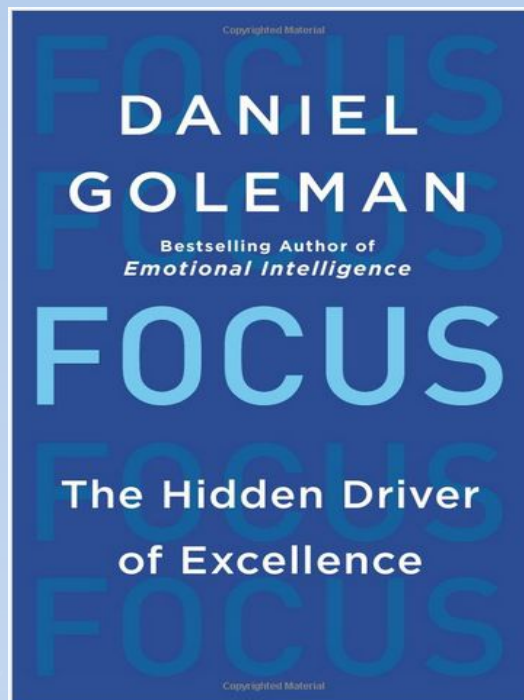


Executive Book Summary  
for PME 803 Organizational Leadership  
by Neil Westcott



## Summary

*Focus* examines the link between attention and excellence. With attention comes better memory learning, improved comprehension, better interaction skills, reading others emotions and sensing how we, ourselves, feel. Whether we realize it or not, our ability to focus has a dramatic affect on our lives from childhood onward. Goleman believes that a good leader needs three things: inner focus, outer focus and other focus. *Focus* is all about blocking out emotional and environmental distractions. A recurring theme in this book is the issue of digital engagement and its affect on attention.

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# Part I - The Anatomy of Attention

**Two competing forces essentially govern our brains. The premise of *Focus* is that being able to take control of the bottom-up mind in order to maintain a more complete focus on a task leads to an improved ability to succeed at what you do.**

**1. Our top-down mind is:**

- **Slower**
- **Voluntary**
- **Effortful**
- **Able to learn new models**
- **Able to make new plans**
- **Capable of overriding our automatic responses (sometimes)**

**2. Our bottom-up mind is:**

- **Faster**
- **Involuntary**
- **Always working**
- **Driven by emotions**
- **Acts out our habits**
- **Responsible for our mental models of the world**

“ I can't read more than two pages at a stretch. I get this urge to go online. ”

## Are digital technologies impacting on our ability to maintain focus from distractions? In this case it seems to.

Focus, Page 8)

**Flow is total engagement in doing something challenging and creative. Goleman relates his thinking about focus to flow since most workers lack the motivation and enthusiasm to maintain focus at work or their everyday work overload causes them to become frazzled.**



Most of the time people are either stressed or bored, with only occasional periods of flow



Only 20 % of people experience flow at least once per day



Around 15 % of people never experience flow in a typical day

Link to a more detailed explanation of flow:

<http://www.pursuit-of-happiness.org/history-of-happiness/mihaly-csikszentmihalyi/>

# Part II - Self-Awareness

Our awareness is made up of our “Me”, or what we feel about ourselves, and the “I”, which is how we are feeling in the moment. The inner voice we feel helps us to balance the “I” and the “Me”, according to Goleman. Performers from Cirque de Soleil that were interviewed report being able to “feel” a perfect performance during practice, or the closest representation to perfect that they are able to make.

**How’s your driving?** A study referenced in *Focus* about driving ability indicated that three-quarters of drivers think that they are better than average drivers, and drivers who had been in accidents were more likely to consider themselves better than average. Most people also thought that they were less likely to overrate themselves compared to other people. This is pertinent to the subject of leadership because Goleman goes on to state that as people become more powerful, they are less accurate in their self-awareness and also less able to receive candid feedback. Seeing ourselves as others see us is a key factor in being a good leader.

**Groupthink** leads people to believe that they have all of the knowledge and expertise necessary to make correct decisions. Similar to individuals that lack self-awareness, these types of group decisions are less effective because they ignore other solutions.

How does a lack of self-awareness hinder leaders in your professional environment?

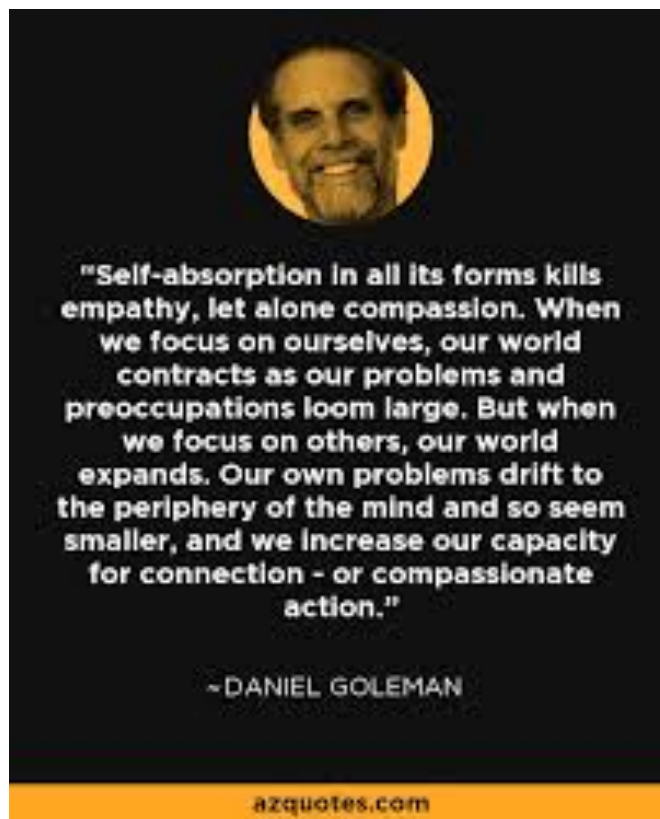
# Part III - Reading Others

## The Empathy Triad

**Cognitive empathy** – A top-down understanding of a problem from someone else's perspective.

**Emotional empathy** – A bottom-up response to someone else's emotion so that we can feel what they are feeling.

**Empathic concern** – A combination of the first two processes which allows us to put out empathy into perspective and act on our feelings if necessary.



**Goleman discusses a few different studies in this chapter: One study examines sociopaths that characteristically lack the facility to understand what other people feel but learn to mimic those responses to manipulate others. He also uses the example of doctors, who are able to block out those same responses in order to do their jobs. Both of these examples point to not only how important it is to have all types of empathy, but also that it is a learnable skill, a fact that is important for aspiring leaders.**

# Part IV - The Bigger Context



People are not attuned to dealing with the larger problems that today's world presents, such as global warming. This is what the term "system blindness" represents. One idea presented in the book to overcome system blindness has to do with handprints, a positive concept to replace a global footprint. Adding value to the world through our handprints give us a sense of doing something meaningful, which allows us to continue to do similar things to experience the same feeling.

Do you have a handprint?

If not, visit <http://www.handprinter.org>



# Part V - Smart Practice

**Improving upon your skills requires top-down focus. Smart practice recognizes errors, and subsequent practice allows for more finely tuned efforts. Repeated practices transfer those skills to your bottom-up mind. The trick for constant improvement is not to allow the bottom-up to take over.**

**Some of the most recent research in the area of gaming technology list many benefits to gaming; including enhancement to visual attention, information processing speed, object tracking and task switching. While Goleman lists many different positive affects of playing video games, he does quote a Singaporean study that indicates a negative correlation between time spent gaming and how well children do in school.**

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# Part VI - The Well-Focused Leader

***Focus* talks about how a leader directs attention where it needs to go by noticing trends. A good leader understands the realities of their situation but also looks for opportunities that might not be obvious to others. For example – Steve Jobs brought focus back to Apple by trimming product lines and staying true to his ideas about innovation and user friendliness while RIM did not innovate or see changes in the market. A winning strategy requires both creativity and insight.**

**Good leaders are good at capturing attention – there are merits to be able to tell a good story. Capturing and directing attention is an integral art of leadership.**

**A good leader needs to do three things: focus their own attention, attract and direct attention from others and be attuned to the inner, outer and other focus.**

# Part VII - The Big Picture

In conclusion, *Focus* addresses some of the systemic messes that society has created. What kind of leader will be necessary to bring about change to solve these messes. Goleman believes that in addition to having the focus necessary for the task, future leaders will need some wisdom and farsightedness to succeed.

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## Critical Evaluation

I really enjoyed reading *Focus* for a number of reasons. It was definitely thought- provoking and challenged some of my beliefs about ability and success in school and life. It was interesting to read a lot of the information about brain science and how the research was being applied to education and leadership theory. Some of the science was very difficult to digest, though, and took some reflection and thought to understand. However, Goleman uses some fairly basic examples as well to ensure his point is being made. Material is woven together from numerous individuals and a diverse group of industries and specialists. The reader will doubtless have a connection to some if not all aspects of Goleman's narrative. The various threads of *Focus* are well connected throughout the text. However, I definitely feel as if I would benefit from re-reading it from a different perspective than the present one - namely completing it for an assignment.

**“The big shock:** statistical analysis found that a child's level of self-control is every bit as powerful a predictor of her adult financial success and health (and criminal record, for that matter) as are social class, wealth of family or origin, or IQ. Willpower emerged as a completely independent force in life success - in fact, for financial success, self-control in childhood proved a *stronger* predictor than either IQ or social class of the family of origin.”  
(*Focus*, Page 81)