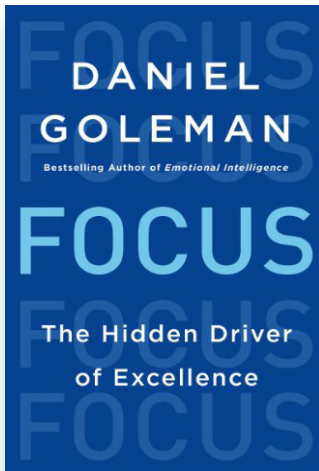


# EXECUTIVE BOOK SUMMARIES



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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## Focus THE NUTSHELL

HarperCollins 2013

There are three different types of focus: inner, other, and outer focus. A well-lived life demands we be nimble in each. The good news on attention comes from neuroscience labs and schoolclassrooms, where the findings point to ways we can strengthen this vital muscle of the mind. Attention works much like a muscle. If you use it poorly, it can wither; work it well and it grows. We'll see how smart practice can further develop and refine the muscle of our attention, and even rehab focus-starved brains.

For leaders to get results they need all three kinds of focus. Inner focus attunes us to our intuitions, guiding values, and better decisions. Other focus smooths our connections to the people in our lives. Outer focus lets us navigate in the larger world. A leader tuned out of his internal world will be rudderless; one blind to the world of others will be clueless; those indifferent to the larger systems within which they operate will be blindsided.

The biggest challenge for even the most focused, though, comes from the emotional turmoil of our lives, like a recent blowup in a close relationship that keeps intruding into your thoughts. Such thoughts barge in for a good reason: to get us to think through what to do about what's upsetting us. The dividing line between fruitless rumination and productive reflection lies in whether or not we come up with some tentative solution or insight and then can let those distressing thoughts go. On the other hand, do we just keep obsessing over the same loop of worry?

# Focus

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We learn best with focused attention. As we focus on what we are learning, the brain maps that information on what we already know, making new neural connections. When our mind wanders off, our brain activates a host of brain circuits that chatter about things that have nothing to do with what we're trying to learn. Lacking focus, we store no crisp memory of what we're learning.

Every variety of attention has its uses. The very fact that about half of our thoughts are daydreams suggests there may well be some advantages to a mind that can entertain the fanciful. We might revise our own thinking about a "wandering mind," by considering that rather than wandering away from what counts, we may well be wandering toward something of value. A mind adrift lets our creative juices flow. While our minds wander we become better at anything that depends on a flash of insight, from coming up with imaginative word play to inventions and original thinking. In fact, people who are extremely adept at mental tasks that demand cognitive control and a roaring working memory, like solving complex math problems, can struggle with creative insights. But once we've hit upon a great creative insight, we need to capture the prize by switching to a keen focus on how to apply it. Serendipity comes with openness to possibility, then homing in on putting it to use.

Systems are, at first glance, invisible to our brain. We have no direct perception of any of the multitude of systems that dictate the realities of our lives. Much of the time people attribute what happens to them to events close in time and space, when in reality it's the result of the dynamics of the larger system within which they are embedded. The problem gets compounded by what's called the "illusion of explanatory depth," where we feel confidence in our understanding of a complex system, but in reality, have just superficial knowledge.

We don't notice what's not there and neither mental system alerts us to this. It's the same with our health or our retirement savings. When we eat some very rich dessert, we don't get a signal telling us, "If you keep this up, you'll die three years earlier." The sweet spot for smart decisions comes not just from being a domain expert, but also from having high self-awareness. If you know yourself as well as your business, then you can be shrewder in interpreting the facts (while, hopefully, safeguarding against the inner distortions that can blur your lens).

To anticipate how people will react, you have to read people's reactions to you. That takes self-awareness and empathy in a self-reinforcing cycle. You become more aware of how you're coming across to other people. With high self-awareness, you can more readily develop good self-management. If you manage yourself better, you will influence better. This triple focus demands attention juggling, and leaders who fail at that do so to their own and their organization's detriment.

A triple focus might help us become successful, but toward what end? We must ask ourselves: in the service of what, exactly, are we using whatever talents we may have? If our focus serves only our personal ends, which include self-interest, immediate reward, and our own small group, then, in the long run all of us, as a species, are doomed. The largest lens for our focus encompasses global systems, considers the needs of everyone, including the powerless and poor, and peers far ahead in time. No matter what we are doing or what decision we are making we need to check our motivation.