



Attention Management Module

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I. INTRODUCTION

Conventional thinking suggests that managing time is the key to higher productivity. Time management techniques were indeed useful in an era when employees punched a time clock, came to a factory or office at set hours, and performed their work on an assembly line or at a desk. But in many organizations today, work is done more with the mind than with the hands, and as much on a mobile device in the cloud as at a desk in an office.

When the value of work is in relationships, ideas, decisions, and outcomes, more than being at a certain place for certain amount of time, the time management paradigm quickly breaks down. Time management is simply inadequate in an always-on, continually connected workplace riddled with portable computers, smart phones, tablets, never-ending email, and ever-increasing apps that are all vying for our attention and offering an all-too-convenient distraction from what is most important.

Many of today's workers, especially managers, suffer from information and task overwhelm, as well as anxiety stemming from feeling behind and always scrambling to catch up. From years of incessant multitasking combined with constant distractions (in their environment and from their ubiquitous devices), many workers have literally lost their ability to focus and concentrate. In the worst case, they ricochet from one urgent task to the next, unable to bring their full concentration to any one activity for more than a few minutes at a time.

You may know people like this. They spend virtually every waking hour being "busy," putting out fires, and racing from task to task, and leave little time for planning, reflection, and renewal. Misinformed, thinking that multitasking is actually a good thing, they stumble around in a fog of "continual partial attention." In a conference call, they miss key information because they are simultaneously typing an email. At lunch, they are constantly glancing at their phones, missing the nuance of what their



coworker is explaining, or worse, rudely answering a call as the person right in front of them is in mid-sentence.

This is problematic enough when line-level employees are this distracted and unfocused. But when managers and leaders indulge these behaviors and fail to bring their full attention and, therefore, intelligence to their responsibilities, their performance and the performance of their department or division suffers. We believe leaders must operate with a higher standard of how they manage attention.

Webster's Dictionary defines *attention* as, "The act or state of attending or heeding; the application of the mind to any sense object, representation, or thought. Focused awareness. Observant consideration; to notice. Close or careful observing or listening." Webster's Thesaurus lists the following synonyms for attention: observation, regard, notice, mindfulness, listening, concentration, care, consideration, heedfulness, alertness, attentiveness, intentness, thoroughness, and awareness.

In times past, working with attention was something left to professional athletes, elite soldiers, martial artists, and yoga and meditation practitioners. But due to the advances and proliferation of digital technology and media, which constantly demand

workers' attention, business leaders now recognize that attention, like other finite resources, must be managed intelligently.

Thomas Davenport and John Beck were pioneers in the field of attention management. In their groundbreaking book, *The Attention Economy*, they make a strong case that “understanding and managing attention is now the single most important determinant of business success.”¹

Davenport and Beck introduced the term *organizational ADD* (attention deficit disorder) to bring awareness to some aspects of the ineffective working style described above. They write, “Today’s businesses are heading for disaster unless they can overcome the dangerously high attention deficits that threaten to cripple today’s workplace.” They define organizational ADD as an “increased likelihood of missing key information when making decisions, diminished time for reflection on anything but simple informational transactions, difficulty holding others’ attention, and decreased ability to focus when necessary.”

This module offers specific frameworks and practices individuals and organizations can use to boost productivity, reduce reactive behavior (and the stress that goes along with it), and allocate

more time and energy to the activities that matter most. We will explore what it means to bring more consciousness to our awareness and our actions. Then, we will be introduced to a framework that can liberate us from the constant “firefighting” that characterizes many workplaces. Finally, we will learn specific techniques that can be used to significantly reduce distractions and increase our proactivity and personal effectiveness.

In the Stagen Learning and Practice module, we described the transformational journey leaders undertake as they increase their capacity for awareness and action. In this Attention Management module, we will drill down into this essential theme of awareness as we focus our attention on attention itself.

Conscious leaders who are serious about bringing more awareness to their actions and the actions of their organization devote time and energy to developing more awareness of awareness itself. While the mastery of awareness is a life-long practice, the practice must be grounded in a conscious awareness of where we put our attention moment to moment, day to day, and week to week.

Companies that succeed in the future will be those expert not in time management, but in attention management. Understanding and managing attention is now the single most important determinant of business success. – Thomas Davenport and John Beck

II. CONSCIOUS ATTENTION

We invite you to put some attention on attention itself. What is your relationship with attention? Is attention something that just goes to whatever stimuli are in your environment? Or are you deliberate about where you put your attention, and for how long?

In your own life and work, you have probably noticed that the times when you have been the most productive often correlate to the times when you were extremely focused. But if you're like most people, you might be puzzled by the fact that you can be extremely focused at certain times and completely scattered at others.

Accomplished individuals across multiple disciplines have come to believe that focus and concentration, possibly more than any other factors, are what separates average performers from peak performers. Peak performers are not only in sports and highly technical jobs; they show up in just about every endeavor in life—they work at computers, they run successful meetings, and they have quality relationships with spouses, children, and loved ones. Focus, it seems, is a big deal. And judging by popular business magazines and books, it's a growing trend.

GETTING INTO THE FLOW

Flow Theory was originally pioneered by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and has been popularized in recent years by former Stagen faculty member Jamie Wheal and his partner Stephen Kotler.² The state of flow, also known as *the zone*, is the mental state of operation in which a person performing an activity is fully immersed in a feeling of energized focus, full involvement, and enjoyment in the process of the activity. In essence, flow is characterized by complete absorption in what one does and losing sense of space and time.³ We've all felt a sense of flow when we have brought our full focus and



concentration to an enjoyable activity: playing sports or a favorite game, creating music, driving, or perhaps a particularly engaging conversation.

There are several predictable effects of getting into a flow state. The first is pleasure. It feels great. The second effect of flow is heightened productivity. The flow state opens vast reservoirs of resourcefulness, creativity, and energy. When people are in flow, their productivity and quality can skyrocket. The third effect is that afterward, when looking back on the experience, people tend to feel a deep sense of satisfaction. Think about that. A person who goes into flow while working will not only be more productive, they'll love the experience of the work itself.⁴

There are four key dynamics that combine to create flow:

1. A balance between challenges and skills
2. Clear objectives
3. Frequent feedback to know if you're achieving those objectives or not
4. Focus and concentration (minimal distractions)

Interestingly, the workplace can be an ideal place to experience flow *if* workers have the opportunity to be free from distractions and engage in a single activity for a period of time. Perhaps you've experienced working on a deadline for a proposal or preparing for an important presentation, and you've blocked out two hours for the task. You were probably surprised how fast the time flew by, how un-stressful it was once you dropped into the mode of full concentration, and how much you enjoyed it. That was flow. The problem is, most people are so distracted and don't understand the importance of blocking out an hour or two of time for an important task, they rarely experience this high-performance state.⁵

CONCENTRATION IS THE KEY

Concentration can be defined as the ability to deliberately control where attention is focused and to hold it there for as much time as desired without being distracted by what is not relevant to the task at hand. One of the most universal of all natural tools, concentration is important for almost every human endeavor. The productivity of just about any activity is enhanced by the ability to concentrate.

The ability to concentrate means that you're in control of where your attention goes, rather than being at the whim of external distractions.

Being able to focus and concentrate does not imply that you cut yourself off from anything important or push anything away. It simply means that you have the ability to attend to exactly what is appropriate in that moment and withdraw attention from (ignore) that which is not relevant to the activity. The capacity to concentrate puts you in the driver's seat. To get better at managing your attention, much less get into a flow state, you need to hone your concentration skills.

MINDFULNESS

Leaders familiar with the practice of mindfulness are likely aware of its use among elite athletes, martial artists, fighter pilots, and advanced meditators. Mindfulness, like its cousin flow, is extremely enjoyable and can significantly increase productivity. Whether you are preparing a proposal, responding to an email, having a difficult conversation with a customer or colleague, or delivering a high-stakes presentation, mindfulness enhances performance.

Mindfulness practitioners are more aware of their thoughts, and less reactive to them. When they experience an emotional reaction (i.e., become triggered), practitioners are more able to dispassionately observe that reaction in their mind and body and make a conscious choice about what to do next. (This is sometimes referred to as *emotional maturity*.)

Several decades of mindfulness research have convinced numerous corporations to make significant investments into training their employees in the practice. These include: Google, Aetna, Intel, General Mills, Target, and countless others.⁶ These corporations have found that mindfulness dramatically increases employees' ability to listen, reflect, make decisions, and produce. The ability to focus and reflect on all available options results in better, more-informed decisions. Focusing with full attention on important conversations results in a higher quality of interaction and collaboration with colleagues.

The attention management practices introduced in this module provide practical ways to bring more mindfulness to your work activities. In a very real sense, attention management tactics are, in fact, mindfulness practices. As you mindfully implement the insights in this module, we invite you to recognize and avoid the *reactive* orientations to attention and aspire to adopt more *conscious* approaches to how you work with your attention. The reactive and conscious hallmarks associated with attention management are summarized below:

Hallmarks of Attention Management	
REACTIVE	CONSCIOUS
Multitasking	Singletasking
Unscheduled	Scheduled
Distracted	Focused
Say "yes" to almost everything	Say "yes" selectively and less often
Addicted to devices	Thoughtful use of devices
Ad hoc meetings	Structural/rhythm meetings

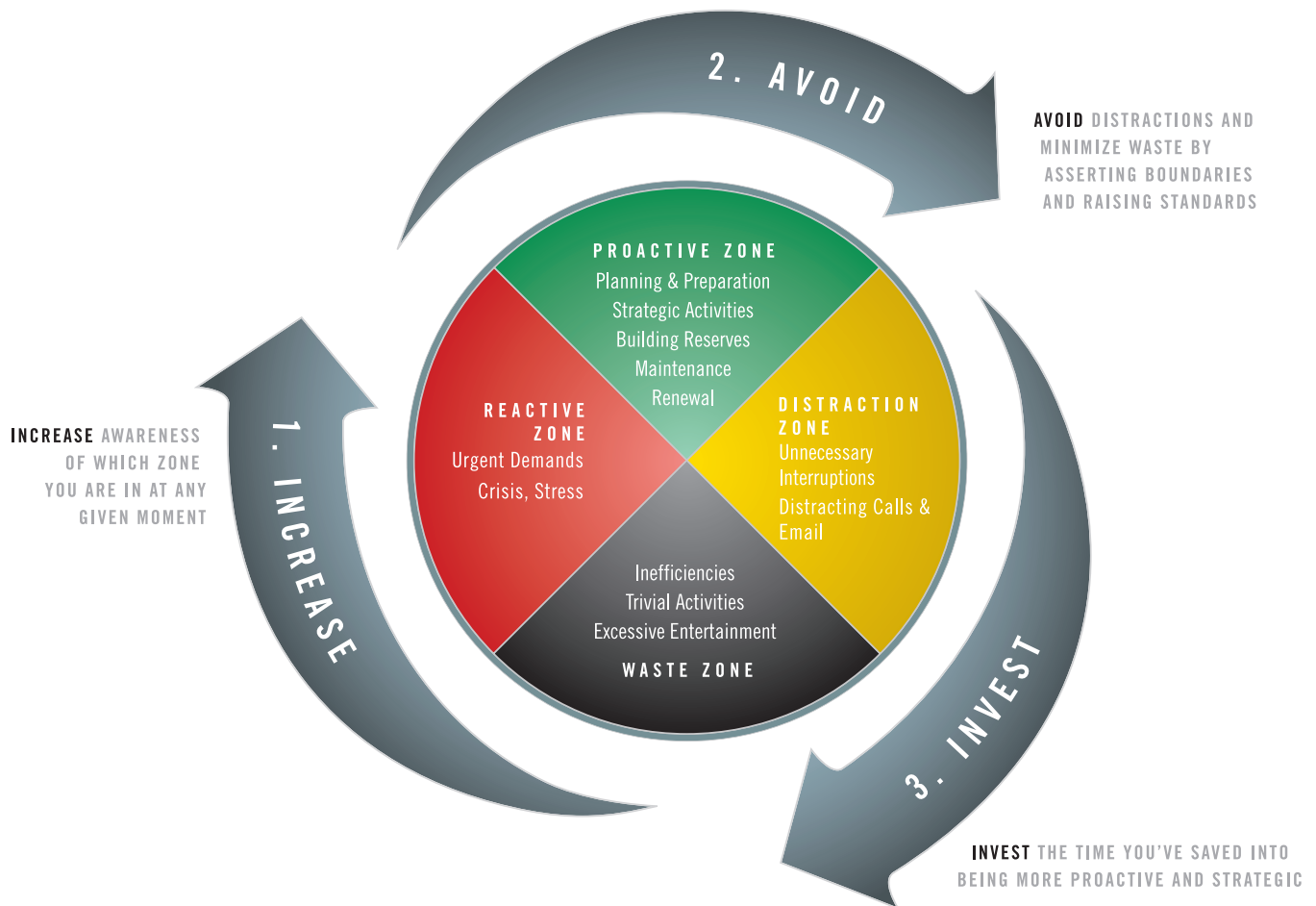
III. THE ATTENTION ZONES MODEL

Too many managers confuse efficiency with effectiveness. *Efficiency* is doing more things in less time. *Effectiveness* is doing the most important things well.

To paraphrase the late Stephen Covey, author of the bestsellers *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People* and *First Things First*⁷, efficiency is a jet airplane traveling at 600 miles per hour. Effectiveness is a jet airplane flying at 600 miles per hour ... *in the right direction*.

Unfortunately, many leaders don't slow down long enough or reflect deeply enough to clarify the right direction. Too many managers have fallen prey to urgency addiction and spend far too little time on activities that are important but not urgent. Too often, the drama of putting out fires promotes the illusion of effectiveness and fuels a vicious cycle of heroics. It stands to reason that if more employees, especially managers, invested more time and energy into proactive, strategic activities, there would be less fires to put out in the first place. But where can

The Stagen Attention Zones Model™



managers find the time to be more proactive and strategic when they are already spread thin just tending to all the urgent matters that arise each day and week?

The Stagen Attention Zones Model™ is an intuitive framework that answers this question. It provides a practical way to counteract urgency addiction and the tendency of managers to get pulled into the “reactivity trap.” The four “zones” in the illustration represent the primary ways managers spend their time and, more importantly, their attention. The numbered arrows represent the three fundamental practices that can be used to dramatically enhance productivity while reducing overwhelm and stress.

Benefits of the Attention Zones Model

- Less reactive
- Less time and energy wasted
- Fewer interruptions and distractions
- More focus on what’s most important
- More strategic, better planned
- More effective days and weeks

THE REACTIVE ZONE

The Reactive Zone is comprised of activities that are both important to you and time-sensitive (urgent). We say they are “important” because they reflect your values and priorities. You care about them. Activities in this zone include urgent demands from clients or bosses and difficult high-stakes situations that feel like a crisis that needs immediate attention.

Naturally, this tends to be the most stressful of the zones. If you spend much of your time putting out fires or running from deadline to deadline, often behind schedule, then you feel like you have little time for things such as planning, strategic thinking, building reserves, and necessary maintenance.

In other words, too much time in the Reactive Zone leaves little time and energy to put into the *Proactive Zone* (see below).

Keep in mind that the Reactive Zone is not inherently bad; it is necessary to respond to customer and employee needs and demands. But if you spend too much time there, it quickly becomes counterproductive, as it traps you in a self-perpetuating cycle.

THE PROACTIVE ZONE

The Proactive Zone is comprised of activities that are important but not time-sensitive. They don’t have to be done today or even this week. Clearly, there is a lot of value in activities such as strategic thinking, planning, preparation, performing necessary maintenance, and building reserves. When things are properly maintained, they are less likely to break down and send you spinning into the *Reactive Zone*. When you take the time for renewal (e.g., breaks, exercise, relaxation, and vacations), you are in a better position to bring your full self to your leadership role and be on your “A game” when you need to be. Neglecting Proactive Zone activities causes the urgencies and crisis situations to just keep coming with greater velocity. This is why so many people find themselves trapped in the Reactive Zone.

Some efficiency experts speak of “urgency addiction” and “adrenaline addicts.” It’s understandable. When you spend your day putting out fires, you enjoy the ego gratification of being a hero for the day. A large dose of adrenaline-fueled urgency gives a false feeling of importance.

The value of spending more time in the Proactive Zone is self-evident—but where do you find the time? How can you be more proactive when you already

don't have enough time to handle your existing urgent priorities? You might think, "I get it. I'll just stop spending so much time fighting fires in the Reactive Zone and spend more time in the Proactive Zone." But here's the catch: You can't just say no to the Reactive Zone, because these activities are, in fact, important to you. If they were unimportant, they would not be in the Reactive Zone—they would be in either the *Waste Zone* or the *Distraction Zone* (see below).

Interestingly, the key to freeing yourself from the Reactive Zone involves working more skillfully with the remaining two zones: the Distraction Zone and the Waste Zone. First, let's clearly define them.

THE DISTRACTION ZONE

The Distraction Zone is comprised of unnecessary interruptions, distracting calls and emails, and other messages that are not important. Such distractions are considered time-sensitive or urgent because they are happening *right now* in the present moment and are grabbing your attention or are "in your face," so to speak. But they are *not* important in the sense that they are not aligned with your priorities and your values. (If they were important, they would be in the *Reactive Zone*.) Perhaps the interruption is important to the person interrupting you, but it's not a high priority for you. Stagen estimates that the typical manager spends 5-15 unproductive hours a week having their attention pulled away by these unimportant distractions and interruptions.

Why are we so easily distracted, and why do we allow so many interruptions? It may be because we don't value focus and concentration in the first place. If we don't know the true value of "undivided attention" in the first place, then we're unlikely to prioritize protecting it. We don't set boundaries. We



don't block out uninterrupted time for ourselves and guard that time. Another cause is that many people haven't yet learned to distinguish what is urgent (time-sensitive) from what is important (aligned with their values and priorities).

THE WASTE ZONE

The Waste Zone is comprised of trivial activities that do not add value. Waste Zone activities are neither urgent nor important—they are simply a waste of time. Workplace productivity research shows that in typical organizations, a tremendous number of hours are spent each week doing meaningless activities that do nothing to forward the organization's goals.

Perhaps the most obvious waste of a manager's time is doing a task for a team member that would be better delegated to that team member (both in terms of productivity and also in terms of skill-building for the employee). Another Waste Zone

example is the extra time it takes to complete a task because you weren't prepared or properly trained. And, consider the executive who still "hunts and pecks" on a keyboard, taking four times longer than necessary to type an email, because he never made the time to take a typing class (or use learn-to-type training software). What about when it takes hours longer than necessary to conclude a meeting or work session because no one took the time in advance to create an agenda and gather all the documents the session would require. A final example would be the time spent searching for paperwork or computer documents that were never properly filed and organized (a Proactive Zone activity).

The illustration on page 6 lists excessive entertainment as an example of a Waste Zone activity. Is there anything wrong with entertainment such as watching TV, pleasure reading, social activities, and so on? No, not if you find the activity meaningful, valuable, or important (i.e., if that leisure activity is renewing). But have you ever sat in front of the television and clicked the remote from one mindless, insipid show to another, not even enjoying yourself? This is one example of the sort of mind-numbing activities that absentmindedly drag us into the Waste Zone. Another example would be spending social time with people with whom you have little in common and don't actually enjoy being around.

THE THREE META-PRACTICES

Increase

The first meta-practice is to increase in awareness which zone you are in at any given time of the day. This is, of course, a mindfulness practice. Get in the habit of noticing and naming the zone you are in. Are you putting out a fire that is both important to you (aligned with your values and key priorities) and also

time-sensitive (urgent)? Or is someone interrupting you with something that may be important to them but really isn't on your radar of priorities at all?

Avoid

Avoid distractions by asserting your boundaries. If you are concentrating on completing a time-sensitive deadline, let your coworker know you can't answer his question right now, but you can be available to discuss his project after lunch. Minimize wasted time and energy by raising your standards. This means being more organized and prepared for your meetings and your work. It also means choosing to avoid conversations and activities that do not add value (not aligned with your values and priorities).

Invest

The cumulative minutes each day and hours each week that you have reclaimed from the Distraction and Waste Zones—not to mention the mental bandwidth and physical energy—can now be reinvested into proactive and strategic activities.

Prepare next week's meeting agenda this week so you can share it with your coworkers and get their input on it prior to the day of meeting. Clean up your desk or computer desktop and file the information you need so you can easily and quickly find it the next time you are prepping for an important meeting. Watch that tutorial you've been putting off so you can be faster and more efficient with your presentation software (or any other application or tool you use daily or weekly). Ask that team member who is struggling with a high-stakes project to go to lunch with you to hear their concerns and offer your support *before* they miss their upcoming deadline.

IV. ATTENTION MANAGEMENT TACTICS

In the last section, we introduced three meta-practices:

1. **Increase** awareness of which zone you are in at any given moment.
2. **Avoid** distractions and minimize waste by asserting boundaries and raising standards.
3. **Invest** the time you've saved into being more proactive and strategic.

Stagen's Attention Management Tactics help leaders implement meta-practice No. 2 (avoid distractions and minimize waste) and meta-practice No. 3 (invest the reclaimed time and energy into the Proactive Zone).

The practical techniques you will learn in this section can significantly reduce distractions and waste and help you increase the amount of high-leverage activities you and your team complete each week, each month, and each quarter. After only a few months of application, it's quite common for managers implementing these methods to reclaim 5-8 hours per week. Imagine getting your work done in four days a week, instead of five, and having a whole day to focus on strategic goals that are truly important to you and your organization.

SINGLETASKING

There was a time when many people believed multitasking was a valuable job skill—they would even write “good at multitasking” on their resumes. However, more than a hundred reputable studies have been published proving that human multitasking is a myth. Computer chips multitask (that's where the term *multitask* comes from). Human brains do not.

People are either attending to one activity at a time, which we call *singletasking*, or they are dividing their attention across two or more activities, which is *multitasking*. Naturally, when multitasking, each

activity suffers because a human being has one consciousness and one unit of conscious attention to spread across the number of activities with which he or she is engaged.

Sue Shellenbarger wrote in *The Wall Street Journal*, “A growing body of scientific research shows [that] one of the juggler's favorite time-saving techniques, multitasking, can actually make you less efficient and, well, stupider. Trying to do two or three things at once or in quick succession can take longer overall than doing them one at a time, and [it] tends to leave you with reduced brainpower to perform each task.”⁸

Numerous neuroscientists and brain researchers have published their findings about the multitasking myth. MIT neuroscientist Earl Miller—one of the world's experts on divided attention—explains that our brains are simply “not wired to multitask well ... When people think they're multitasking, they're actually just switching from one task to another very rapidly. And every time they do, there's a cognitive cost in doing so.”⁹

Don't ever confuse multitasking—trying to do more than one activity at the same time (meaning in the span of 5-15 minutes)—with managing multiple projects. All managers, and most employees, have multiple projects and multiple tasks. If you complete one task before going on to another, you can complete dozens of tasks in a day. That is not multitasking.

When you take in more information by having multiple simultaneous “experiences,” it may feel like you are doing more or doing it faster. That is an illusion. Every time you divide your attention, you reduce the amount of intelligence and skill you can bring to each activity. You perform the tasks more slowly and with more errors than if you complete one task before moving to the next.

Of course, not all tasks are equal. The inefficiency of multitasking is most pronounced with activities that require abstract thought and careful attention. Tasks that can be done in a rote manner using your hands or feet with almost no conscious thought—like walking and chewing gum or brushing your teeth while listening to a podcast recording—see a less pronounced loss in effectiveness.

Multitaskers picture themselves as expert jugglers, astounding their audience by keeping five balls in the air with grace, ease, a smile, and a wink. In reality, multitaskers are more like unskilled, amateur plate spinners, getting one plate spinning, then another and another, then frantically racing from one to the next (ignoring the others) while at any moment one might come crashing down.¹⁰

The more things you try to juggle at the same time, the less effective you become because of the time and attention lost when mentally switching from one activity to the next. This concept of “task switching” has become central to researchers’ understanding of why multitasking is so disastrous to productivity and performance, especially for managers and executives whose work involves abstract thinking, problem-solving, and decision-making. Research shows that it takes 20 to 40 percent longer to complete a group of tasks while multitasking—with nearly twice as many errors.

Have you ever noticed how stressed and exhausted you feel after multitasking for a few hours? The root cause is cortisol—the stress hormone. Research shows that multitasking significantly increases



the production of cortisol as well as the fight-or-flight hormone adrenaline. This explains, in part, why multitaskers often feel mentally foggy and overwhelmed.

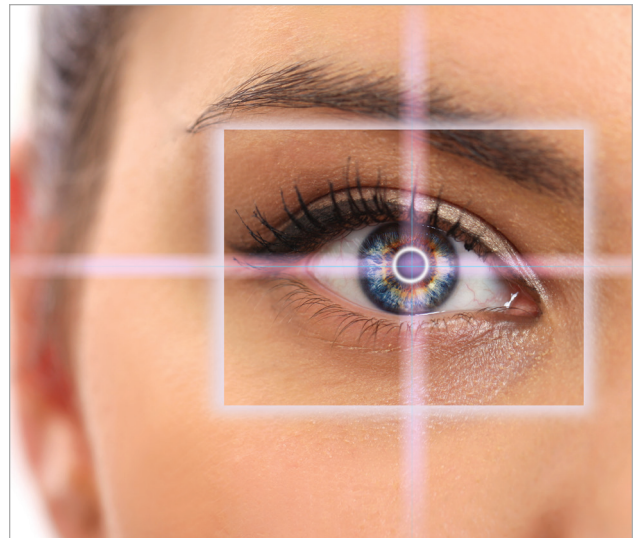
The prefrontal cortex of the brain has a novelty bias. Human attention is easily pulled away by something new (shiny object syndrome). This puts knowledge workers—which include managers and leaders—at a disadvantage. The abstract thinking part of the brain we most need to do our jobs (focusing, learning, solving problems, and making decisions) is easily distracted. A text comes in, or we have an idea and quickly open a new tab to do a Google search, or we jot down something we need to do later—each of these indulgences tweaks the novelty- and

reward-seeking prefrontal cortex, causing a squirt of dopamine, further reinforcing our delusion that we are good at multitasking.

A study funded by Hewlett-Packard¹¹ and conducted by the Institute of Psychiatry found that, when multitasking, people show a temporary 10-point drop in their IQ—more than twice that found in studies of the impact on mental performance under the influence of marijuana. Multitaskers also suffer diminished mental performance similar to that seen in people who get no sleep the night prior to a test. Think of that! Working under the influence of multitasking erodes your performance worse than coming into the office stoned.

A study conducted by the Virginia Tech Transportation Institute¹² and repeated by several other organizations shows that a driver who is texting or reading email is 23 times more likely to have a collision. Multitasking behind the wheel is actually more dangerous than driving drunk.

Stanford neuroscientist Russ Poldrack found that trying to learn new information *while multitasking* causes the new information to actually be saved into the wrong part of the brain. When there are not distractions, the information goes straight into the hippocampus, where it is organized and stored for later, easy retrieval. When multitasking, the data is routed into the striatum region of the brain, which is best suited for storing procedures, not facts and ideas).¹³



Stop multitasking. Concentrate on doing one thing at a time for at least half an hour at a stretch. If you can block out an hour or two for each activity, you might even surprise yourself by dropping into a flow state and producing some of your best work (with less stress).

Per the mindfulness and flow section in this module, bringing your full attention to an activity can not only result in higher performance, it can also be enjoyable. Can you recall a time when you were highly focused and effective and delivered impressive results? That was likely a time when you were singletasking. You focused in on what you were doing, brought your full undivided attention, and gave 100 percent. Why not bring that quality of awareness to every important activity?

WEEKLY TIME BLOCKS

A primary reason multitasking is so ineffective is that it takes time to mentally switch gears, get into a new mindset or physiological state, and find your rhythm with each new activity. Different activities require different neurophysiological (mind-body) states.

Consider the difference between the state you are in when you analyze financial reports versus empathizing with a team member struggling with a fellow employee or troubling work situation. Grouping similar activities together optimizes overall productivity. And doing each activity for a

block of time allows you to avoid the task-switching that breaks your flow, slows you down, or causes unnecessary mistakes. Each block of time should be a minimum of 30 minutes with an hour or more being ideal.

Time blocks are recurring and should be scheduled into your calendar at the same time and day each week or each month. Consider time blocks to be foundational to the structure of each week. Once you establish a routine, you can start to organize tasks in the most appropriate recurring time block. Time blocks can also be applied to individuals or groups:

Examples of individual weekly time blocks

Exercise at the gym – Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays from 6:30 to 7:30 a.m.

Financial reviews – Tuesdays from 2 to 4 p.m.

Personal focus time – Wednesdays from 4:30 to 6 p.m.

Weekly Focusing Process (see corresponding tactic) – Fridays from 4 to 4:30 p.m.

Reflection time – Sundays from 11 a.m. to noon

Examples of group weekly time blocks

Departmental huddle – Mondays from 8:30 to 9 a.m.

Leadership team meeting – Tuesdays from 9 to 10 a.m.

Office hours for key team members – Thursdays from 2 to 5 p.m.

Date night with spouse – Saturdays at 7 p.m.

Church with family – Sundays from 9 to 10 a.m.

WEEKLY FOCUSING PROCESS

The purpose of the Weekly Focusing Process is to ensure that every single week you keep your attention focused on what is most important (according to your values and priorities). If most leaders do an honest inventory of their professional and personal values and priorities, they typically find that some areas receive less attention than they deserve. You might even say some are being neglected: key work relationships, long-term planning, or necessary introspection and reflection on important decisions. If an activity isn't finding its way into your week, it is unlikely to be well-represented in your life. Planning your weeks effectively is the fundamental bridge to productive months and productive quarters.

The key is not to prioritize what's on your schedule, but to schedule your priorities.¹⁴ – Stephen Covey

Reactive items (important and urgent) tend to displace *proactive* items (important but not urgent). Therefore, many managers' weeks fill up with reactive items, leaving little time for proactive activities. If you don't schedule the proactive activities at the start of the week, you'll likely get pulled into spending most of your time dealing with things in the Reactive Zone. To avoid that, commit 15-30 minutes before the week starts (ideally on Friday afternoon or over the weekend) so you can carefully plan out the upcoming week with key deadlines, important meetings, and time-sensitive tasks.

The Weekly Focusing Process is intended to be a recurring time block—arguably, the most important time block each week. Start by connecting with your purpose and core values. This provides emotional context to the activities of the week and grounds

you in what is most important to you. Next, review your organization's (or team's) vision statements, priorities, and initiatives. Finally, review your current leadership contributions to those initiatives and personal tasks, especially those that need attention in the next week. Once you identify your proactive activities for the week, schedule appointments with yourself in your calendar and appropriately adjust the agendas of any regular recurring time blocked meetings you lead.

Scheduling and keeping appointments with yourself

Leaders who are serious about managing their attention place a high value on their time and their ability to keep commitments. Every important project is comprised of tasks, and every leader has tasks to complete each week. So when are those tasks going to get completed? In your free time? Between meetings with other managers?

This is where self-discipline comes in. Leaders who truly value their own time and are committed to disciplined execution schedule time each week to complete that week's important tasks. The effectiveness of several of the other tactics introduced in this module rely on your ability to schedule appointments with yourself—and then keep those appointments.

Does it seem odd to schedule appointments on your calendar for things like project work, paperwork, reading, decision-making, strategic thinking, or creative time? How else can you be assured to get those tasks done each week if you don't make time in your schedule for them? And how can you possibly manage your attention each week and each day if the important activities you engage in are not reflected accurately on your calendar?

You should consider appointments with yourself as important as appointments with your most valuable customer.

Scheduling appointments with yourself for specific activities and tasks poses little challenge for most leaders. But keeping those appointments requires discipline. It is important to assert your boundaries if you want to implement this tactic successfully. You will need to tell your coworkers, “I have to go now; I have an appointment.” Yes, it is still an appointment if it is an appointment with yourself. Isn’t your time as valuable as the time of a colleague you would schedule an appointment with?

When you conduct your Weekly Focusing Process, you will schedule an appointment for each of the key tasks you are committed to doing that week. If you fail to schedule appointment times to work on these proactive projects at the start of the week, you may not get around to these important, but not urgent, items. They are highly likely to get displaced by the numerous urgent and important tasks that surface each day of the week.

Imagine your weekly schedule as a bucket and your key proactive tasks as fist-sized rocks. Urgent and important tasks are like sand pouring into your bucket from all around you. If you put the big rocks (your proactive tasks) in your bucket first, you can pour the sand (reactive tasks) in around them—but not vice versa. This is why you must schedule appointments for all important tasks into your calendar on the day (and at the time) you intend to put your attention on these activities.



The key to staying out of the Reactive Zone is to preemptively schedule time for proactive activities day after day, week after week. When you have the discipline to spend this time planning, preparing, and completing high-leverage strategic tasks, then the Reactive Zone begins to shrink, and it will continue to shrink week after week, month after month.

Message notification

Digital communication devices, channels, and apps are now ubiquitous. The ability to communicate with so many people across so many channels on any device is a blessing and also a curse. As leaders, we have responsibilities and many stakeholders who communicate with us. The result is a never-ending stream of messages from various apps across multiple devices.

There is little benefit to being notified every time a message comes through. If you are not conscientious about your notification settings, you will be continually barraged by unnecessary distractions and have great difficulty focusing and staying productive.

Being constantly distracted by unnecessary notifications robs you of your ability to concentrate and destroys your productivity.

When writing a proposal, reviewing a report, or planning your calendar, do you feel compelled to read your incoming email the moment you are notified (perhaps as often as every 4-6 minutes)? If so, you may be an “email addict.” Email is a useful servant, but a terrible master. Your *calendar* and your *priorities* should guide your attention and determine when you respond to colleagues and clients, not the randomness of when an email arrives in your inbox.

To minimize these distractions from email and other message notifications (e.g., texts, Slack, app notifications, and so on), switch off all notifications that are unnecessary—and that means *most* of them. Email notifications, in particular, should be turned off.

Email filtering

Rather than have all your email flow into one overwhelming inbox, set up individual folders for the major categories or types of email you receive. Examples include management, marketing, sales, customers, family, newsletters, junk mail, etc. By having your correspondence grouped by types, you can focus your attention on one area, client, or project at a time. You’ll find this to be less distracting, less stressful, and a lot more productive.

Manually filing each email you receive is a huge time waster, so once your folders are set up, create email filters or rules to sort and file incoming and outgoing email into specified folders. Naturally, you will review the contents of high-priority folders several times a

day but review the low-priority folders once a day or less. In some cases, you may only review newsletter folders once per month.

A popular filtering practice is used for CC messages where all emails in which you are in the CC line automatically filter into a CC folder. If you educate your team to include you in the TO line when they expect a reply and the CC line for messages that do not require your reply, you can establish Weekly Time Blocks for reviewing your CC folder. By singletasking the activity of reading CC emails in a time block, you can establish a flow and increase speed and effectiveness.

It only takes a small amount of time to configure your notifications, folders, and filters initially, and then to update the settings periodically. The time you will save easily offsets the small amount of time for setup. You will be amazed at how less overwhelmed you will feel, plus you will save several hours a week by not reading unnecessary email and by being able to quickly find the messages you are looking for when you need to locate them.

DIGITAL DOPAMINE LOOPS

Have you ever left your phone at home or been without it for a day? Or not had access to the Internet for a day ... or an afternoon? How was that for you? Did you experience anxiety? Withdrawals? A panic attack? Hopefully not, but those situations can certainly give a glimpse into our relationship with our digital devices and the effects they are having on our brains.

Do you check your email when you are at home in the evening with your family? What about when you are in a meeting with your colleagues? When you take a short break from a task, do you feel compelled to

check your texts? If you answered yes to any of these questions, you may have succumbed to a “digital dopamine loop.”

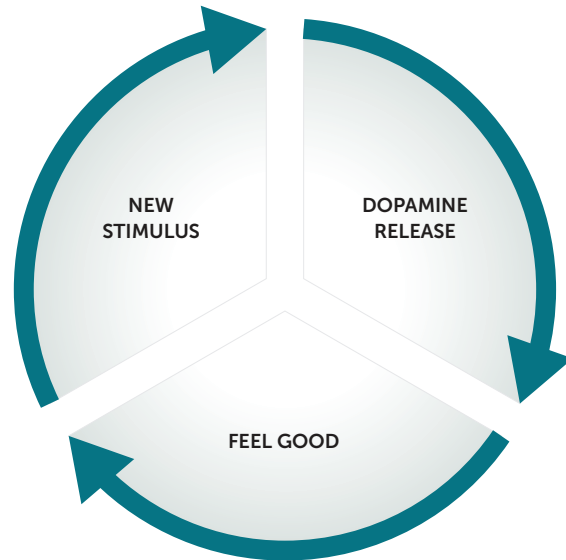
You may be familiar with the neurotransmitter dopamine and the fact that it is associated with many brain functions, including attention, learning, motivation, and pleasure-seeking behaviors. Dopamine causes curiosity about new ideas and motivates you to seek information.¹⁵

Dopamine loops represent the fundamental pattern underlying many habit-forming behaviors.

In simple terms, a dopamine loop is a brain-behavior pattern that involves desire and seeking behavior, having a pleasant experience, then feeling stimulated to do it again. In the past, it took a few days, or at least a few hours, to gratify a desire. But not with digital devices. Today, it only takes seconds.

The dopamine system is actually more active when you are anticipating a reward than when you get it. Pleasure from the dopamine system does not satiate like a natural reward. Therefore, the system keeps saying “more, more, more” causing you to keep seeking even when you have found the information you were looking for. Have you ever searched for something on Google, actually found the answer, and half an hour later realize that you are still looking for more information? Dopamine starts you seeking, then you get rewarded for the seeking, which makes you want to seek more. It becomes harder and harder to stop looking at email, stop texting, or stop checking your cell phone to see if you have a message or a new text.¹⁶

Digital devices provide near-instant gratification. Want to talk to someone? Shoot them a text (on your phone) or private message (on a social media app)



and they will often respond in only a few seconds. Want to know the answer to a question? Just type or speak your search request into your device and get an answer in a few seconds. Want to see what your colleagues or friends are up to? Pull up LinkedIn, Slack, or Facebook. Digital technology has made it easier to drop into a dopamine-induced loop faster than just about anything humans—or nature—have created previously.¹⁷

Some researchers estimate that the average worker pulls their phone out more than 50 times a day. Do you think this is just an accident? It’s not. It’s product design. Teams of neuroscientists and product engineers are designing their digital devices and services to trigger dopamine loops that are virtually guaranteed to keep you coming back for more.¹⁸

Digital devices are woven into almost every facet of our lives, and certainly our work lives. They keep us connected to things that matter to us, and they help us do our jobs. So quitting digital devices altogether, cold turkey, is not likely to happen.

The dopamine system is especially sensitized to “cues” that a pleasure may be forthcoming. If there is a small, specific cue—say a bell or a chime—that

signifies something is going to happen, it really gets our dopamine system turning, increasing the habit-forming nature of the loop. Do you get notified when someone comments on your post on LinkedIn (or, insert favorite social media site)? Do you feel compelled to see what they said? Interestingly, the dopamine loop is actually amplified when the information coming in is small so that it doesn't fully satisfy. Short text and social media messages are more addictive than, say, typewritten letters, articles, or books.

With all these pleasure loops, instant gratifications, bells and dings, light cues going off, and dopamine squirts throughout the day, what could possibly go wrong?

Constant stimulation of your dopamine system can have a number of negative effects on your brain, mood, and health. Not to mention, it's pretty hard to be effective when these digital dopamine loops are firing off all the time, making you compulsively check your phone, email, and so on. So what can we do to avoid digital dopamine loops or back out of one when we figure out we're in one?

If you care about productivity in general, and attention management in particular, you need to be on the lookout for ways to prevent and break digital dopamine loops. First, turn off those cues. Those lights and chimes are like the bell for Pavlov's dogs. They get your dopamine system salivating for what's coming. Adjust the settings on your phone, laptop, desktop, and tablet so you don't receive the automatic notifications. Unless you are a doctor working in an emergency room, your device should not make you on call all the time. Callers and texters should not control your schedule. You should be the one who decides when you return texts, respond to emails, or engage in a phone call.

When in meetings, switch off or mute all notifications. When working on projects that require your undivided attention—or when you are with your family—lose that electronic leash.

Some people who are striving for a more measured use of these addictive devices deliberately leave their phone in the car (or locked away somewhere for a few hours) when they need to give their full focus to an important task or person. Leaders who use their devices mindfully often choose to only check email every couple of hours (or a couple of times a day, depending on their situation) to see if any time-sensitive messages have come through. Then they can reply on their own timeframe. It's not about being unavailable or unresponsive. It's about choice, being deliberate, and being conscious about when you are available and how you respond.

COMMUNICATION CHANNELS AND MODES

Channels of communication

We now have an enormous, and growing, selection of communication channels to utilize, each with their own strengths and limits. The typical company uses five to seven discrete communication channels (email, phone, video conferencing, text, Messenger, in-person meetings, and so on) and expects its employees to be tuned in. The typical worker also layers on an additional five to 10 personal channels.

In business, email is often the most often used—perhaps overused—medium. However, for many younger workers, email is viewed as an increasingly unpopular mode of communication. In its place, younger workers often prefer text or Messenger (on whatever the popular app is currently) and

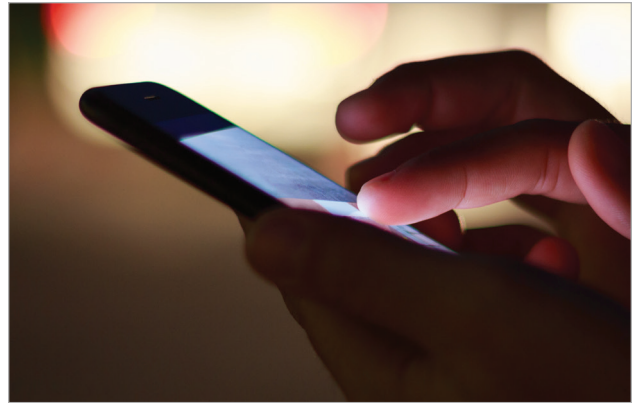
have abandoned voicemail altogether. Because text messages tend to be short, the channel can have the effect of discouraging thoughtful discussion, detail, and nuance.

If we are serious about managing our attention, then we need to be deliberate about the channels we use, and when and how we use them. Because every organization and culture is different, we cannot provide detailed guidelines for each channel, but we can offer some helpful orientating generalizations to inform your discussions and help you decide for yourself the best way to stay connected and informed while being productive and efficient with your time, energy, and attention.

Learning when to use each mode of communication in the proper context and in the right way can help you reclaim several hours a week in productivity, avoid misunderstanding, and help coworkers and employees feel more engaged and satisfied (and motivated) to work with you. Avoidable misunderstandings and conflicts are exactly the sort of things that pull you into the Reactive Zone.

Modes of communication

We invite leaders to be thoughtful about “synchronous” versus “asynchronous” and “in-person” versus “remote” modes of communication. In-person meetings, video conferences, and telephone calls are all examples of *synchronous* communication. *Synchronous* means the speaker and listener are both communicating at the *same time*. An in-person meeting (in the same physical room), however, is quite different than a phone call or video conference (a remote conversation).



Email, postal mail, video recordings, and so on are examples of *asynchronous* communication. One person sends the message, and the other receives it at a later, unspecified time. There is generally not an expectation that the receiver will respond immediately the way they would with a phone call or video conference.

We recommend reserving synchronous communication (whether on the phone or in person) for those times when you need to discuss complex or emotionally charged issues or collaborate together to brainstorm or make decisions. We sometimes call synchronous communication *real-time communication*. This is precious time. It's not easy to get people together synchronously. In-person, face-to-face meetings are especially valuable for building relationships but are also the most precious. It's costly to get together in person (additional time required, the venue, travel, etc.). Therefore, it is wasteful to use valuable synchronous meeting time for routine status reports and simple exchanges of data. Why tie up two or more people's schedules for something that would be better handled through a simple email?

Managers spend a lot of time in meetings. Yet, many managers report that their meeting time is not used productively. As a good starting place, Stagen recommends the following meeting fundamentals for all of your meetings—in-person meetings, video conferences, phone conferences, and even one-on-one phone calls:

- Stay disciplined about starting and ending meetings on time.
- Use precious synchronous communication for problem-solving, not updating and informing that could be done in advance through asynchronous communication.
- Always manage and follow the agenda. It keeps everyone focused on what is most important (and is a good tool to rein conversations in, when necessary).
- Choose meeting length consciously. Shorter meetings between 30 minutes and two hours force people to distill their information and be more efficient with their communication; these meeting lengths tend to work for well-understood, ongoing decisions. Longer meetings can be more effective for complex brainstorming, challenging initiatives, planning, or other less predictable “figuring out” problems; however, these should be used sparingly and managed with a carefully crafted agenda.

In many cases, it is sufficient and preferable for one person to convey an idea and then allow the other person (or persons) to respond at a later time at their convenience. Asynchronous communication is much less expensive in its use of resources (i.e., time, attention, energy, money) and should be used whenever appropriate to the task.

Of course, it’s possible to overuse asynchronous communication. Some managers who are ineffective leaders “manage by email.” This is, of course, to be avoided. Asynchronous communication must be supplemented by phone calls and, when possible, in-person communication in order to establish, build, maintain, and renew a feeling of trust, connection, comradery, and chemistry.

Because emotion is largely recognized and understood by hearing and seeing another human being, any communication that has important emotional content should be conveyed in person or by video conference or phone. Synchronous communication is best, of course, but it is also possible to leave a voicemail that conveys emotional content. Feelings such as praise, warmth, frustration, or discomfort always come across more accurately when the receiver hears the voice tone, and even better still, can see the facial expressions. Never use email to address emotional issues—it is rarely interpreted accurately and usually comes across much colder and harsher than is intended. Using email when a phone call is required is one of the biggest causes of unnecessary drama that pulls leaders into the Reaction Zone.

Texting and messaging (using Slack or other collaborative apps) represent an interesting hybrid between asynchronous and synchronous modes of communication. In certain circumstances, they can be extremely effective. Many organizations do the bulk of their work with collaborative tools, such as Slack, supplemented by video conferences and/or phone calls with occasional in-person get-togethers. Many teams have remote members (in other states or countries), often in different time zones. Messaging tools can allow people to move forward on tasks and projects both independently and also collaboratively.

Sometimes the messages are read and responded to in hours, and other times the conversations are in real time.

EDUCATING YOUR ENVIRONMENT

Most of the attention management tactics we have discussed in this module will be deployed in an organizational environment. When you adopt new routines like this, it is important to socialize these new approaches with the people you interact with on a daily or weekly basis. We call this “educating your environment.”

You will want to incorporate the meeting tips and guidelines into your regular meetings. Of course, you will need to discuss this with the people who attend those meetings. Many practitioners find it useful to share the Attention Zones core practice sheet with coworkers and offer to explain it to anyone who is interested. Some leaders more formally present the model in a team meeting and encourage coworkers to bring more mindfulness to how they spend their time and attention.

The discussion of the myth of multitasking and the benefits of singletasking is almost always a rich one. If your coworkers have visibility to your calendar, you will certainly want to explain Weekly Time Blocks to them and let them know the times each week that are best to collaborate with you.

It is also extremely useful to discuss the pros and cons of in-person meetings, phone and remote meetings, messaging, texting, and other communication channels and modes. You may be surprised to hear some of the preferences that surface.

Meta-practice No. 2 in the Attention Zones model involves avoiding distractions by asserting boundaries and minimizing waste by raising standards. Well, much of the work of asserting boundaries and raising



standards involves interacting with others. So you are going to need to educate your environment about when you plan to be available.

For example, how might you allow people to “drop by” your office—or in the case of remote teams, ping you—to get immediate input and discussion while not being “always open and on call” for anyone with any whim who wants to snag your attention and siphon off some of your time? We recommend setting Weekly Recurring Time Blocks once or twice a day, or at least several times a week, when you have an open-door policy or “open office hours.” You can invite people to drop by or ping you during these hours—the best times to reach you when you are most likely to be available.

If someone wants to speak to you outside of those times, perhaps when you are in an appointment with yourself working on an important task or time-sensitive deadline, then you must assert your boundaries. You can convey, in a respectful and friendly way, of course, “I want to give you my full, undivided attention, but I can’t at the moment. I will be available at 2 or 3 this afternoon, or tomorrow before lunch. Which slot would work best for you?”

This Attention Management module has brought a number of new distinctions into focus that leaders can leverage in their quest to increase their capacity for greater awareness and more skillful action. Armed with the Attention Zones Model and a packed toolkit of attention management practices, you can expect to be less distracted, more focused, and more productive the moment you begin to implement them. And in time, as your attention management skills grow, you can expect to bring more mindfulness and flow into many dimensions of your work life, allowing you to be a more effective leader and to find your work less stressful and more satisfying on many levels.



Multitasking makes you stupid. – Sue Shellenbarger

V. END NOTES

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⁵ Many readers of this supplement have access to and/or are already familiar with a number of other Stagen modules, models, and tools that were designed with Csikszentmihalyi's research and flow theory in mind. Those tools, techniques, and methods help leaders clarify priorities, set clear and achievable goals, define (and limit) scope to eliminate unnecessary distractions, learn to focus and concentrate, evaluate "skill" levels in various capacities, and accelerate development through integral practice—most of the factors that contribute to flow.

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