

Member's Quarterly

Winter 2022 Edition

Feature

Brains Are Not Wired to Multi-task: Don't Compromise Performance

How leaders can overcome distraction and regain focus

Distractions are a reality for leaders. Whether it's a wandering mind that prevents you from being present or external distractions that limit your ability to be productive, distractions are real – and growing.

Without care and attention to the source of your internal and external distractions and concrete steps to keep them in check, distractions can overwhelm you, compromising your performance. Your focus takes a hit. So does your brain's ability to function at its best, especially your executive functioning skills such as problem solving and decision making.

The good news? Through research, we better understand what distracts and overloads our brains. Science also helps us appreciate how our brains perform at their best. Here are four concrete shifts you can make to overcome distraction and regain your focus.

Is your wandering mind helping or hindering you?

Our minds naturally wander. In fact, research suggests we do it for about 50 percent of our waking moments. Though some of it can be creative and useful, most of it is not. For example, it is useful if you're inspired to consider fresh perspectives in your work after taking a break and you allow your mind to wander freely. When your mental distraction becomes a default pattern of second-guessing decisions or mentally rehearsing how you're going to jump into a conversation instead of being fully engaged in it, a wandering mind can be downright unproductive.

Focussing on something concrete is a great way to tame your wandering mind.

Tip # 1 Focus on what's right in front of you

The next time you're in the middle of something and find your mind drifting, simply notice and bring your attention to an object you can hold. For example, pick up a pen. Instead of thinking about your 'to do' list or what you're going to say next, focus on the pen. Notice its color, texture, how it feels in your hand and use that moment to bring your mind back – whether it's to the meeting you're in or the task at hand.

Each time you do this, you will be training yourself to return to focus. By building your mental focussing muscle, you'll be able to call upon it every time you find your mind wandering out of focus.

Tip # 2 Focus on your breath

Focussing on your breath is another powerful way to overcome distraction.

When you connect to your breath and devote just a few minutes to slow, intentional breathing in a quiet space, you trigger your Parasympathetic Nervous System. This system helps us manage our fight or flight response, induces rest and relaxation that calms our body and brain and also helps lower our levels of anxiety along with our heart rate and blood pressure.

It also boosts brain functioning when you do it over time, leading to better focus, improved clarity and better emotional control.



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Feature continued

Are your habits leading to distraction?

We live in a hyper-connected world, serving up a never-ending stream of potential distraction in a typical day with multiple online platforms, social media feeds and 24/7 news, updates and alerts clamoring for attention. While they can all be useful, they also present an enormous challenge to your ability to focus – without careful, conscious management.

When you are constantly processing information and activity, it's easy to overstimulate your brain and trigger or stimulate both the stress hormone Cortisol and your fight or flight Adrenaline hormone. The result? Your brain suffers and you end up with higher levels of mental fog or scrambled thinking. Instead, consider how you will manage what you focus your attention on throughout the day.

Tip # 3 Set distraction boundaries

Pay attention to all the ways you are being pulled or interrupted each day. Then make conscious choices about when you will be focussed on a task (uninterrupted) and when you will be 'available', whether it is to take calls, meet with staff or allow incoming notifications on your computer, phone and mobile devices. All can be turned off!

The more intentional you are about your daily habits and patterns – especially your defaults – the more you'll be able to consider and make the conscious choices that serve you best. This really counts when it comes to directing your brain and its precious energy reserves for your most focussed efforts.

Tip # 4 Mono-Task versus Multi-Task

Our brains are not wired to multi-task. Rather, they are master 'switchers', allowing us to switch back and forth between tasks. Regardless of whether you are processing an incoming message, notification or phone call, each one distracts your attention and causes your brain to 'switch'. Then, it must switch again to return to what you were attempting to focus on. The more switching you do, the greater the cognitive load you place on your brain's daily reserves, leading to brain fog and a marked decline in your ability to make good decisions or complete tasks effectively.

The best strategy? Mono-task - focus on doing one thing at a time and devoting the first few hours of your day to your most important work, especially anything requiring executive functioning skills. Your brain will be at its freshest at that time and able to perform at its peak.

Your mind, just as your muscles, can be trained to pay attention, building your capacity to be a more focussed leader. Concrete, intentional practices such as these are simple yet powerful ways to develop this skill and bring focus back into your leadership life.

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