

# Pay full attention to whatever you do!

## Daniel Goleman on the importance of focusing

*The ability to focus is part of emotional intelligence and a prerequisite for effective leadership. This is what author Daniel Goleman concludes based on his studies how to develop leadership qualities. In an interview with ZOE, he explains his findings.*

**ZOE:** Mr. Goleman, you have been dealing with the development of leaders for many years, and have created a new conceptuality with your book «Emotional Intelligence» that emphasizes the importance of social skills of executives, and has influenced many leadership development programs. What is the significance of the ability you've referred to in your book «Focus, the hidden driver of excellence»? Why are these skills important?

**Goleman:** In «Focus» I recast the meaning of emotional intelligence in terms of our ability to pay attention: take in information fully, understand it deeply and respond most adaptively. I feel that this is, from a cognitive point of view, one of the essential tasks of high performance leadership. If you fail anywhere along the line you're lowering your performance.

**ZOE:** With regards to this ability to pay attention you differentiate between the three kinds of focus - inner, other and outer focus. Tell us more.

**Goleman:** Inner focus refers to self-awareness, to our ability to understand for example how our emotional state impacts our ability to think well or not. There is a very strong connectivity between cognitive function and emotional states. It is crucial to know how our emotions impact our performance, and how to manage our emotional life in order to optimize our other skills.

Other focus has to do with emphasizing, with tuning into the people around us, the people we work with. To understand for instance how our states impact their states. If we are a leader we have a very strong say in how other people feel. In any

human group it's natural to pay most attention to, and to put most importance on, what the leader says and does. This magnifies the impact of the leader's emotions for better or for worse.

And then the third kind of focus –outer – has to do with understanding larger systems in which you operate. The economy, your sector, your competition, your technology, all of this is changing. And it's only going to accelerate, which means your ability to take in information well and respond to it is going to be more important than ever. And the substrate of that ability is emotional intelligence.

### Daniel Goleman – Biography

Daniel Goleman, best known for his worldwide bestseller Emotional Intelligence, is most recently co-author of Altered Traits: Science Reveals How Meditation Changes Your Mind, Brain and Body.

He has worked with leaders around the globe, examining the way social and emotional competencies impact the bottom-line. His article in the Harvard Business review, «The Focused Leader» won the 2013 HBR McKinsey Award for best article of the year.

Goleman has been ranked among the 25 most influential business leaders by several business publications including TIME and The Wall Street Journal. Apart from his writing on emotional intelligence, he has written books on topics including self-deception, creativity, transparency, meditation, social and emotional learning, ecoliteracy and the ecological crisis. M.A in Clinical Psychology und Ph.D in Personality and Development, Harvard University.

**ZOE:** How do I become such a well-focused leader? What skills should I train for? What do I have to do?

**Goleman:** The question how to become a well-focused leader is one that I've dealt with now for a couple of decades. Based on research together with my colleagues at the Korn Ferry Hay Group we developed the Emotional/Social Competence Inventory (or ESCI), a 360 assessment. It is designed specifically for leadership development, and used by coaches, and consultants to conduct a pre and post diagnostic with their clients. How does this person seem to be functioning as others see them, not as he or she reads himself or herself – self readings are notoriously unreliable. When people around them give them honest anonymous feedback, that's very powerful information. The results can be used by the coaches to direct their own efforts towards where the client wants to be, which ideal image of himself he wants to represent in five years and what is it he needs to work on in order to advance, to make himself more effective. Then at the end of three to six months you might ask the client to do the same assessment again and show how he has improved. It's very re-enforcing for an executive to know that the work they are doing actually makes a difference as perceived by the people they work with.

**ZOE:** Are there other ways how coaches, trainers and advisors best assist their clients in becoming a focused leader?

**Goleman:** There is interesting work coming out of the Max-Planck institute in Leipzig, by Tania Singer. She looked at how to develop self-awareness in terms of mindfulness, developing the ability to monitoring your own thoughts and feelings without being hijacked by them, but rather just observing them coming and going. Being able to hold that stance gives you a high degree of freedom that allows you to focus better. Because the main distracters in our flow of attention are emotional thoughts, particularly around relationships. If you just let your mind wander it tends to wander to the worst problems you're having right now. That's the way the brain operates.

So, the active focusing moment on whatever task is at hand means that you need to be able to resist the momentum of mind wandering, keeping your mind on that one thing. And Tania Singer and other cognitive neuroscientists around the world have found that mindfulness training is a very powerful way to increase this.

I just finished writing a book, «Altered Traits», which reviews all the best studies of mindfulness and related methods. And we find that the more you practice mindfulness the more the circuitry which inhibits mind wandering becomes stronger. A simple method, for example, is keeping your mind on your breath and noticing when your mind wanders, and bringing it back. This is the basic move in the mental gym. And the re-

search on this is very clear, that this does strengthen the brain's attention circuitry.

I'm a big advocate for putting such attention exercises in schools, from the earliest years until University, because right now we leave children's attentional abilities and their development to chance. I think particularly in the adverse technological environment that they grow up in they will only become more distracted in the future. I think children will need more strengthening of the mind. This is the next step in education for the future. And even now it's not too late for adults to do the same.

Second, if you are a highly effective leader you need to manage yourself and be fully present to the person you're with. That means putting aside your daydream, your tasks, your tech tools, and actually listening fully and understanding this person. And it's almost embarrassing to say that – it seems so obvious – but it's less obvious now than it was 20 years ago.

The third method is intentionally cultivating empathy. Which again goes back to Tania Singer's work. There are three kinds of empathy each is based on a different set of brain circuitry. The first is cognitive empathy, to understand how you think, your perspective and your mental models. With cognitive empathy, I know the terms in which you slice reality. This allows me to communicate very effectively with you. It's a very important kind of empathy.

The second is emotional empathy. It's really brain-to-brain empathy. Brains are designed to silently connect with each other in a face-to-face interaction, and create an invisible automatic spontaneous bridge for emotion. So, my emotional state effects your emotional state, yours effects mine. And understanding that by tuning in to your own emotion, which reflects the other person, gives you the signal what's going on with the other person. And then you can go from there.

The third kind, which is extremely important for leadership is technically called empathic concern. This means I not only know how you think and how you feel, I actually care about you. I want what's best for you because it's best for us. And this is the kind of leader who's a mentor, who is a coach. He doesn't just dismiss people as they are, but sees them as able to develop further strength – and helps them do so. This builds enormous trust and loyalty, and makes any leader far more effective.

**ZOE:** Let's zoom out a little and look at teams and organizations. How can a team develop into a well focused team?

**Goleman:** The qualities of emotional intelligence – self awareness of self-management, empathy, relationship management – manifest at the team level as well as the individual level. The best work is by Vanessa Druskat at the University of New Hampshire. She has been studying high performing teams for

years, and has identified the norms and collective habits that high performing teams have, also with regards to emotional intelligence. In this context self awareness means that team members know each other well and can identify the strengths and weaknesses of each person on the team, and they know when to have one person to a job, another person not, because of that.

For example, if someone is creating a problem on the team they don't just ignore it or work around it, they name it and deal with it, because it's important for the overall team effectiveness. And they can see what is going on with that person, and identify how they can help them. This is an example of relationship management at the team level. They also have empathy at the team level, that they are able to understand their clients. Every team has clients, just as every person does, within an organization and outside the organization.

**ZOE:** Towards the end of your book «Focus» you elaborate how a leader and team can learn to read larger systems and gain system literacy.

**Goleman:** I think if you have a team norm that says let everybody say what they know about the system and take that into account, they will get a fuller picture of the whole system. For example as sales people interact with customers, they learn what the market wants. Additionally, you may have big data, that's another way of looking, but it's just not the only way. The power of big data is you can pick up invisible patterns. On the other hand the dilemma with big data is that assumptions are built into the questions that are asked, where the way the information comes out may not give you the whole picture.

**ZOE:** The question is, how leadership can provide a fertile ground in order to tap into notably all these signals from the system as often this does not happen, and essential information is not being given at the right time.

**Goleman:** Yes, one of the dangers of being a leader is that you think you know the answer, and you haven't actually taking in all the information. So, it has to do with managing yourself. Maybe being a little humble or you could call it open minded, and being able and ready and willing to listen to what other people have to tell you.

**ZOE:** That's what probably Ed Schein would call humble leadership.

**Goleman:** Yes.

**ZOE:** But tell me more. In your book you describe the big picture leader, leading for the future. What makes this?

**Goleman:** Well, a big picture leader looks beyond the present, looks beyond the next quarter, looks far into the future, and thinks in terms of decades and maybe even centuries. And they look very widely, with a large horizon, understanding systems as a whole. The greatest leaders have the biggest picture, and are leading far into the future and not just for the present.

**ZOE:** In the future workforce will become even more scarce and attraction and retention of employees of growing importance. Can you share your insights, how executives and organizations can help ensure working conditions in which work is not a contradiction to a fulfilled life but contributes to it?

**Goleman:** One thing that helps us enormously is if a leader can articulate a shared vision that's meaningful. This helps people find purpose and meaning in their work. The more meaningful your work is the more satisfying it is. One of the competencies for example that we evaluate leaders on is inspiring leadership. Can you articulate from your heart what matters to you and to everyone else about this work? The best leaders do this.

**ZOE:** And do you think that there is anything particular employers or coaches can do to increase the focus and flow for such a balanced work life or their employees especially in times where burnout is increasing?

**Goleman:** I think there are several things you can do. One is help with managing the forces that lead to burn out. The second is to explore values in different dimensions so that leaders are more in touch with what's meaningful about their work. And then the third is to help people with focus, which I've already explained.

Let me go into each of those. In terms of the values dimension, it's really helpful to make time for self-reflection. What is it that matters to you about this job? Is this where you want to be in five years? Will this job take you there? How does this matter to you in your life? That's the meaning or values dimension.

And then there is the burnout dimension, which has to do with helping an executive manage better not just their time but their energy. Are they sleeping well. Do they have a method to decompress, do they make time for it – it might be going for a long walk, it might be meditation, it might be yoga, it might be running, going to the gym. It doesn't matter what is it. But do you actually make sure you do it? Or do you let other things take away that time. Helping people manage their life, so that they build in a way to de-stress is very important.

**ZOE:** Many executives complain about a certain leadership fatigue - too many issues, too many demands and requirements,

too few resources. What would you recommend to them to get such new energy?

**Goleman:** First of all there is the question of whether you can control the level of demands at all. Maybe you can or maybe you can't. If you can't, then what can you do to increase your energy level. And part of that has to do with the basic steps I was talking about in terms of managing stress. The load is the stressor. So, can you bring more energy, focus and calm to the situation by the methods I've been talking about.

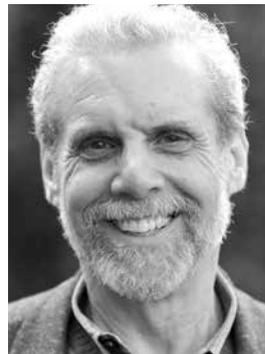
**ZOE:** To loop our interview back to the topic of this edition about work forms for fulfilled life, what do you consider important pre-requisites and abilities to lead a successful working life?

**Goleman:** First, I think being someone who is rooted in his or her own values, and with their own sense of purpose, and so can bring the energy that gives you to the work you do. Second, remembering to pay full attention to whatever you do, and particularly to the people you're working with – to empathize in all three ways.

**ZOE:** Can you give us a sneak preview about your new book being published later this year?

**Goleman:** Yes. I've just finished a book on what sciences reveals about meditation. There have been more than 6000 published studies today in the scientific literature, about 1 percent of which are really good. My co-author Richard Davidson, a neuroscientist at the University of Wisconsin, and I have weeded through those studies and summarized the main findings. We start with mindfulness, which strengthens attention surprisingly quickly, and also helps with keeping your body calm and under control. And it allows paying better attention to other people in a way that they know you care about them. All of which are critical skills for effectiveness in leadership.

**ZOE:** I really thank you very much for this interview.



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