

Focus: The Hidden Driver of Excellence (HarperCollins, 2013) by Daniel Goleman, reviewed by Steve Gladis, PhD, November 2013.

1. **Overview:** Attention is the muscle of the mind, and distraction is like the infectious “common cold.” Your mind gets strengthened by attention and weakened by mind wandering. Goleman calls our attention to three types of focus: Inner Focus – self-awareness and control; Other Focus – empathy for others and relationship building; and Outer Focus on the external environment – systems thinking. Two brains within us control our thoughts – bottom brain (basal, instinctual, ancient) and top brain (slower, cognitive, wandering). Using mindfulness and switching brains can help us focus, solve important problems, and attain excellence.
2. **Three Kinds of Attention for Leaders:** 1. Inner focus attunes us to our emotions, intuitions, and decisions – a form of self-awareness and self-regulation. 2. Other focus connects us with others through forms of empathy – Cognitive Empathy (I see how you view the world); Emotional Empathy (I have a sense of how you feel); Empathic Concern (I want to do something to soothe or help you). “Outer focus keeps our eye on the larger environment we live in – a systems approach works well to keep us safe and sound. 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 in which they operate will be blindsided.”
3. **Impoverishment of Attention:** Video games and endless electronic chatter; constant news, especially negative; information on demand by Google; and so much more are taking our kids and us down a path of distraction and lack of focus. We jump from emails to blogs to texts and get swallowed up in a sea of distraction. Doubly disturbing is that 8 percent of American online gamers meet the psychiatric definition of addiction. Nobel-winning economist Herbert Simon wrote: “...a wealth of information creates a poverty of attention.”
4. **Modes of Attention:** Psychologist and researcher Mihaly Csizmetmihaly has studied attention for year. He’s concluded that when we are minimally challenged and under minimal stress, most of us are bored. However, when we’re overstimulated, overstretched and overmatched for our capacity, we’re overwhelmed – what he calls “frazzled.” Finally, our performance is highest, and we’re most focused and engaged, when our capabilities are stretched but matched to the level of difficulty faced at work, which he calls “flow.” And flow is marked by your attention being absorbed, time flying by, feeling like you’re challenged but a good match for the challenge and doing what you enjoy. Unfortunately only 20% of people have flow in a day. A Harvard experiment using a phone app asked: What are you doing now? And, what are you thinking? People were often bored commuting and at work but fully attentive when lovemaking! (Who checks their phone while lovemaking?)

5. **Two Brains:** The bottom brain is the rudimentary ancient brain in our basal ganglia. It's reflexive, fast, impulsive, and stores habitual activities, like driving or walking. It sends impulses to the top brain. The top brain resides in the neocortex. It's slower, able to learn, the seat of self-control and regulation, and takes more effort and energy to power up. It often sends controlling signals to calm down the bottom brain. But both work in concert communicating back and forth in a kind of dance of thought and behavior. Key idea – strong focus on one tends to dampen the other. Thus, meditating on our breath can calm down an overactive, anxious top brain. Also, a bottom-up warning can protect us from being blindsided by a threat.
6. **Leaders and Focus:** People follow the leader's focus. In effect, leaders spread emotional contagion – both good and bad. Leaders need to take care that their emotions don't run the show. Moreover, strategy is an example of organizational attention and focus – best leaders are system thinkers. They can focus on their own self-awareness, others and the outer world in a kind of blended balanced way. Being too focused on a financial goal can make a leader appear less caring.
7. **Cognitive Control:** The bottom brain can overload the top brain – anxious fears can bubble up and overwhelm this part of the brain. And, a top brain darting from one thing to another can quickly overwhelm itself. Mindfulness or “cognitive control” can help us calm down the inner monkey-mind. Meditation is particularly effective at tamping down the wandering mind. In schools, a technique called “breathing buddies” is often used to calm down children. Teachers ask them to lie down, put a stuffed animal on their abdomens, and breathe in and out, watching the animal rise and fall. Also, they use “Stop Light”: When you feel overwhelmed, think Red Light – STOP; then, Yellow Light – What are my options? Then Green Light – Pick my best option and move forward. Such exercises can move prefrontal focus from negative (right) side to positive (left) side of the brain.
8. **Teams:** The best teams surface disagreements, talk about them, and don't let them simmer and boil over. Create time and space to reflect on things that bother people and allow them to bring up negative issues and feelings. To get the wisdom of the group, it has to be a safe place to share. Team Triple Focus: Individual – Self-awareness (“raising the elephant”); Other – understanding others on the team AND other groups the team deals with; Outer – what's going on in the organization and the business environment.