

LeaderPerfect Newsletter

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Staying On Focus

by Dr. Mike Armour

It's not enough to set goals and priorities. We must also stay focused on them.

Staying focused is a daily battle. Distractions come at us in torrents. A friend of mine calls it being "nibbled to death by a duck." The constant nibbling has a way of drawing attention away from the goals, priorities, and values that deserve our focus.

As a youngster I used to spend long hours playing with a magnifying glass. Not only was I fascinated by what I could see through one, I was equally taken aback by its other distinct property -- its ability to focus sunlight so intently that I could actually burn things with it.

Not that I was some sort of would-be arsonist, finding great joy in starting fires. Nothing like that. I was simply amazed that a little piece of glass, held in the proper relationship between a bright sun and a combustible object, could char the object, or even set it aflame.

This result was possible because of the power of focus. Without the focusing presence of the lens, the sunlight was far less powerful. Its rays could be blocked entirely by even the flimsiest of material. Properly focused, however, sunlight passing through the lens could set a dry leaf or a piece of paper aflame in a matter of seconds.

In fact, I would create games to see just how fast I could burn through leaves or paper. When I could do it consistently in twenty seconds, I would try to get the time down to nineteen seconds, then eighteen.

The Power Of Focus

The key to speed was keeping the distance between the magnifying glass and the "target" at the precise focal length of the lens. At that distance the lens had the greatest "burning power." If I moved the lens even slightly from that distance, I cut down the burning power significantly. And once I deviated from the focal length by an inch or so, there was almost no burning power at all.

That's the way it is with goals. Being focused on them means more than simply keeping them posted. Or calling them regularly to mind. The power of goals is keeping them in the sharpest possible focus.

In order to maintain such focus, it's important to limit the number of critical goals we set for ourselves. If we have so many goals that we can't keep each one in sharp focus at all

times, the goals lose their power. Two or three well-defined goals, kept in focus, are far more powerful than seven or eight that flit in and out of focus.

How many goals can you genuinely keep in focus at any given time? How many goals can your organization keep in focus at once? Exceeding that number dilutes the power of each individual goal.

As you are setting goals for the year ahead, the number of things you want to accomplish is probably greater than the number of goals you can focus on simultaneously. So does that mean simply paring down what you want to do to a smaller size? Not necessarily.

Taking On Goals A Few At A Time

Let's imagine that you have nine overall goals you want to achieve next year. And let's imagine that you've determined that you're fairly efficient at staying focused — truly focused — on four goals at a time. Identify four of the nine goals that you want to focus on in the first quarter of the year. Don't ignore the others. But don't fret about making major headway with them, either. Keep your attention and your energies focused on the four goals for the first quarter.

Now let's say that because of the power of your focus, you achieve two of the goals in the first quarter. Two are left unfinished. As you move to the second quarter you keep focus fixed on the unfinished items and add two of the remaining five goals to your field of focus.

Continue that pattern through the year, picking up an additional "focus goal" each time one of your goals is completed. Some goals may take the entire year to accomplish. Others may be substantively completed in a quarter, or even less. But the key is never to exceed your "focus capacity" in the number of goals you are working on.

New Year's Resolutions That Succeed

The reason so many New Year's resolutions fail is that we start off on January 1 trying to tackle all of the resolutions at once. As the inevitable distractions of life thrust themselves into our schedule, we gradually lose focus on first this resolution, then another. By mid-year we are writing most of the resolutions off as a lost cause. We can do the same thing with business or organizational goals. It's not only important to set goals for the year, but to sequence them and time them so that we are never overtaxed by trying to focus on too many priorities at once. We get the most done by doing a few things well.

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