

THE ONE THING

THAT WILL MAKE EVERYTHING ELSE EASY

In previous articles I have written about the stress-mind/brain connection and its affect on our performance, productivity and overall state of mind if not understood and managed effectively in today's fast paced info-tech marketplace. In particular I have looked at our capacity to focus our mind and brain and use its limited resources and willpower to improve your overall happiness and satisfaction in all areas in life. In this month's article I wanted to look at productivity, as I continue to be amazed at the demand on us to be more and more productive in the fast-paced modern info-tech marketplace that most of us are trying to succeed in. The aspect of productivity I would like to get into more depth about is this whole concept of focus and concentration on the things we need to accomplish that will help us reach our desired aims.

WORDS BY DREW KNOWLES

In my observation of all the people I coach and train, and my own study of the way people move and behave in the marketplace, it is getting harder and harder to focus and remain focused on the right things, that will help us achieve the satisfaction we want in different areas of life that are important to us. There is such a pull to get distracted by a myriad of things at all times throughout the day, and so many great ideas and possibilities that we could act on coming at us, that those who are to be successful in today's marketplace need to develop a kind of single minded focus and resolve about staying focused on certain things for long enough to reach their aims, and build any kind of surplus or wealth for themselves to live a satisfying life. To really get deep into this whole concept of focus I decided to review a book called "The One Thing" that I highly recommend which in my view takes this idea of focus to the extreme to help you produce extraordinary results.

Before I do that I am going to re-cap on some of the article I wrote in January of last year about "The Healthy Mind Platter" by David Rock, as focus is one of the seven neuro-cognitive activities for having a healthy mind and brain.

"Focusing on today's modern info-tech world is a challenge and it really takes something to get a grasp of how to actually stay focused, be productive and be able to elevate your performance without burning out your brain.

As I sat down for a three hour block to begin researching and writing this article on focusing the mind and improving the use of my brain, an area that I am at work on this year (2013) to master, I was struck by the amount of times that I was distracted, my attention diverted, and how challenging it was to just focus on the one thing I had scheduled time to do. I realised very quickly that I have become so accustomed to, and have such an ingrained habit of stopping what I am doing for short periods to handle or do small tasks that in my mind seem like they don't take much time, or won't take away my ability to stay focused during the time I have scheduled to work on a significant single task.

It became obvious to me the more I researched and read about it,

that I did not really get how much multi-tasking/task switching/ dual-task interference actually affected my productivity and performance, and was depleting my brain's resources in an inefficient way. I realised I was not seriously dealing with the hard core research that has been coming out for the last 15 years on this, and using it to my full advantage to get the most out of my brain and mind, and have even more access to lower stress levels, greater balance in my life, and the ability to elevate my levels of performance in my own work.

I discovered that none of us can get away with it not affecting our productivity and mental state to some degree, and our brain really does have a limited amount of resources to perform at its best. It is now critical that you begin learning about how to manage your mind and brain better, to maximise the use of it in our brain-powered economy, where the amount of information, choices, decisions and tasks that are demanded of us to deal with day-to-day are relentless, and not going away."

FOCUS TIME - ATTENTION MANAGEMENT FOR PERFORMANCE

Modern life has turned our day to day activities to a 24/7 constant information stimulation and state of availability for whatever demands we have to fulfil on. This is leaving us more scattered and our attention constantly fragmented. This requires the capacity to manage one's attention: to focus entirely on the person or task at hand while also exerting self-control to block out interferences.

The central component of the Healthy Mind Platter for those concerned not just with brain health but also performance is undoubtedly focus time: the time we are able to focus, stay focused and refocus efficiently and effectively.

There are three key areas to focus time. Firstly the executive part of the brain that enables us to focus is the well-developed prefrontal cortex (PFC). It is responsible for important capacities such as (1) working memory, involved in organising and structuring information, remembering self and creating images of the possible

future, for consequence evaluation, and long-term planning; and (2) processes for monitoring behaviour and inhibiting pre potent responses, including emotion regulation and self-observation. To focus is to pay close attention. Attention is a complex process involving multiple parts of the brain related to perception, arousal, emotion, and memory.

What is critical for your PFC is your level of arousal. A lack of stimulation (boredom) and overstimulation (stress) leads to impairment of executive functions, distraction, and lack of focus. In these conditions, the brain can be altered to enter a state of hypo- or hyper-vigilance that can impair performance. Attention can therefore be considered to be dependent on a state of optimal arousal that activates our body and mind to process the incoming information and respond adequately. In order for a person to function at optimal levels of arousal, predictability and a sense of control are necessary. Deep breathing, mindfulness (openness and acceptance to what arises in the field of attention), and framing the stressor as controllable or transient can also help to maintain or bring a person back to optimal levels of arousal and attentional focus. In short, there is a direct relationship between stress, focus, and health.

Secondly, another aspect of focus time is sustaining attention, or staying focused, which is a function of self-control. The exertion of self-control appears to depend on a limited resource. Just as a muscle gets tired from exertion, acts of self-control cause short-term impairments (mental depletion) in subsequent self-control, even on unrelated tasks.

Thirdly, there is the capacity to re-focus following distraction or during multi-tasking. Given the limited capacity of our working memory, rather than processing multiple sources of information simultaneously, we continuously switch our spotlight of attention back and forth between different stimuli. As a consequence we divide attention, and allocate less time to each task, or distribute a given focus in divided ways over a longer time span. The logical consequence is that multi-tasking impairs performance, also referred to as “dual task interference.”

In the Healthy Mind Platter, focus time involves the application of a singular attentional focus on a task that permits a sense of mastery and completion. Focus time enables an individual to avoid the sense of being overwhelmed and incomplete that so often accompanies multitasking. Focus time is both a cognitive process necessary for effective performance, and an intentional effort that requires self-control, both of which require energy and the management of stress. This has important implications for self-management – keeping down the “switching-time costs” of multitasking which diminishes cognitive performance. In these ways, focus time is helpful for the process of a sense of efficacy in the outcome of efforts and the effective sense of contributing to work output.

THE ONE THING - THE SURPRISINGLY SIMPLE TRUTH BEHIND EXTRAORDINARY RESULTS (GARY KELLER WITH JAY PAPASAN)

I am now going to review this book, as it builds on the idea of “focus-time” and expands on it, to really help you look at what is “The One Thing” that if you focused on it, would make everything else easier or unnecessary. It is a very simple concept to grasp, but these guys have done a great job of making it very easy to start to implement this principle, that can really make ALL the difference to you being able to produce the results you need to live a very satisfying life.

The Main idea is that the real key to achieving more in your career, with your business and in your personal life is to narrow your focus and concentrate on the One Thing which will deliver the most value. Extraordinary results come when you focus.

“The way to get the most out of your work and your life is to go as small as possible. Most people think just the opposite. They think big success is time consuming and complicated. As a result, their calendars and to-do lists become overloaded and overwhelming. Success starts to feel out of reach, so they settle for less. Unaware that big success comes when we do a few things well, they get lost

trying to do too much and in the end accomplish too little. Over time they lower their expectations, abandon their dreams, and allow their life to get small. This is the wrong thing to make small.” – Gary Keller and Jay Papasan

As counterintuitive as it may sound, the key to achieving more is to consciously try and do less things, not more. You just make certain the things you are focusing on are those which count the most – which deliver the greatest value. Find ways to eliminate all the busy stuff which soaks up your time and attention and you’ll have less stress and more time for what really counts.

To achieve more, think big but go small. Figure out what the One Thing which delivers the most bang for your buck is and do that alone. Less really is more when it comes to getting things done.

THE SIX LIES ABOUT PRODUCTIVITY

There are six common myths which are really misunderstandings when it comes to being more productive. See these lies for what they are and you start on the path to doing more.

1 Everything matters equally

The idea of equality of achievements is a lie pure and simple. When everything seems to be of equal importance, you become busy doing stuff but if you’re not careful, your efforts in one area can inadvertently offset all you achieve in another area. The truth is activity is often unrelated to productivity. Working through a long and impressive list of To-Do’s is nice, but if that list is filled with trivial and unimportant stuff, you’re not getting anywhere meaningful even while you check the various items off. Instead of putting together a long To-Do list, achievers put together a much shorter list of the items they absolutely must do to succeed. This is a much more productive way to work.

The 80/20 principle - “Success requires that you follow the 80/20 Principle, but you don’t have to stop there. Keep going. You can take 20 percent of the 20 percent of the 20 percent and continue until you get to the single most important thing! Start with as large a list as you want, but develop the mindset that you will whittle your way from there to the critical few and not stop until you end with the essential ONE. The imperative ONE. The ONE Thing.” – Gary Keller

To offset the myth that everything matters, don’t focus on being busy – focus instead on being productive. Keep asking what really matters until there is only One Thing left on your list and then find ways to make that your core activity for the majority of each day. In other words, to achieve more, go small. Figure out what core activity generates the most results for you and then make maximizing the time you do that your top priority – even if you have to say “No” to lots of other nice things. Success comes from doing what matters most.

2 Multitasking is a good thing

In 2009, Stanford University professor Clifford Nass set out to prove definitively how multitaskers work. He studied 262 people who were accomplished multitaskers and was stunned to find multitaskers performed worse right across the board. He concluded multitasking is a lie and this in a completely inefficient way to get things done.

If you want an in depth understanding of why Multi-tasking does not work see my previous articles at drewknowles.com. The simple truth is while distractions are natural and are to be expected, multitasking doesn’t work. It does not boost performance – in fact, multitasking definitively introduces more distractions which undermine results. If you buy into the myth that you can do two or more things at once, problems lie ahead.

3 You must be “disciplined”

In society at large, there is an enduring idea that to be successful, you have to lead a “disciplined life.” Therefore, if you’re not yet as successful as you want to be, then that’s an indicator you’re not as disciplined as you need to be. That’s incorrect.

“You don’t need to be a disciplined person to be successful. In fact, you can become successful with less discipline than you think, for

one simple reason: success is about doing the right thing, not about doing everything right. The trick to success is to choose the right habit and bring just enough discipline to establish it. That's it. That's all the discipline you need." - Gary Keller and Jay Papasan

Rather than striving to be a disciplined person – however you might personally define that concept – you should work to develop productive habits which will take you in the right direction. Social scientists have found it takes about 66 days, on average, to form a habit and make it a permanent part of your life.

"Success is actually a short race— a sprint fueled by discipline just long enough for habit to kick in and take over." – Gary Keller and Jay Papasan

4 Willpower is always on-call

Another of society's prevailing myths is that the willpower to do anything is always on call and can be summoned whenever and wherever it is required. This basic approach of "Where there's a will there's a way" suggests to achieve something great, you've just got to want it more fervently than you desire any alternative.

Unfortunately, the reality is willpower ebbs and flows in individuals all the time. Sometimes we have lots of it but at other times there is a definite shortage of willpower – it seems to have a life of its own. For most people, willpower tends to start off strong at the beginning of the work day and then gradually ebb out. Morning breaks, lunch breaks and afternoon breaks boost will power throughout the day but most of the time, willpower has a short shelf life. It's a limited but renewable resource.

Here is the smart approach for putting willpower to productive work - Respect your level of willpower at any time; Set your highest priority tasks for when you expect your willpower to be the strongest; Fuel your brain with the right food. Again if you want to understand how to use and manage your willpower better read my articles on the topic.

5 A balanced life

Everyone talks about leading a "balanced life" but the reality is nobody ever achieves it. The balanced life is a myth. It's impossible to achieve. To deliver extraordinary results in any field of endeavor, you have to focus all your time and energy on what you're doing and that automatically means you have less time to do everything else. That kind of intense focus always makes balance impossible to achieve.

"In the world of professional success, it's not about how much overtime you put in; the key ingredient is focused time over time. To achieve an extraordinary result you must choose what matters most and give it all the time it demands. This requires getting extremely out of balance in relation to all other work issues, with only infrequent counterbalancing to address them." - Gary Keller and Jay Papasan

Instead of trying to achieve a good work-life balance – a concept which was only coined in the mid-1980s as more women entered the workforce – look at your life as being a dynamic balancing act:

- 1. Separate your life into two buckets** – your work life and your personal life.
- 2. Fill your work bucket wisely** – by giving a disproportionate amount of time to your One Thing. Allocate as much of your work day as feasible to what you're great at and nothing else.
- 3. Counterbalance your personal life bucket** – by paying passionate attention to the other areas of your life when you're not at work. Have the mantra that you will work hard and then play hard as well.

Don't go too long without counterbalancing your work bucket and your personal life bucket. Be clear about which bucket you're filling at any one time and give it your best efforts. Work just as hard at filling both buckets as you can. That's the best kind of balancing you can do.

6 Big is bad and to be feared

Loads of people don't chase big dreams because they have fallen for the myth "big is bad." The reality is if you fear being highly successful and instead settle for less, you shortchange yourself. You should get into the habit of thinking big and setting audacious, inspiring goals. The undeniable reality is if you think big, you will act differently and go down different paths.

The actions you take when going after a big outcome will differ markedly from those you take if you're going after a small outcome. Smart people use what they've achieved to date as a platform on which to build for the future rather than as a glass ceiling for what they can achieve in the future.

THE KEYS TO THINKING BIG ARE:

1. Think different – don't order from the menu but instead imagine potential outcomes nobody else has even envisaged yet.

2. Act boldly – find out what systems, models, relationships and habits other high achievers have used and put them to work in your own career.

3. Look at failure as an integral part of the journey – as a temporary setback on your way to exceptional results. Be prepared to fail your way to success – meaning to learn from your mistakes – and to keep moving forward.

THE ONE THING SYSTEM FOR GETTING MORE DONE

To achieve extraordinary results, you have to focus on one question and three concepts:

1. One thing always matters more - This deceptively simple question "What's the ONE THING I can do right now - which will make everything else easier or unnecessary", works because it combines both a big picture perspective and a small picture laser-like focus. If you ask this question every day and then commit to working on whatever activity will generate the most value, you'll be making the best progress you feasibly can on your most important work.

Whether you seek answers big or small, asking the Focusing Question is the ultimate success habit for your life." - Gary Keller and Jay Papasan.

2. Success is sequential - Nobody achieves great success in one foul swoop. Being successful is much like a game of dominoes – you start by knocking down a small domino which in turn knocks down a bigger domino until you eventually knock down a huge domino which represents big success. To achieve exceptional results, you start small, build momentum and grow into it.

All of this means you have to make asking the focusing question part of your ongoing daily routine in order for it to work its magic - be tenacious, set up reminders, recruit support and use it in all areas of your life. "Whats the ONE THING I can do right now - which will make everything else easier or unnecessary for...my finances; my business; my job; my relationships; my personal life; my physical health; my spiritual life....etc.

3. Success always leaves clues - As you ask the focusing question consistently and persistently, the key to moving ahead is to find and then act on the great answers you will generate. You want to research, model and then integrate into your actions answers to that question which are big and specific.

To illustrate, suppose you decide the One Thing you need to do is to increase your sales. This leads to questions which can be couched several ways:

A small and specific approach: "What can I do in the coming year to increase my sales by 5 percent?"

A small but broad approach: "What can I do in the coming year to increase my sales?"

A big, broad approach: "What can I do in the coming year to double my sales?"

A big and specific approach: "What can I do today which will enable me to double my sales in the next 6 months?"

The big and specific question is a "great question." In practical terms, when you ask a great question like that, you're pointing towards a major stretch goal. Big and specific questions will usually lead to big and specific answers which move you forward.

Once you have a great question framed, you can then integrate it right into your focusing question: "What's the ONE THING I can do today to double sales in six months - such that by doing it, everything else will become easier or unnecessary?"

"The Focusing Question helps you identify your ONE Thing in any situation. It will clarify what you want in the big areas of your life and then drill down to what you must do to get them. It's really a simple process: You ask a great question, then you seek out a great answer."
- Gary Keller and Jay Papasan

HOW TO ACHIEVE EXTRAORDINARY RESULTS

Delivering extraordinary results is a six step process - The One Thing System:

Live with purpose - To be happy, dedicate your life and your career to achieving something bigger and more far-reaching. The question you need to ask yourself is, "What's the ONE THING I can do in my life that would mean the most to me and the world, such that by doing it, everything else would be easier or unnecessary?". Pick the direction you'd like to move in and start heading down that path with conviction and you'll be happy.

Live by your priorities - When you live with purpose, you know where you want to go. Live by your priorities and you'll see what you need to do to get there. The key technique for living by your priorities is to use a technique called "goal setting to the now." This works by writing down your answers to these questions:

What's the ONE Thing I want to do or achieve in my career someday?

What's the ONE Thing I can do in the next five years to reach that goal?

What's the ONE Thing I can do this year to reach my 5-year goal?

What's the ONE Thing I can do this month to reach my yearly goal?

What's the ONE Thing I can do this week to achieve my yearly goal?

What's the ONE Thing I can do today to achieve my weekly goal?

What's the ONE Thing I can do right now to achieve my daily goal?

Live for productivity - No matter what system you prefer to use, being productive always comes down to two simple principles: Time block your ONE THING and protect your time block. To achieve extraordinary results, take your calendar or appointment diary at each planning session and time block three things in this order:

1. Time block your time off - so you can view yourself as working between vacations. You'll be more productive if you're relaxed and the key to that is to have some quality down-time. Set aside time to charge your batteries and know when that will be.

2. Time block your One Thing - when you will focus on what makes you most productive. Aim to schedule at least four hours a day for doing your One Thing and then defend that time fiercely. Schedule it

early each day when your willpower is at full strength.

3. Time block your planning time - at least one hour each week where you will review your annual and monthly goals and track progress. At each meeting, you ponder the question: "Based on where I am right now, what's the ONE Thing I need to do this week to stay on track for my monthly goal and for my monthly goal to be on track for my annual goal?"

Once you have your time blocks in place, you then have to protect them with vigor. Let others know when you'll be available and when you won't - they will adjust reasonably quickly. If someone tries to steal your time allocated to your One Thing, gracefully decline and come up with alternatives.

"The people who achieve extraordinary results don't achieve them by working more hours. They achieve them by getting more done in the hours they work." - Gary Keller and Jay Papasan.

Make three commitments - To achieve extraordinary results over time, you need to make three commitments: Follow the path of mastery; Continually seek the very best way to do things; Be willing to hold yourself accountable for doing all you can to achieve your One Thing.

Watch out for thieves - The four thieves of productivity that you need to guard against zealously are: An inability to say "No"; Fear of chaos - make sense with any feelings of chaos as some things get put on the back burner as a natural consequence of focusing on your ONE THING; Poor health habits; Having a work environment which does not support your goals.

Start now! - To achieve extraordinary results, you've got to think big but go small with what you do. Figure out what your One Thing is taking into account your purpose and then get to work maximizing the time you spend doing that One Thing.

"Actions build on action. Habits build on habit. Success builds on success. The right domino knocks down another and another and another. So whenever you want extraordinary results,

look for the levered action that will start a domino run for you. Big lives ride the powerful wave of chain reactions and are built sequentially, which means when you're aiming for success you can't just skip to the end. Extraordinary doesn't work like that. The knowledge and momentum that build as you live the ONE Thing each day, each week, each month, and each year are what give you the ability to build an extraordinary life." - Gary Keller and Jay Papasan.

To conclude, if you are someone who really wants to thrive in today's marketplace, you MUST learn to FOCUS! While I only touched on 'focus' and how it relates to the mind/brain, which you can read more about in my previous articles, it is clear that you need to understand and manage how you apply it to get the best out of your mind/brain. You also got just a small taste of the book "The One Thing" by Gary Keller with Jay Papasan, but their message is very powerful, and something that I am at work on myself to have the best year yet. It takes some effort, and being willing to be ruthless sometimes with myself, and others to maintain my own focus, but is worth it in the long run to have the kind of life you really want to live. 

DREW KNOWLES is a Mind Coach who trains and coaches business owners, entrepreneurs and high level corporates to manage their mind and deal with stress to improve their performance, productivity and overall state of mind. drewknowles.com

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