

Pay Attention & Boost Performance

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Today, our attention is diffused; not just in the workplace but everywhere I look people are distracted; in a state where we are not fully present. Daniel Goleman, who popularised emotional intelligence, speaks of ‘continual partial attention’, a thorn in our collective sides, or more accurately, in our heads.

This lack of attention impacts our performance. Our ability to do our job is directly related to how well we can concentrate and focus. If you're continually distracted, you don't perform as efficiently, you don't produce the same quality of work, you make more mistakes and in some workplaces this translates to not being as safe. Clearly trying to do multiple tasks at once means the primary task takes longer and our accuracy declines.

Attention is also critical for forming memories. I recently heard, on Sydney radio station 702 ABC, about a study which compared one group of people who walked around a gallery and took photos to another group who simply looked at the works without taking photos. The study found that the group that took photos had memories which were impaired in terms of accuracy and recall. The difference, as I recall, (I could be wrong as I was trying to drive, navigate, talk on the phone and listen to the radio at the same time) was whether people were giving their full attention to the artwork and engaged only with the primary stimulus or whether they defused their attention by also using their cameras.

Every moment we are now distracted by so many gadgets and stimuli vying for and competing for our attention that it works against us forming memories or developing any real understanding. Rarely these days do we pay **full** attention to any one task we are doing. So if we are trying to talk, listen, write emails and read a text all at once then surely we are in a constant state of diffused attention and there is no doubt that in this state our memories and thinking will be fuzzier than had we focused on one thing at a time.

A recent article by Kath Kenny in the Sydney Morning Herald summed it up beautifully. Kenny writes that if we are constantly posting and sharing and capturing everything that happens to us then we are not paying full attention and not forming accurate and lasting memories. She goes on to say that it is no wonder that when we do not have access to our gadgets that we can start to feel like we don't exist at all.

This is why one of the most important things to learn in the workplace today is how to focus and strengthen our attention. Building these skills can change our brains and heighten our ability to concentrate hours later - it's like going to the gym and building muscles.



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In a recent program we ran for a client we built participants' resilience and productivity by helping them pay attention and strengthen their focus. The program included simple mindfulness techniques and a 'S.T.O.P.' process where participants were asked to practice the following:

- **S**low down – push feet against the floor or take some deep breaths;
- **T**ake note of what they were thinking and feeling – stress, anger, anxiety, joy etc.
- **O**pen up – be honest about how they had been behaving especially with others – had they been short, abrupt, critical, not creative, humourless etc.
- **P**ursue values and prioritise how they wanted to behave next – We asked them to decide what they were going to do next in the context of their values – have a conversation, phone a client, do some proper planning, think expansively, say sorry etc.

(Adapted from an Acceptance & Commitment Therapy techniques as taught by Dr Russ Harris)

We also teach 'still mind listening' which asks the listener to pay full attention to the speaker and invites much deeper sharing and self-expression. Being receptive to what others have to say is a must for leaders - it is the province of knowledge to speak and the privilege of wisdom to listen.

There is lots of evidence that such techniques help peoples' well-being and performance at work. In the end, mindfulness and attention helps us to **respond appropriately rather than react blindly**. Google knows this. Since 2007, Google has run a 'Search Inside Yourself' program which is so popular it has a waiting list of some 6 months. Google's program combines meditation, mindfulness and emotional intelligence and as the program's creator, Meng, has famously said, "every company knows that if their people have EI, they're going to make a shitload of money."

And while the corporate world embraces mindfulness as a means of boosting performance, it was lovely to read a great story in the Sydney Morning Herald last week by Daisy Dumas about the South Sydney Rabbitohs and the 'Out of Your Mind' program which the coach believes has had a significant impact on players' ability.

In parallel with the work we do, the Rabbitohs have been doing mindfulness, meditation and breathing training to build resilience, conquer distractions and anxiety and better deal with pressure and difficult situations for longer. The techniques helped the Premiers be more present, to respond effectively and not react blindly. In this context, helping the players respond more effectively in the next play. Staying calm is crucial here. Many US sports teams are now doing similar training; the Chicago Bulls, Super Bowl winners the Seattle Seahawks and the Los Angeles Lakers to name a few.

As with our training, the Rabbitohs also focused on values, (as described above in the STOP technique) ensuring the players brought their values to the next play and used them to guide and inform their actions. It certainly worked for them and helped them perform at their best, in a way they had been unable to for the past 43 years.



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