Are You Paying Attention?

Shifting priorities and multiple distractions make it hard for managers and their teams to focus on what’s important, writes Julian Birkinshaw, Criticaley Thought Leader and Professor of Strategy and Entrepreneurship at London Business School.
Contrary to popular belief, our scarcest resource in the workplace isn’t time – it’s attention. To achieve maximum productivity, companies should dedicate sufficient time to the most pressing tasks.

They should also challenge the common view that businesses gain a commercial and competitive advantage by absorbing as much information as possible. As Nobel Laureate, Herbert Simon, suggested 40 years ago, attention becomes a scarce resource when data is ubiquitous – a theory that’s applicable in today’s world, where everyone is bombarded with data. So, how can leaders manage their attention more effectively and focus on the right tasks?

1. Individually, you can avoid disruptions when immersed in work by switching off your phone and closing Outlook or your web browser. They may be simple changes, but it’s amazing how easily people are distracted.

2. Today, information is more readily available; because of this we amass more than we need to make a decision or write a report. So how can you avoid this ‘analysis paralysis’ issue? The best way is to develop your hypothesis or argument and then find information that supports or refutes it. Another option is to set a deadline and stick to it.

3. While information is everywhere, you shouldn’t be afraid to rely on intuition. It’s tempting to back every argument with evidence, but the most successful business leaders – from Jack Welch to Steve Jobs and Jeff Bezos – have always sought to combine rational and intuitive thinking. An ounce of real insight is now worth a pound of data.

4. Find time for reflection. Think of taking breaks as a form of meditation or mindfulness, allowing you to make sense of and analyse your thoughts.

Managing your attention is one thing, but what about other people’s?

While your team is as easily distracted as you are, each member is also highly sensitive to stimuli and cues from their manager. Without realising, you adjust their attention when talking about cost cutting, job titles or promotions... These changes focus your team’s attention and collectively shape people’s views on what’s important, which in turn influence their subsequent behaviour. My advice for managing your team’s attention is to follow these rules:

Keep any messages clear and simple. If you emphasise different objectives each week, employees get confused and they tune out. Conversely, they are more likely to share and understand your goals if you continue to deliver the same message. For example, most mining companies start each meeting talking about safety – it’s a simple but effective way of keeping the issue high on the agenda for employees.

It’s also important to be clear on where their default attention lies. Once you’re aware of their focus, you can strategically shift them away from this as and when required. For example, a global software company missed opportunities in Asia because it prioritised the needs of its European operation. To address this, the CEO temporarily relocated to Asia and made sure global team meetings alternated between the morning in Europe and afternoon in Asia. Moreover, the agenda always included region-specific and global concerns. The changes led to a marked shift in behaviour, with the company focusing more on Asia without losing the attention of its European staff.

In today’s knowledge era, we think of knowledge and information as scarce resources that need harnessing. However, information is everywhere and knowledge is shared widely across companies. In such a world, the scarce resource is your own and your employees’ attention – we need to manage it smarter.

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