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**Forget Time Management.
Manage Your Attention**

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Abstract:

Leaders today are bombarded with demands, drowning in a sea of emails, meetings, and urgent tasks. Yet, the culprit isn't time itself, but our fractured attention spans pulled in a million directions. This white paper challenges the traditional time management approach and introduces a powerful alternative: attention management. By learning to focus on what truly matters and eliminate distractions, leaders can unlock their full potential, make impactful decisions, and drive innovation in a volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) world.

Introduction:

Baseball players can easily hit home run after home run in batting practice. But, things are different when it's the bottom of the 9th and the game is on the line in a stadium full of people cheering (or maybe booing). The difference is the player's ability to focus on what matters and ignore what doesn't.

This focus is what separates success from failure, and it's the same acute focus leaders need to navigate the complexities of today's business world - the email inbox, pressure from the boss, disappointing metrics. Unfortunately, most leaders are bombarded with these and many more distractions. So the attempt to "squeeze it all in," ultimately leads to a leader feeling overwhelmed and ineffective. Add to that a world of increasing volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity (VUCA), and most leaders struggle with how to manage it all.

The Problem: Time Management Fallacy

We've taught leaders for years that one of their most important skills is *time management*. This is essentially code for "squeeze it all in." Despite trying to use a bigger box (meaning more hours in the week) leaders find that fitting it all in is impossible. This not only results in leaders feeling like they're not on top of things but also fearing that they don't know what they're missing.

The Solution: Attention Management

Time management is important, but not as important as attention management. That baseball player at the plate isn't meting out their attention in small pieces to all the inputs around them. They're ignoring many of them, focusing on what's most critical.

Warren Buffett famously said, "The difference between successful people and *really* successful people is that *really* successful people say no to almost everything." This highlights the power of focusing on a few critical decisions rather than spreading ourselves thin across many less critical decisions. Multitasking dilutes our effort, leading to subpar results and missed opportunities. Conversely, managing our attention allows us to:

- **Make impactful decisions:** By focusing deeply on the critical few, we increase the likelihood of making the right choices that truly move the needle.
- **Foster innovation:** True innovation requires sustained focus and the ability to explore unexpected paths. Managing distractions creates space for creative thinking and problem-solving.

- **Thrive in a VUCA world:** The ability to filter out noise and focus on relevant information is crucial for navigating uncertainty and making sound decisions in rapidly changing environments.

Make Impactful Decisions

Examine your last day, last week, or even last year. How many decisions and actions had a significant impact on the outcome? The fact is, for many decisions, there are bad answers and good answers, but no *right* answer. However, we invest a great deal of effort, time, and attention in pursuit of the *right* decision.

By trying to keep our attention focused on so many things, we may miss the moment that matters. When our attention is fully occupied, we can miss important new bits of information. It could be a change in the competitive landscape, the beginnings of a fracture in your team, or a process breaking down. We need enough free reign in our attention so that we're able to notice and engage with new and important signals.

Foster Innovation

Another reason to manage your attention span is to create room for creativity and problem-solving. Of course, you're applying this already "on the fly" but real innovation comes from staying with those problems long enough to unlock creativity and innovation. This means opening space and time for these worthwhile opportunities.

Think of it this way - What occupies your mind on your drive home (or on a long walk, or run, or while mowing the grass)? Do you bounce around from one issue to the next feeling overwhelmed and ineffective? Or do you keep coming back to the same tough challenge until you unlock it, allowing you to make confident decisions? Focusing your attention span involves removing the wrong things from your attention.

That's the core message: Do fewer things better. Go deeper on fewer decisions and problems.

Identifying Attention Sinks:

Attention sinks are anything that pulls our focus away from what truly matters. They can be external, like constant electronic notifications, or internal, like negative self-talk. These sinks work like gravity and continuously pull us away from what we should focus on. Attention sinks must be managed, eliminated, or curtailed. Common offenders include:

- **Multitasking:** The myth of doing two things at once dilutes our effort and hinders performance.
- **Complexity:** Unnecessary complexity in systems and processes creates decision fatigue and drains mental energy.

- **Negative self-talk:** Dwelling on "what ifs" and past mistakes consumes valuable attention and hinders forward progress.

Multitasking

"My mind is like an internet browser. 17 tabs are open, 4 of them are frozen, and I don't know where the music is coming from" is an incredibly appropriate, popular meme.

Whether working on several things at once or simply responding to email while sitting in a meeting, multitasking ensures that we are doing tasks at suboptimal performance levels.

When any portion of our attention span is required, multitasking is just *rapid task switching*, ensuring that we're never truly focused on the topic at hand. If your topics are important, then they deserve your best. And if they are not important, why are they occupying your attention at all? That might sound simple, but to a point, effective performance is exactly that simple.

Complexity

Complexity is another attention sink. We take a pending task, decision, or problem and surround it with complexity that draws us in far deeper than necessary. One example is the famous, or infamous, menu at The Cheesecake Factory, with over 250 items. Does anyone need 250 items to be able to find one, or several, selections that they would desire? How much more energy does it take to make a decision given so many options?

While the menu selection is inconsequential, there are plenty of work menus with just as much complexity, whether it involves our product portfolio, our pricing options, who to invite to a meeting, who needs to review the work before a decision, and so on. Reducing complexity makes engaging in important work less complex and has the added benefits of reducing cost and increasing quality.

Negative Self Talk

Other examples of attention sinks are negative self-talk and worrying. “What if” and “That could have been better” rattle around in your brain taking your attention away from many other things. Of course, ignoring these thoughts is often promoted as bad for your happiness. However, on a purely pragmatic level, they are using your brainpower to focus on the wrong things. Avoiding these attention sinks is a valuable pursuit, but simply processing them and discarding them quickly can be just as useful.

How to Manage Your Attention:

Reduce Complexity:

- **Embrace heuristics:** Develop “good enough” rules for routine decisions, freeing up attention for more strategic matters.
- **Delegate effectively:** Trust others to handle tasks you don’t need to do yourself, reclaiming your mental space.
- **Create focused zones:** Dedicate specific times and spaces for deep work, free from distractions.

Heuristics

One mechanism for managing complexity is through the effective use of heuristics. Heuristics, or rules of thumb, help to manage complex choices by defaulting to a “good enough” option. This allows our attention span to be focused on other decisions and actions. For example, returning to The Cheesecake Factory menu, if I’m at a dinner where I want to focus my attention on the conversation rather than the menu, I’ll find the first two things I’d be happy with and then let the server choose between the two. At work, whether in manufacturing or a restaurant kitchen, if you establish a first-in, first-out order management heuristic, then that decision is taken care of. It may not always be optimal, but it’s good enough, and you don’t have to spend a lot of time prioritizing and reprioritizing.

Delegate

Delegation is a more obvious option, but it's rarely done with this purpose. Usually, the unintended effect of delegation is not an increase in attention span but the opposite. Once a decision or project is delegated you worry about how it's being done or whether it is heading towards the right outcome, and if you need to re-engage.

When you delegate properly, you recognize that while whoever you delegate it to may not do it as well as you, they are likely to get a good enough answer, or the consequences of them not getting a good enough answer is relatively low.

The real tradeoff is that by not delegating some, or many, decisions, you will not get the more impactful decision correct. For example, if a Fire Department Chief on the scene is not paying attention to big decisions such as "Do we pull back?" or "Do I call in another crew?" because they're worried about where someone is pointing the hose, then this was a risky tradeoff of where their attention could be placed.

Focused Zones

Another mechanism for managing attention span is by creating different zones for different kinds of work. If you, and your team, are in a tactical execution mode all day every day, then where is there room for new thinking, or generating creative solutions? Do you have a 4-hour block of time that you can commit to analyzing an important decision and getting it right? If you have even one hiring decision to make, then I would argue that's exactly the kind of space you need to focus your attention span.

Prioritize Ruthlessly:

- **Not all priorities are equal:** Choose a handful of truly impactful decisions or problems to focus on deeply.
- **Leverage heuristics and delegation:** Don't be afraid to "good-enough" less critical tasks to free up attention for your priorities.
- **Focus on strategic impact:** Identify decisions unique to your expertise and with long-term consequences, deserving your deepest attention.

Conclusion:

Our attention is a finite and valuable resource, yet it's often the most neglected. By adopting a mindset of attention management, leaders can take control, filter out the noise, and focus on what truly matters. This empowers them to make impactful decisions, drive innovation, and thrive in an increasingly complex and demanding world. Don't let distractions manage you; start managing your attention today and unlock your full potential.