

Focus on Leadership vs Leadership Focus

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Daniel Goleman, author of “The Focused Leader,” explains why leaders need to cultivate a triad of awareness — an inward focus, a focus on others, and an outward focus.

I have written about leadership in many volumes, from the very first book, “*Building the Successful Veterinary Practice: Leadership Tools (Volume 1)*”, Wiley & Sons Publishing, to multiple monographs in the VIN Bookstore, to a recurring thread in most team-based efforts I have published. But clients of late have caused me to relook at the leadership from another perspective, as suggested by Daniel Goleman, in “*The Focused Leader*”.

A primary task of leadership is to direct attention. To do so, leaders must learn to focus their own attention. When we speak about being focused, we commonly mean thinking about one thing while filtering out distractions. But a wealth of recent research in neuroscience shows that we focus in many ways, for different purposes, drawing on different neural pathways—some of which work in concert, while others tend to stand in opposition.

Grouping these modes of attention into three broad buckets—focusing on *yourself*, focusing on *others*, and focusing on *the wider world*—sheds new light on the practice of many essential leadership skills. Focusing inward and focusing constructively on others helps leaders cultivate the primary elements of emotional intelligence. A fuller understanding of how they focus on the wider world can improve their ability to devise strategy, innovate, and manage organizations.

Every leader needs to cultivate this triad of awareness, in abundance and in the proper balance, because a failure to focus inward leaves you rudderless, a failure to focus on others renders you clueless, and a failure to focus outward may leave you blindsided.

THE MANAGEMENT JUNKIE

In my back page efforts in Veterinary Forum, I often talked of those practice owners who were their own worst enemy. One article I titled the “Management Junkie”, someone who attends a seminar or reads an article and initiates changes out of the blue. We know that change in adult education requires consistency, the same message 7 times in 21 days just to get buy-in, and then a 90-day application phase without additional changes, unless it is self-generated by the action person (not the boss) to reach the predetermined measurements of success agreed upon at the beginning of the project. I wrote how Management Junkies could not stay focused or consistent, and derailed the team effort of their practice staff.

The editor had many more readers write in than ever experienced for most articles. Eight of the eleven stated they felt betrayed, because I wrote about them and their practice, yet I had never been in their practice. I also get this from my FORTNIGHTLY articles, where past clients contact me and ask why I am writing about them; in most cases, I have not, yet they identify with the concept of the article. These are the practice owners who focus on themselves, and not on their team or the broader veterinary community.

The Management Junkie also seldom focuses on the staff member efforts. They track dollars as if that was the critical yardstick of staff motivation. I am sorry folks, all healthcare research shows belonging, self-esteem, and personal growth are the usual top motivators, and while money is in the top six, it seldom, if ever, breaks into the top three reasons for job satisfaction. I look at the procedures per 100 transactions for key recognition factors (timely, meaningful and specific). This requires identification of program managers, training them to a level of being trusted, and then empowering them to excel. Take for instance behavior management – over 90% of new puppy owners want behavior management (it is the second most internet search item after location), yet most practices do not track the Family Fit nurse technician consult. We know most practices stock a wide range of nutritional products, yet many practices do not track the recurring nurse technician nutritional weigh-in and progress consult. We also know that many clients do not follow our prescription guidelines (this is “client adherence”), yet very few practices assign a nurse technician to follow-up on dispensed meds, nor do they track the follow-up effort. If you do not measure it, you cannot track it, nor can you recognize staff members who are doing a great job following the written Standards of Care (this is where compliance actually occurs).

The one-dimensional practice leader who starts everything and then changes direction in mid-stream creates a chaos that undermines self-determined progress within the staff members. In most cases, we say they lack empathy!

EMPATHY TRIAD

We talk about empathy most commonly as a single attribute. But a close look at where leaders are focusing when they exhibit it reveals three distinct kinds, each important for leadership effectiveness:

- *cognitive empathy*—the ability to understand another person’s perspective;
- *emotional empathy*—the ability to feel what someone else feels;
- *empathic concern*—the ability to sense what another person needs from you.

Cognitive empathy enables leaders to explain themselves in meaningful ways—a skill essential to getting the best performance from their direct reports. Contrary to what you might expect, exercising cognitive empathy requires leaders to think about feelings rather than to feel them directly.

Emotional empathy is important for effective mentoring, managing clients, and reading group dynamics. It springs from ancient parts of the brain beneath the cortex—the amygdala, the hypothalamus, the hippocampus, and the orbitofrontal cortex—that

allow us to feel fast without thinking deeply. They tune us in by arousing in our bodies the emotional states of others: I literally feel your pain. My brain patterns match up with yours when I listen to you tell a gripping story. As Tania Singer, the director of the social neuroscience department at the Max Planck Institute for Human Cognitive and Brain Sciences, in Leipzig, says, “You need to understand your own feelings to understand the feelings of others.” Accessing your capacity for emotional empathy depends on combining two kinds of attention: a deliberate focus on your own echoes of someone else’s feelings and an open awareness of that person’s face, voice, and other external signs of emotion.

Empathic concern, which is closely related to emotional empathy, enables you to sense not just how people feel but what they need from you. It’s what you want in your doctor, your spouse—and your boss. Empathic concern has its roots in the circuitry that compels parents’ attention to their children. Watch where people’s eyes go when someone brings an adorable baby into a room, and you’ll see this mammalian brain center leaping into action. This is the same trait puppies and kittens elicit from our staff members.

In fact, mapping attention to power in a practice organization provides a clear indication of positional hierarchy: The longer it takes Person A to respond to Person B, the more relative power Person A has. Map response times across an entire practice, and you’ll get a remarkably accurate chart of social standing as well as organizational behavior. The practice owner leaves requests/e-mails unanswered for hours; those lower down respond within minutes. This is so predictable that an algorithm for it—called automated social hierarchy detection—has been developed at Columbia University. But the real point is this: Where we see ourselves on the social ladder sets the default for how much attention we pay. This should be a warning to the practice owners, who need to respond to fast-moving competitive situations by tapping the full range of ideas and talents within an organization. Without a deliberate shift in attention, their natural inclination may be to ignore smart ideas from the lower ranks.

OUTWARD FOCUS

Leaders with a strong outward focus are not only good listeners but also good questioners. They are visionaries who can sense the far-flung consequences of local decisions and imagine how the choices they make today will play out in the future. They are open to the surprising ways in which seemingly unrelated data can inform their central interests. Melinda Gates offered up a cogent example when she remarked on *60 Minutes* that her husband was the kind of person who would read an entire book about fertilizer. Charlie Rose asked, Why fertilizer? The connection was obvious to Bill Gates, who is constantly looking for technological advances that can save lives on a massive scale. “A few billion people would have to die if we hadn’t come up with fertilizer,” he replied.

This “leadership focus” is challenging. But if great leadership were a paint-by-numbers exercise, great leaders would be more common. Practically every form of focus can be strengthened. What it takes is not talent so much as diligence—a willingness to

exercise the attention circuits of the brain just as we exercise our analytic skills and other systems of the body.

The link between attention and excellence remains hidden most of the time. Yet attention is the basis of the most essential of leadership skills—emotional, organizational, and strategic intelligence. And never has it been under greater assault. The constant onslaught of incoming data leads to sloppy shortcuts—triaging our e-mail by reading only the subject lines, skipping many of our voice mails, skimming memos and reports. Not only do our habits of attention make us less effective, but the sheer volume of all those messages leaves us too little time to reflect on what they really mean. This was foreseen more than 40 years ago by the Nobel Prize–winning economist Herbert Simon. Information “consumes the attention of its recipients,” he wrote in 1971. “Hence a wealth of information creates a poverty of attention.”

My goal here is to place attention center stage so that you can direct it where you need it when you need it. Learn to master your attention, and you will be in command of where you, and your practice organization, focus.