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For an overview of how busy executives handle multiple simultaneous demands requiring immediate action click <http://www.fastcompany.com> and search "multitasking", or type this URL www.fastcompany.com/magazine/63/multitasking.html

The full article describes strategies for attention - with examples and sidebars

Here are a couple of excerpts:

"For all of Carter's experience with wireless tools and virtual conferencing, he is careful to note that occasionally there's no substitute for good old-fashioned face time. "You can't read people's reactions when you're talking to them through email. Also, if you're making a pitch or you need to engage in any kind of persuasion, email or a Web chat just won't cut it. The phone is better, but a meeting is best." ... Carter's point is well-taken: The most important thing to know about technology is when to turn it off."

"Heading to a meeting? Go unplugged. When you meet with someone, you're using a nonrenewable resource: your time. Don't let cell-phone or pager interruptions waste it."

"Tell me what you pay attention to and I'll tell you who you are." -- *Jose Ortega y Gasset*



What you pay attention to is also a key to success. I was reminded of this when mountain biking one day. I paid attention to a big rock in the center of the trail ahead of me, while I thought about how to steer around it. I didn't get a chance to finish thinking; I was on my hands and knees in the dirt after catapulting over my handlebars.

Here is the rule in biking: "Do NOT look at a rock on the trail, unless you want to hit it; look at the path you want to take around it instead."

Regardless of what you want it to do, the bike usually follows your eyes. If you look at an obstacle, chances are you'll hit the obstacle. If your eyes track a path around the obstacle, so will your bike.

In business, likewise, if you focus on obstacles they can take you down. You want to make note of obstacles but focus your attention on how you intend to steer around them.

Paying Attention Pays

Any middle-aged adult with children in the instant messaging generation has probably watched with fascination as the kids have carried on multiple conversations with several friends on various topics in different locations simultaneously via instant messenger. They switch frames of reference with no apparent hesitation and can weave different conversations together even when the input they receive is out of sequence. That's great. Isn't it?

Well, maybe not so great. The level of attention employed is equivalent to that at an after-the-game pizza party or a crowded cocktail party where people float in and out of quick, casual, superficial conversations.

A few years ago, "multi-tasking" became a desirable description. It made a virtue out of divided attention. You could claim: "I'm not letting any time go to waste; I'm multi-tasking." Or: "I'm not ignoring you; I'm multi-tasking." Translated, this means: whatever it is that you are saying, or I am doing, does not require my full attention, so I can work on several [trivial] things at once. That's what divided attention is good for.

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For an example of the opposite circumstance, think about a time you were looking at someone who didn't know you were watching, and he or she turned unexpectedly, and your eyes made contact. There is almost an electric shock when such contact happens. The impression made by attention is unmistakable.

Here are three experiments you can try. Next time you are engaged in a task and someone requests your attention, completely stop what you are doing. Lift your head or turn so that you are directly facing the other person. Look at them and focus your whole attention on what they are saying and how they are expressing themselves both verbally and with their body language. You should be able to feel the difference from the casual half attention most of us usually provide. And I can guarantee you the other person will notice. As you might guess, this works as well at home as at the office.

The second experiment takes longer: watch successful people. Observe them carefully. I bet you will discover that they create specific times and opportunities to focus significant attention on a single piece of work. They can be proactive rather than reactive because they set aside time to work on a single important project, rather than always dividing their attention.

The President of the Healthcare Association of New York State, Dan Sisto, provides a great example of this each year when the NY state budget is under consideration. He puts usual business and distractions aside to focus his efforts on this one subject that is so important to his members. From my personal observations and the testimony of his staff, I know that Dan is absolutely clear about what his priority issue is during February and March each year. He knows where and how to focus his effort and attention.

There is one other experiment you can try that should provide you with convincing evidence. Make note of your own feelings when someone else gives you their full attention. If it feels as good as I expect, remember that you can have that effect on others also.

“An expert is someone who has succeeded in making decisions and judgments simpler through knowing what to pay attention to and what to ignore.” -- Edward deBono



Peter McGinn founded Leadership Impact to help leaders and organizations excel by bringing out the best in people and aligning their talents with the goals of the organization. Services include strategic planning and implementation, creating and sustaining a culture of performance, improving governance, developing leaders, improving teams, facilitating board and executive workshops, and speaking on leadership, organizations, and personal development.

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