Focus: The Hidden Driver of Excellence

Title: ***Focus: The Hidden Driver of Excellence***

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Book Summary:

In *Focus*, psychologist and journalist Daniel Goleman, author of the #1 international bestseller *Emotional Intelligence*, offers a groundbreaking look at today's scarcest resource and the secret to high performance and fulfillment: attention.Combining cutting-edge research with practical findings, *Focus* delves into the science of attention in all its varieties, presenting a long overdue discussion of this little-noticed and under-rated mental asset. In an era of unstoppable distractions, Goleman persuasively argues that now more than ever we must learn to sharpen focus if we are to survive in a complex world.

Goleman boils down attention research into a threesome: inner, other, and outer focus. Drawing on rich case studies from fields as diverse as competitive sports, education, the arts, and business, he shows why high-achievers need all three kinds of focus, and explains how those who rely on Smart Practices—mindfulness meditation, focused preparation and recovery, positive emotions and connections, and mental "prosthetics" that help them improve habits, add new skills, and sustain greatness—excel while others do not.

Book Notes:

While the link between attention and excellence remains hidden most of the time, it ripples through almost everything we seek to accomplish. Location 97

Attention works much like a muscle—use it poorly and it can wither; work it well and it grows. Location 116

For leaders to get results they need all three kinds of focus. Inner focus attunes us to our intuitions, guiding values, and better decisions. Other focus smooths our connections to the people in our lives. And outer focus lets us navigate in the larger world. Location 118

Today's children are growing up in a new reality, one where they are attuning more to machines and less to people than has ever been true in human history. That's troubling for several reasons. For one, the social and emotional circuitry of a child's brain learns from contact and conversation with everyone it encounters over the course of a day. These interactions mold brain circuitry; the fewer hours spent with people—and the more spent staring at a digitized screen—portends deficits. Location 145

All of this was foreseen way back in 1977 by the Nobel-winning economist Herbert Simon. Writing about the coming information-rich world, he warned that what information consumes is "the attention of its recipients. Hence a wealth of information creates a poverty of attention." Location 199

The biggest challenge for even the most focused, though, comes from the emotional turmoil of our lives, like a recent blowup in a close relationship that keeps intruding into your thoughts. Such thoughts barge in for a good reason: to get us to think through what to do about what's upsetting us. The dividing line between

fruitless rumination and productive reflection lies in whether or not we come up with some tentative solution or insight and then can let those distressing thoughts go—or if, on the other hand, we just keep obsessing over the same loop of worry. Location 230

The power to disengage our attention from one thing and move it to another is essential for well-being. Location 245

Richard Davidson, a neuroscientist at the University of Wisconsin, names focus as one of a handful of essential life abilities, each based in a separate neural system, that guide us through the turbulence of our inner lives, our relationships, and whatever challenges life brings. Location 252

We learn best with focused attention. As we focus on what we are learning, the brain maps that information on what we already know, making new neural connections. Location 259

Research by Harvard's Howard Gardner, Stanford's William Damon, and Claremont's Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi zeroed in on what they call "good work," a potent mix of what people are excellent at, what engages them, and their ethics—what they believe matters. Those are more likely to be high-absorption callings: people love what they are doing. Full absorption in what we do feels good, and pleasure is the emotional marker for flow. Location 343

On the other hand, another large group are stuck in the state neurobiologists call "frazzle," where constant stress overloads their nervous system with floods of cortisol and adrenaline. Their attention fixates on their worries, not their job. This emotional exhaustion can lead to burnout. Location 362

Why the puzzle? Our brain has two semi-independent, largely separate mental systems. One has massive computing power and operates constantly, purring away in quiet to solve our problems, surprising us with a sudden solution to complex pondering. Since it operates beyond the horizon of conscious awareness we are blind to its workings. This system presents the fruit of its vast labors to us as though out of nowhere, and in a multitude of forms, from guiding the syntax of a sentence to constructing complex full-blown mathematical proofs. Location 379

The bottom-up mind is:

- faster in brain time, which operates in milliseconds
- involuntary and automatic, always on
- intuitive, operating through networks of association
- impulsive, driven by emotions
- executor of our habitual routines and guide for our actions
- manager for our mental models of the world

By contrast, the top-down mind is:

- slower
- voluntary

- effortful
- the seat of self-control, which can (sometimes) overpower automatic routines and mute emotionally driven impulses
- able to learn new models, make new plans, and take charge of our automatic repertoire—to an extent Location 397

Voluntary attention, willpower, and intentional choice are top-down; reflexive attention, impulse, and rote habit are bottom-up (as is the attention captured by a stylish outfit or a nifty ad). When we choose to tune in to the beauty of a sunset, concentrate on what we're reading, or have a deep talk with someone, it's a top-down shift. Our mind's eye plays out a continual dance between stimulus-driven attention capture and voluntarily directed focus. Location 403

The bottom-up system multitasks, scanning a profusion of inputs in parallel, including features of our surroundings that have not yet come into full focus; it analyzes what's in our perceptual field before letting us know what it selects as relevant for us. Our top-down mind takes more time to deliberate on what it gets presented with, taking things one at a time and applying more thoughtful analysis. Location 406

Top-down wiring adds talents like self-awareness and reflection, deliberation, and planning to our mind's repertoire. Intentional, top-down focus offers the mind a lever to manage our brain. As we shift our attention from one task, plan, sensation or the like to another, the related brain circuitry lights up. Location 416

The peak of automaticity can be seen when expertise pays off in effortless attention to high demand, whether a master-level chess match, a NASCAR race, or rendering an oil painting. If we haven't practiced enough, all of these will take deliberate focus. But if we have mastered the requisite skills to a level that meets the demand, they will take no extra cognitive effort—freeing our attention for the extras seen only among those at top levels. Location 434

The more you can relax and trust in bottom-up moves, the more you free your mind to be nimble. Location 439

Brain studies find that having a champion athlete start pondering technique during a performance offers a sure recipe for a screwup. Location 458

Overloading attention shrinks mental control. It's in the moments we feel most stressed that we forget the names of people we know well, not to mention their birthdays, our anniversaries, and other socially crucial data. Location 479

The bottom-up circuitry learns voraciously—and quietly—taking in lessons continually as we go through the day. Such implicit learning need never enter our awareness, though it acts as a rudder in life nonetheless, for better or for worse. Location 493

While our minds wander we become better at anything that depends on a flash of insight, from coming up with imaginative wordplay to inventions and original thinking. In fact, people who are extremely adept at mental tasks that demand cognitive control and a roaring working memory—like solving complex math problems—can struggle with creative insights if they have trouble switching off their fully concentrated focus. Location 613

Life's creative challenges rarely come in the form of well-formulated puzzles. Instead we often have to recognize the very need to find a creative solution in the first place. Chance, as Louis Pasteur put it, favors a prepared mind. Daydreaming incubates creative discovery. Location 636

A classic model of the stages of creativity roughly translates to three modes of focus: orienting, where we search out and immerse ourselves in all kinds of inputs; selective attention on the specific creative challenge; and open awareness, where we associate freely to let the solution emerge—then hone in on the solution. Location 638

In a complex world where almost everyone has access to the same information, new value arises from the original synthesis, from putting ideas together in novel ways, and from smart questions that open up untapped potential. Creative insights entail joining elements in a useful, fresh way. Location 658

“The intuitive mind is a sacred gift and the rational mind is a faithful servant,” Albert Einstein once said. “We have created a society that honors the servant and has forgotten the gift.” Location 677

The nonstop onslaught of email, texts, bills to pay—life’s “full catastrophe”—throws us into a brain state antithetical to the open focus where serendipitous discoveries thrive. In the tumult of our daily distractions and to-do lists, innovation dead-ends; in open times it flourishes. That’s why the annals of discovery are rife with tales of a brilliant insight during a walk or a bath, on a long ride or vacation. Open time lets the creative spirit flourish; tight schedules kill it. Location 682

Creative associations aside, mind wandering tends to center on our self and our preoccupations: all the many things I have to do today; the wrong thing I said to that person; what I should have said instead. While the mind sometimes wanders to pleasant thoughts or fantasy, it more often seems to gravitate to rumination and worry. Location 719

Tightly focused attention gets fatigued—much like an overworked muscle—when we push to the point of cognitive exhaustion. The signs of mental fatigue, such as a drop in effectiveness and a rise in distractedness and irritability, signify that the mental effort needed to sustain focus has depleted the glucose that feeds neural energy. Location 841

Self-awareness, then, represents an essential focus, one that attunes us to the subtle murmurs within that can help guide our way through life. And, as we shall see, this inner radar holds the key to managing what we do—and just as important, what we don’t do. This internal control mechanism makes all the difference between a life well lived and one that falters. Location 906

Our “gut feelings” are messages from the insula and other bottom-up circuits that simplify life decisions for us by guiding our attention toward smarter options. The better we are at reading these messages, the better our intuition. Location 949

Somatic marker is neuroscientist Antonio Damasio’s term for the sensations in our body that tell us when a choice feels wrong or right. This bottom-up circuitry telegraphs its conclusions through our gut feelings, often long before the top-down circuits come to a more reasoned conclusion. Location 956

One surefire test for self-awareness is a “360-degree” evaluation, where you’re asked to rate yourself on a range of specific behaviors or traits. Those self-ratings are checked against evaluations by a dozen or so people whom you have asked to rate you on the same scale. You pick them because they know you well and you respect their judgment—and their ratings are anonymous, so they can feel free to be frank. The gap between how you see yourself and how the others rate you offers one of the best evaluations you can get anywhere of your own self-awareness. Location 982

There’s an intriguing relationship between self-awareness and power: There are relatively few gaps between one’s own and others’ ratings among lower-level employees. But the higher someone’s position in an organization, the bigger the gap. Self-awareness seems to diminish with promotions up the organization’s

ladder. Location 986

Candid feedback from those you trust and respect creates a source of self-awareness, one that can help guard against skewed information inputs or questionable assumptions. Another antidote to groupthink: expand your circle of connection beyond your comfort zone and inoculate against in-group isolation by building an ample circle of no-BS confidants who keep you honest. Location 1080

Attention regulates emotion. Location 1099

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 of 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. Location 1167

Bottom line: kids can have the most economically privileged childhood, yet if they don't master how to delay gratification in pursuit of their goals those early advantages may wash out in the course of life. Location 1174

Of the many nuances and varieties of attention, two matter greatly for self-awareness. Selective attention lets us focus on one target and ignore everything else. Open attention lets us take in information widely in the world around us and the world within us, and pick up subtle cues we'd otherwise miss. Location 1234

The chronic cognitive overload that typifies life for so many of us seems to lower our threshold for self-control. The greater the demands on our attention, it seems, the poorer we get at resisting temptations. Location 1268

Here's the catch. We are prepared by our biology to eat and sleep, mate and nurture, fight-or-flee, and exhibit all the other built-in survival responses in the human repertoire. But as we've seen, there are no neural systems dedicated to understanding the larger systems within which all this occurs. Location 1910
Focusing on what's wrong about what we do activates circuitry for distressing emotions. Emotions, remember, guide our attention. And attention glides away from the unpleasant. Location 2109

Learning how to improve any skill requires top-down focus. Neuroplasticity, the strengthening of old brain circuits and building of new ones for a skill we are practicing, requires our paying attention: When practice occurs while we are focusing elsewhere, the brain does not rewire the relevant circuitry for that particular routine. Location 2266

Now, decades after that controversial article, competence models tell a clear story: nonacademic abilities like empathy typically outweigh purely cognitive talents in the makeup of outstanding leaders. Location 3257

When Accenture interviewed one hundred CEOs about the skills they needed to run a company successfully, a set of fourteen abilities emerged, from thinking globally and creating an inspiring shared vision to embracing change and tech savvy. No one person could have them all. But there was one "meta" ability that emerged: self-awareness. Chief executives need this ability to assess their own strengths and weaknesses, and so surround themselves with a team of people whose strengths in those core abilities complement their own. Location 3265

Take any working group and ask the members, "Who is the leader?" and they'll be likely to name whoever has the fitting job title. Now ask them, "Who is the most influential person in your group?" The answer to that identifies the informal leader, and tells you how that group actually operates. Location 3284

Note: should you wish to find any quote in its original context, the Kindle "location" is provided after each entry