

Focused Leadership

The basis of organizational, emotional and strategic effectiveness

The *focused leader* has the primary responsibility to direct attention. When we talk about being focused, we commonly mean thinking about one thing while filtering out distractions. However, new research in neuroscience shows that we focus in different ways for different purposes, drawing on different neural pathways, some of which work in concert, while others tend to stand in opposition.

The focused leader needs to cultivate in abundance and in the proper balance, the different modes of attention into three categories. Focusing on yourself; a failure to focus inward leaves you rudderless, Focusing on others; a failure to focus on others renders you clueless, and Focusing on the world; a failure to focus outward may leave you blindsided.

1. Focusing on Yourself: Get in touch with your inner voice. Leaders who heed their inner voices can draw on more resources to make better decisions and connect with their authentic selves. A look at how to focus inward can make this abstract concept more concrete.

❑ **Self-Awareness:**

Being self-aware involves listening to internal physiological signal. Learning to hone-in on sensory impressions is one significant part of self-awareness. Learning to view and accept your authentic self is another. Being real means to be the same person to others as you are to yourself. This involves paying attention to what other people think of you and being open to input.

❑ **Self-Control:**

Cognitive control is the scientific term for what we call ‘willpower’. Cognitive control allows leaders to pursue goals regardless of setbacks and distractions. Excellence cognitive control can be seen in individuals who remain calm in a crisis and recover from defeat. Cognitive control research over many years shows the importance of willpower in relation to leadership success.

2. Focusing on Others: The word “attention” comes from the Latin *attendere*, meaning “to reach toward.” This is a perfect definition of focus on others, which is the foundation of empathy and relationship building. Leaders who can effectively focus on others are easy to recognize. They are the ones who find common ground, whose opinions carry the most weight, and with whom other people want to work with. They emerge as natural leaders regardless of organizational or social rank.

❑ **Empathy:**

Empathy is most commonly thought of as a single attribute. However, a closer look at empathy reveals three distinct kinds, each important for leadership effectiveness:

- Cognitive empathy: the ability to understand another person’s perspective;
 - Emotional empathy: the ability to feel what someone else feels;
 - Empathic concern: the ability to sense what another person needs from you.
- *Cognitive empathy:* The enables leaders to explain themselves in meaningful ways—a skill essential to getting the best performance from their direct reports. Contrary to what you might expect, exercising cognitive empathy requires leaders to think about feelings rather than to feel them directly.



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- *Emotional empathy:* is the ability to feel what another person feels. This is important for effective mentoring, managing and reading group dynamics. It springs from a parts of the brain beneath the cortex call the amygdala.
- *Empathic empathy:* is the ability to sense what someone else needs for you. Empathic concern requires managing your personal distress without closing yourself off to the pain of others. Research suggest that the application of empathic concern is vital to moral judgements.

❑ **Building Relationships:**

People who have no social sensitivity can be easily noticed. Leaders who are cognitively empathic tend to do better at because they pick up implicit norms fairly quickly. Research suggest that as a person rises through the ranks, their ability to both make and maintain personal connections deteriorate and they tend to overlook the ideas and talents of the lower ranks. This is a warning to senior leaders.

3. Focusing on the world: Leaders who have a strong outward focus tend to be both good listeners and questioners. They tend to be visionaries who can sense the consequences of decisions and visualize how the choices they make will work out in the future.

To summarize, focused leaders are in tune with how they feel, understand how other people see them, can manage their impulses, can tune out distractions and comprehend what other people need from them. This can be quite difficult and takes willingness and determination.

