

Lack of focus is undoubtedly one of the lethal performance killers. Workplace surveys reflect that a scarily large number of employees are usually disengaged primarily due to a foggy, stressed or wandering mind which compromises performance. It takes a mighty effort to shun away all the distractions (both physical & emotional) and concentrate all energies on the task at hand.

I have been struggling with focus myself for a quite a while. I am always on the lookout for some inspiring material on this subject, and recently came across an incredible book on **Focus** by Daniel Goleman. Thanks to my colleague (Asif) for recommending this book. A brilliant read on the anatomy & dynamics of focus. This article encapsulates highlights from the subject book.

Disengagement at work can be associated to a whole range of factors such as low motivation, lack of challenge, inadequate financial tradeoffs, a discouraging boss, workload, constant stream of technological teasers (buzz of a mobile or 'bing' of a new mail).

According to brain science, the primary reason of disengagement is absence of "FLOW". People are rarely in flow in their daily lives. They are mostly stressed or bored. Research shows that 20 % people have a 'flow' moment at least once a day. Around 15 % of people never enter 'flow'.

What is “FLOW”? Just like music, flow is a state of harmony. A melody is created and music flows when different instruments are in sync. Similarly, flow is a state of neural harmony, a rich, well timed connection between diverse brain areas. There are two vital parts of the brain, the top down and bottom up, When these parts are in sync, we are more likely to perform at our best. It results in high engagement, a state of full absorption; we enjoy carrying out the tasks and feel good about it. Pleasure is the emotional marker of flow.

To understand the dynamics of flow, we need to take a closer look at the two drivers of our mind. Our brain has two semi independent, largely separate operating systems. The ancient brain is called bottom up mind, whereas the relatively modern brain. which has evolved over the centuries, is called top down brain. Both play a phenomenal role in defining who we are and how we operate.

The Bottom Up Brain or Narrative Brain

- This fast and furious part of our brain works like a flash, operates in milliseconds
- it is involuntary and automatic, never sleeps, may dose off for a while though
- It forms intuition through a network of neural associations
- Highly impulsive in nature and is driven by emotions
- This part of the brain fathers all our habits and is usually change averse

Top Down Brain – Direct Experience

- It has evolved over a period of time, flexible and reflective
- It has limited capacity and consumes a lot of energy to operate, no wonder a focused task leaves us exhausted and drained out
- It is voluntary and effortful
- This is the seat of self control and has the tendency to overpower and challenge old habits and emotionally driven impulses
- It is a willing learner, capable of making new neural connections

Power of choice, will power & voluntary attention are top down functions whereas bottom up brain is reflexive and routine driven.

The bottom –up brain has immense storage capacity, it multitasks and scans our surrounding without being told to do so. It is a collector, always on the lookout to gather and store

information. The top down brain takes time to deliberate on what is presented by the bottom up brain. Its job is to bring some method to the madness.

Full focus is achieved when both parts of the brain are active. For instance, creative problem solving is a function of harmonious blend of top down and bottom up activity. Think through a problem logically and methodically and then let your mind adrift for a while as you stumble on an impasse. Let your mind wander a bit, break away from the routine and let the unconscious automated bottom up brain to dig out an insightful and creative solution.

The happy marriage between both parts of our brain enables us to realize our full potential and enhance our performance. A collision between both brains is a recipe for disaster as it creates confusion, conflict and chaos in our thought process causing dissonance.

Employee Engagement can be stimulated through motivation, challenge and most importantly by evoking a sense of purpose which will lead to flow, a state of harmony between our creative energies and rational navigators.

An employee dwelling in his comfort zone due to lack of challenge, fear or de-motivation, easily succumbs to distractions and ends up wrestling with focus issues. S/he barely get to enjoy the magical moments of 'flow', which act as catapult that hurl you to fly higher & faster.

Office environment can play an instrumental role in employee engagement by promoting a high performance culture which ignites both parts of the brains; challenge , pressure and sense of accomplishment involves top down thinking while motivation & positive reinforcement keeps the door open for bottom up traffic such as creativity and the value of a mind adrift.

“The intuitive mind is a sacred gift and the rational mind is a faithful servant. We have created a society that honors the servant and has forgotten the gift.” Attributed to Albert Einstein
