

In pursuit of focus: Fostering an elusive leadership trait

As hyperconnectivity expands, IESE professors offer insights on how to recover focus as the means to nurture personal and corporate success.

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"On an average day, we spend 2.1 hours on distraction," **Robin Sharma**, best-selling author and coach, told an audience of **Fast Forward** participants at IESE's Barcelona campus.

"We're distracted by technology every 11 minutes, and it takes us 25 minutes to refocus our minds on the deep, creative work we were doing before we were distracted."

Compulsively checking Twitter feeds and e-mails is just one of the multitude of distractions that can keep us from becoming an asset to our coworkers and organizations.

Focus, as Daniel Goleman explains in his latest book on the subject, is not only a scarce resource among leaders today, it is also *The Hidden Driver of Excellence*, as the title of his book proclaims.

IESE professors **Alberto Ribera**, **Anindya Ghosh** and [Pablo Maella](#) would agree. Recent work by these professors sheds light on what leaders and organizations can do to recover focus as a means of nurturing the creativity, productivity and innovation that strengthen performance and more often lead to success.

Honing the self

Focus is essentially a discipline. Exercising it requires starting with the basics: a focus on the self.

For leaders charged with managing departments, divisions or entire organizations, honing in on the self may seem counterintuitive.

However, as **Pablo Maella** insists, "the importance of exercising clarity and focus in self-management cannot be overstated, for it is a key pillar of personal and organizational productivity."

Identifying and managing your own personal resources is an important aspect of self-management. One of these resources is time.

As **Robin Sharma** explains, "Science says we are at our energetic best first thing in the morning, and that's when we have most of our focus. So, for the first 90 minutes of your work day, do only important work. Use your best hours to do your best work."

Perhaps the most important resource at the heart of self-management is to know yourself. **Alberto Ribera** says, "We all come into this life equipped with an array of strengths and personal resources, though we may not even be aware of most of them."

Through his research and experience working with managers around the globe, Ribera offers insights and tools to help individuals with the process of discovering what their strengths are, and attaining the self-realization known as "flow" — the state of concentrated or complete absorption with the activity at hand.

Aligning attention, time and habits with one's vision of the self is the ultimate aim, for "it is the direction of our attention and its intensity that will determine what we accomplish, and how well," Ribera explains.

With coaching a crucial component of [Executive Education programs at IESE](#), Ribera oversees a group of talented career coaches who support participants in their journey toward greater focus in self-management, in order to increase their effectiveness as leaders.

The ripple effect

The focus achieved through the practice of self-management spreads out from individuals to benefit the organization as a whole. As such, it is important for companies not only to recruit individuals who understand their strengths and priorities, but also to create flow-friendly environments, which maximize employees' ability to reach and contribute their potential.

Former Patagonia CEO Michael Crooke, for example, has acknowledged the benefits of this

ripple effect of flow from individuals to large management teams: "When you get a high-powered team together and you really get into a zone, you'll synchronize and achieve excellent results."

Certainly, such environments become fertile ground for creativity and innovation.

Yet channeling the creative talents of individuals too generally toward innovation can risk missing the mark, cautions **Anindya Ghosh**.

Strengthening focus on an organizational level, especially when it comes to innovative efforts, reaps important benefits, he explains in a research paper published in *Organization Science*.

Ghosh gives the example of the innovative ambition that earned Kodak's Advanced Photo System an Innovative Digital Product Award in 2002. The ambition without the right focus, however, couldn't help the company survive past the next decade.

Together with his coauthors, Ghosh explored the factors that produce high-impact inventions — those that allow companies to shape the evolutionary trajectories of their product market or to create new ones entirely.

Inventive focus emerged as a key ingredient, along with a company's prior experience of bundling disparate strands of technology in corporate R&D. "The highest impact rewards those firms that master the art of combining ambition with focus in the leveraging of experience," he says.

Focus on the right things

Although it may be elusive in our hyperconnected, fast-paced world of distraction, focus is an asset worthy of every leader's and every organization's attention.

With self-management one of the prime building blocks of strong leaders and, consequently, successful organizations, executives who are able to step out of the immediate demands inherent in managing others to master the art of focus will tend to be a much greater asset to their companies and colleagues.

By developing a better ability to understand and mindfully manage their own strengths and priorities, leaders can then turn their attention to the larger challenges of their organization and the world around them.

As Unilever CEO Paul Polman told a Continuous Education session organized by the IESE Alumni Association, companies can achieve a lot more if they focus on the right things. This means not putting the sole focus on the shareholder.

"If we keep focused on what we do best, then the shareholder will be rewarded. So the shareholder is an outcome."

"Companies should focus on what they are supposed to do in the first place — which is to serve society, to focus on consumers — and do that well, do that responsibly. That is what I call intelligent growth."

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