefits of improving this mental faculty, and to understand how to do that.

How does he hope to accomplish this? Goleman presents an analysis of the latest research on attention that is backed up with numerous scientific findings and he includes case studies and many anecdotes. The author also touches on diverse themes such as unstoppable distractions, mind wandering and mindfulness. He also raises a concern: the digital revolution is making attention an endangered species, quoting the 1977 Nobel-winning economist Herbert Simon; “Wealth of information creates a poverty of attention”.

The book is broken up into seven parts and contains twenty-one chapters with somewhat ambiguous titles. The first four parts describe the Science and Anatomy of Attention – where Goleman breaks down the different types of attention and quotes scientific studies which pin-point the brain sections that fire up while test persons use different types of attention. He then moves on to explain “triple focus”. It is vital that leaders have a balanced “triple focus” in order to get the results they need. This “triple focus” builds on (1) self-awareness “inner focus”, which fosters self-management, own perspective & knowing yourself, (2) empathy “outer focus”, the basis for skill in relationships, other’s perspectives & understanding others, and (3) systems thinking “outer focus”, putting everything into context, which widens our focus on the world around us.

The last part focuses on “smart practice” and growing the “attention muscle” and draws on several case studies from professional sports, playing video games, schools, and applying mindfulness.

I found an interesting nugget of information in the chapter on the myth of 10,000 hours. Positivity has great payoffs for performance: energising us so we can focus better, think more

flexibly and persevere. Here, the SF approach popped up (with no specific mention of it) in a question standing somewhat alone: “If everything worked out perfectly in your life, what would you be doing in 10 years?”. Richard Boyatzis, a psychologist at the Weatherhead School of Management at Case Western University (and friend, colleague of Daniel Goleman) states “talking about your positive goals and dreams activates brain centers that open you up to new possibilities”. He had been applying dream-first coaching for many years and is the inventor of the Intentional Change Theory (ICT). A focus on our strengths, Boyatzis argues, urges us toward a desired future and stimulates openness to new ideas, people and plans.

Goleman wraps up his book with discussions of the best attributes of great leaders, which includes the big picture and setting strategy. Again, he draws on case studies to make his point that leaders (and teams) need to rely on a “Triple Focus” of inner, outer and other focus, in the right balance, to inspire and to excel.

Goleman’s book is a well-researched and well-referenced compilation of the work of many authors, scientists and researchers. It also contains excellent notes and information for further reading. This book, however, is not quick and easy reading. It requires a tremendous amount of focus in order to keep up with the switch between interesting and informative facts, peppered with anecdotes, examples and case studies. It took me two reads through the book to really grasp what the author was trying to say. Was it my lack of attention and focus? Or was the author deliberately challenging my focus by adding the somewhat distracting anecdotes? Was he deliberately drawing our attention away and then re-focusing it again to provide us an opportunity to exercise our ‘attention muscles’?

I would recommend this book to readers who are interested in gaining a more in-depth look at the relationship between attention/focus and achieving excellence. And, if you read carefully, you may even gain a better understanding of ‘why’ some aspects of SF are so successful, for instance:

The power to disengage our attention from one thing and move it to another is essential for well-being. In the SF approach: by disengaging our attention from problems and weaknesses and moving it toward solutions and strengths, we offer our clients an opportunity to re-focus their attention.

Deep thinking demands sustaining a focused mind. The more distracted we are, the more shallow our reflections; likewise, the shorter our reflections, the more trivial they are likely to be. In the SF approach: asking “what else?” and again “what else?” lengthens the reflections and gives clients space to explore more deeply.

So, have my best hopes been achieved? Yes, nearly! My best hope after reading this book is that Daniel Goleman will start to write his 14th book expanding on the topics of the last chapters, which fall a little short at the end of the book. I would like to see more specifics on WHAT leaders and teams need to do to in order to gain the desirable “triple focus” balance.

Reference for Richard Boyatzis:

<http://weatherhead.case.edu/faculty/Richard-Boyatzis>

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