**“MINDFULNESS AND ATTENTION”**

Mindfulness helps leaders boost levels of attention, and create high engagement by being present.

Rasmus Hougaard

Jacob was a senior leader in a European financial services company. Like most of his counterparts, he was always ‘on’—connected to the office in one way or another, all day, every day. With his Smartphone and tablet, he was permanently tethered to the office. Day in, day out, he dealt with a steady stream of emails and an overloaded calendar of meetings. When he did have a free moment, he would often be interrupted by someone phoning with yet another urgent matter that needed his immediate attention. When I first met Jacob, he told me that he did not feel in control of his life. He felt like he was always trying to catch up, always overloaded with external forces—people and tasks—dictating his day-to-day reality. He felt he was living on autopilot without a clear sense of purpose and direction. Sounds familiar?

The reality Jacob told me about is the new normal. Leaders across the globe, and in most industries, are facing a work reality where they are under ‘pressure’, ‘always on’, ‘information overloaded’ and ‘distracted’. I call it the ‘paid’ reality.

Like many of us, Jacob longed for a greater sense of control. In our first meeting, he committed to undertake a four-month training program of ten minutes daily mindfulness training and a series of meetings to alter his working habits. It was a significant investment of time considering his already busy work schedule. After the four months had gone by, I asked Jacob what he had gained from the program. His answer:“one second.”

At first, his response took me by surprise. Four months of effort and daily training to gain only one second? That seemed like a meager return. But then he explained, “Previously, when something happened, I reacted automatically. Every time an email came in, I read it. Every time I received a text, I answered it. Whenever a thought or emotion popped into my head, I paid attention to it and allowed it to take my focus away from what I was doing. I was a victim of my own automatic reactions. The four months of training have given me a one-second mental gap between what happens and my own response. It feels like I am one second ahead, so that I can choose my response rather than being a victim of my automatic reactions. I cannot always control what happens in life, but I have developed the freedom to choose my response to it.”

Jacob’s story describes what thousands of busy executives and leaders experience every day. But one second? What can change in one second? Everything.

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One second is the difference between making a rushed decision leading to failure. It is the difference between acting out anger instead of applying due patience when under pressure. In our low-latency world, speed is a factor in any competition—sports, politics, and especially business. This is truer now than ever before. With today’s high-frequency trading, millions of dollars can change hands in a millisecond. That is one-tenth the time it takes to blink. As the speed of business approaches the speed of light, one second is the difference between performance and high performance. In short, one second is the difference between achieving desired results or not. And it is all in the mind.

**Leadership starts with the mind**Leadership is about achieving results-for the organization,for one’s people, or in one’s own life. And the birthplace of good results is the mind. Let us take a closer look at that: results come from performing certain actions. No good results come without some kind of action. Performing the right actions come down to making the right choices about what actions to perform. And making the right choices requires the ability to pay attention to the right things, at the right time, in the right way.

Our attention is the foundation for everything we want to achieve as a leader and in life in general. From this perspective, the ability to manage our mind becomes critically important. But managing our attention, as simple as it sounds, can be tricky. Try this, to get an experience of it right now.

Set a timer for 45 seconds

Focus your attention on one thought—an email, meeting, or something else

Focus your full attention on this one thing and nothing else

Do not pay attention to any other thoughts or sounds until the time is over

Were you able to maintain focus on one thing? If you are like most people, you likely experienced that during those brief 45 seconds, your mind wandered off to a variety of thoughts. Do not worry—you are perfectly normal. If you can relate to this experience, then you probably recognize that sometimes—or possibly often— your mind has a mind of its own. In other words, it can be difficult to control your mind and what you pay attention to. But if it is true that our mind is the forerunner of any desired result, and we are really not in control of our mind, there is a performance gap.

**Welcome to the attention economy**
Work-life has changed radically over the past few decades. We used to have working conditions where our attention could more easily focus on the task at hand. We are now experiencing distractions and information overload all the time. Our cell phones, tablets, emails, texts, and the likes place constant demands on our attention.

According to the former director of the Accenture Institute of Strategic Change, Tom Davenport, “Understanding and managing attention is now the single most important determinant of business success.” We are living in an ‘attention economy’ where the ability to manage our attention and the quality of our attention is key to our success as leaders. But in the ‘paid’ reality, where our ability to pay attention at will is under siege, we have a problem.

How big is this problem? Researchers studying the mind’s natural tendency to wander calculated that on average our mind wanders 46.9% of the time. In other words, while we are at work, 53.1 % of the time our mind is on task. The rest of the time it is off task. From a leadership perspective, there is a lot of potential to be developed here. Even just a small increase in ‘on task’ time could have a significant improvement in many aspects of leadership including productivity, leadership effectiveness, employee satisfaction, team work, and anything else that would benefit from more focused attention.

Attention-wandering is a natural neurological tendency. But in the Harvard Business Review article, Overloaded Circuits, Why Smart People Underperform, researcher Edward Hallowell outlines the fact that attention-wandering has increased drastically over the past few decades, due to the challenges of the ‘paid’ reality.

Attention is indeed a new variable of economy in business and certainly in leadership. McKinsey outlines why in the McKinsey Quarterly article ‘Recovering from information overload’: “… attention fragmentation hit CEOs and their colleagues in the C-suite particularly hard because senior executives so badly need to synthesize information from many different sources, reflect on its implications for the organization, apply judgment, make trade-offs, and arrive at good decisions.”

Traditionally, business productivity has been enhanced through time management, goal setting, prioritization skills, and general qualifications. Attention, in the ‘paid’ reality, is becoming a new foundational skill of leadership and business performance. Welcome to the attention economy.

But the big question is whether we as leaders, facing the ‘paid’ reality, are destined to experience attention-wandering with resulting underperformance? Are we destined to have minds that often wander, and lose focus?

Thankfully, the answer is no. Attention can be trained and strengthened. It is much like a muscle. We can enhance our attentiveness to the task at hand or people we are leading. Mindfulness is the method. And make no mistake; mindfulness is no touchy-feely, new-age concept. Based on thousands of years of development, mindfulness is a rigorous practice of enhancing focus and clarity of mind while opening the eyes to the potential in ourselves and the world. It is a practice of mental high performance, and in many ways a long-awaited answer to the challenges of today’s fast-paced and information overloaded leadership reality.

Training our mind is possible. Decades of research shows that our brains are changeable. It is called neuro plasticity. In short, the way we use our brain is the way we reshape it. Any action we do or thought we think is creating neural pathways in our brain, whereby it is easier to repeat. The brain is changing according to how we use it. This means we are not predefined by what we are now, but rather we are recreating ourselves by what we do now. This means that every moment we spend with a focused and clear mind, focus and clarity become traits of our brain. In the context of the attention economy, this means we are not destined to have a wandering mind. We can train ourselves and gain high levels of attention, focus, and clarity of mind, and thereby become better leaders of our own lives and the people we lead.

Mindfulness is about entering the attention economy, being one second ahead. Are you ready to get started?