

**Chapter 5**

**LOOKING AT FOCUS**

*Success...  
My nomination  
for the single most  
important ingredient  
is energy well directed.*

Louis B. Lundborg  
Former Chairman, Bank of America

## **WE GET WHAT WE FOCUS ON**

Where and how individuals and organizations focus their attention and energy dramatically impacts the results they achieve. Moreover, many of us are naturally distracted from focusing effectively or productively. The focus issue is a soft issue. It often *causes* many of the measurable hard issues we encounter in organizations. For this reason, a fundamental mindset issue that leadership must understand and address revolves around focus.

Let's look closer at our ability to focus. The human eye is indeed an amazing organ. When functioning properly, it can detect objects or movements within a full 180-degree periphery. Yet, for all we can see simultaneously, we can only clearly focus on one object at a time.

All day, every day, we continuously shift our focus from one thing to another depending upon what seems most interesting, important or threatening to us at each instant. If what we see is compelling enough, we direct our energies toward it. When we wish to channel our energies in a different direction, we shift our focus there. We look in the direction we want to walk, at a phrase we wish to read, at a piece of food we'd like to eat, or on a project we need to complete.

## **THE TWO SIDES OF ATTENTION**

Just as we direct and focus our eyes, we can choose where to direct our overall mental focus. We also can choose how we will interpret what we see, feel, hear, smell, taste, sense, or if we will pay attention at all. We can, for example, look right at something and not see it, such as when we are daydreaming or have our minds on something other than what is at hand. In addition, our enormous capacity for concentration allows us to focus on one thing to such a degree that everything else fades into oblivion. Thus, we are able to channel our energies into the most productive vein at any given moment.

Jerry Rice, prolific pass receiver for the Super Bowl Champion San Francisco 49ers, uses this ability to his benefit. He says that when he goes out for a pass all he thinks about is seeing the ball come into his hands. Once the ball is safely in his hands, all he sees is the goal line. Currently, he is on track to break virtually every NFL receiving record by a wide margin.

This ability to concentrate — to focus all of our physical and mental energy on one thing — is like a two-edged sword. Sometimes we get so caught up in paying attention to a distraction, real or imagined, that we don't focus on what really matters. Fixation is what psychologists call extreme cases of this concept.

Have you ever been driving down the road so mentally distracted that you missed your turn or didn't see a stoplight? Then, you know what we mean.

To see a different way this concept works, think back to the last time you bought a new car. Remember finally picking the exact make, model and color you wanted? Then what happened? Did it seem like you saw cars everywhere just like the one you bought? If so, the reason for this is simple. The other cars were out there all along, but you did not notice them. When the specific automobile type became fixed in your mind, your attention automatically was drawn to notice similar automobiles.

## **A MODEL FOR FOCUSING ENERGY**

This leads us to an important concept: We naturally become fixated on, attract more of or move towards that upon which we focus our attention. The power of a clear goal, for example, is that it provides a focal point for our attention and energy, thus helping us move towards it.

During a discussion of the focus issue, the comptroller for a company in Texas offered a practical observation: "When I was a kid, I would ride my bike to the swimming hole, and my attention would be focused on all the fun I was going to have and on seeing my friends. As I'd ride along and see a big rock on the path, I'd notice it and automatically see what I needed to do to

get around it and zip on down the road. My mind would be so focused on getting to the swimming hole and on the fun I would have there that the rocks along the way were not reasons I could not get there, just obstacles to address and get by.

“I remember once, I saw a rock in my path no larger than the others, but this time I stared at it and my front tire smacked right into it. I sprawled on the ground. My focus shifted from ‘getting to the swimming hole’ to the ‘rock on the path.’ Focusing on the obstacle stopped my progress towards my goal.”

While the analogy seems rather simple, so are the points we want to make. They are:

- (1) We tend to move *towards* what we focus our attention on.
- (2) When we focus our energy on the obstacles in our path, we spend time and energy dealing with those obstacles rather than on getting where we want to go.
- (3) When we are clearly focused on where we want to go, we do whatever we need to do to get there with minimal wasted energy.

In this book, we will use the following graphic as a model of the choices we have about where we can focus our attention and energy — a focus model, or model of choices. The words on each side of the model will change depending on the situation. For example, for the previous story about riding the bicycle to the swimming hole, the cyclist had a choice of focusing on where he wanted to go or on the obstacles in his path. The model of the choices would look like this:



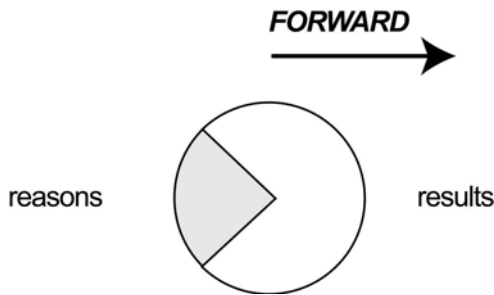
We have a choice. We can either focus our attention and energy on the obstacles in our path or on where we want to go. Only one of these choices leads us to where we want to go. We achieve or receive what we focus upon. The model suggests the desired focus is on the “Forward,” or right side.

To the extent we focus on the forward side of the focus model, we move closer to where we want to go. Creative Thinkers tend to focus most of their energy on “where we want to go” and get there much quicker as a result. Reactive Thinkers tend to focus more of their energy on the “obstacles” side of the model. To the extent we focus on the obstacles in our path, we are held back from getting to where we want to go.

*What situations can you think of in your organization in which people may be so focused on all of the problems that they may have lost sight of the original objective?*

*What situations can you think of in which people were so focused on what they wanted to achieve that they overcame any obstacles to achieve the goal?*

Often the most and best energy of an organization’s people gets so focused on the reasons why they cannot obtain the results they want that little energy is available for focusing on what needs to be done to achieve those results. The model of these choices is:



If our people are more focused on all the reasons why they cannot achieve goals, they are indeed likely to miss the mark. To the extent they are focused on the desired results and what needs to be done to achieve them, they will progress effectively toward those results.

Misdirected focusing goes on everyday to varying degrees in many organizations, and everyone from front-line employees to top executives contributes to this issue. Based on their conditioning, the default focus for the 80%ers/Reactive Thinkers in particular tends to be on the reasons they cannot achieve something.

Many of our people are unable or unwilling to make conscious choices about where they focus their attention. As leaders, we have an opportunity to refocus our people for their good as well as for the good of the organization.

Often people simply are not aware of the choices they have about the direction of their focus. In *Conflict Management . . . The Courage to Confront*, Richard J. Mayer explains it this way: “We each create our own separate reality. One way we do so is by selecting what we experience. We can effectively pay attention to only one thing at a time. So, we turn down the car radio when we look to find the number of the house we’ve never visited; we turn off the television while we memorize a poem. We cannot hold a conversation and read at the same time.

“We pick out what we choose to be aware of from an ocean of possibilities. If you are on the road and hungry, you see res-

restaurants and little else; if you break off the heel of your shoe, the shoe repair shop stands out and the rest of your surroundings (including the restaurants) fade into the background. If you perceive so-and-so to be untrustworthy, you notice only evidence that agrees with your perception. You somehow hear just your own name across a noisy room.

“We see what we want or desire to see, we choose what we are aware of — sometimes whether or not it’s there,” says Mayer.

Both individuals and organizations have a choice as to where energy or attention is directed. A person or an entire team can greatly impact results achieved by making conscious choices about where attention is focused. If we focus on what we want more of, positive results are increased, because selecting something to focus upon tends to draw more and more of it to us.

*Consider the most critical issues faced by your organization. Is the predominant focus on the objective and what needs to be done to achieve it, or is the focus on what’s wrong with the current status or all the reasons the team or organization cannot achieve the objective?*

*What benefits could you reap if the focus could be shifted so that more of the attention was on solutions?*

The vice president of sales for a medium-sized computer company in the Northeast had a difficult situation. His 250-person organization had been downsized twice during the last six months, and people were frustrated, upset and hostile. As a result, sales had decreased. He decided to have a national sales meeting and knew that success of this strategic meeting would be critical to the organization’s ability to turn the sales momentum around. For this reason, he took on the responsibility of kicking off the two-day session himself.

As he began the session, the tension was so great that it felt like the auditorium could explode at any moment from the hostility. During his one-hour opening session, however, something amazing happened. By totally focusing on the positive aspects of

the previous six months, he shifted the attitudes of the people so dramatically that at the end of his hour he received a standing ovation. At the next break, he heard appreciation from many people who were optimistic about their future. More importantly, the overall meeting was a rousing success and was crucial to the beginning of their turnaround.

There are focus choices to make every moment of every day. In each situation, we can choose between focusing on what is working and what we want more of, or we can concentrate our attention on analyzing what is not working, what we don't want — either way we get more of whatever we focus on.

## **WE ATTRACT WHAT WE TRY TO AVOID**

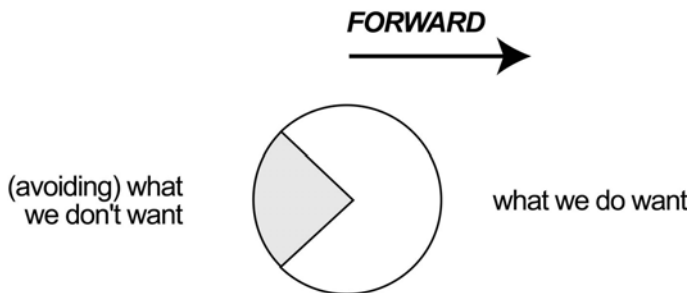
Another key issue with respect to focus concerns how much energy we put into avoiding a certain situation or problem. Just as focusing on what we want more of tends to draw us closer to it and bring more of it into our experience, the attention and energy we put into trying to avoid something tends to draw us closer to it as well.

We already saw this concept illustrated by the story of the boy riding his bike to the swimming hole. When he shifted his focus to “avoiding rocks,” he hit the rock he wanted to avoid and wrecked his bike. Here's another simple example of how this principle works. Take a moment to imagine a beautiful, sandy beach. Now, just for a few moments, do not think of that beautiful, sandy beach. Avoid thinking of the beautiful, sandy beach. What happened? Were you able to avoid thinking of the beach? Probably not.

By trying *not to* focus on something, which is the same as avoiding focusing on it, we actually focus all our attention in its direction. Thus, *avoiding* something doesn't work. If you were successful in not thinking of the beach, how did you do it? In all likelihood, you focused your mind on something entirely different than a beautiful, sandy beach. In other words, the only way we can change our focus from what we want to avoid is to replace it with something else we want to focus upon. You might

have focused on a car, on food, on a person — anything to *replace* the beach.

So, where is our attention focused when we are trying to avoid, for example, mistakes? Our attention is on the very mistakes we want to avoid! With our attention on mistakes, we are likely to make more of them. Avoiding doesn't work! If we want to minimize mistakes, we must focus on what we *do* want, not what we don't want. What we *want* is accuracy or effectiveness or whatever is the opposite of what we want to avoid. A generic focus model might be:

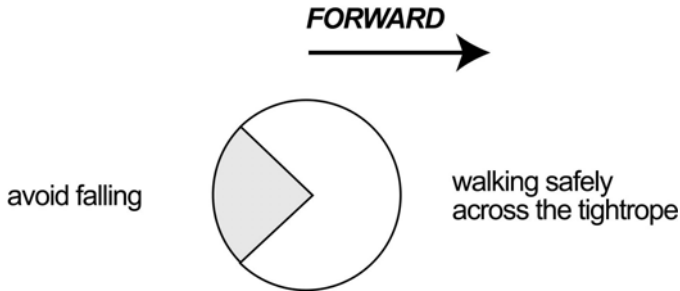


The model suggests the importance of focusing on what we do want, not what we don't want.

Warren Bennis and Bert Nanus explored this concept in depth in their *book Leaders: The Strategies for Taking Charge* through the story of Karl Wallenda. During April 1978, Karl Wallenda, the 73 year old patriarch of one of history's greatest tightrope walking families, was booked to do a series of breathtaking solo walks on a high wire stretched between two beachfront hotels in San Juan, Puerto Rico. As hundreds of spectators watched, the master began moving carefully on the 120-foot-high cable with the same dazzling dexterity he had shown thousands of times before. This time, however, halfway across the cable Wallenda suddenly lost his balance, plunged to the ground and was killed instantly.

As the media and his family later analyzed what had happened, one distinct trend surfaced — Wallenda was focusing on

what he wanted to avoid. The model of choices he had for where to focus his attention would look like this:

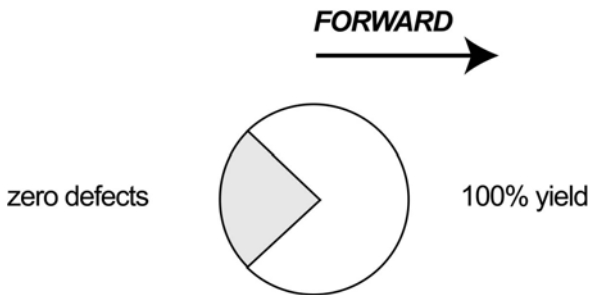


Karl’s widow explained: “All Karl thought about for three straight months prior [to the event] was *falling*. It was the first time he’d ever thought about that, and it seemed to me that he put all his energies into *not falling* rather than walking the tightrope.” Mrs. Wallenda added that he had even taken great pains to personally supervise installation of the guy wires holding the tightrope between the hotels, something “he had never even thought of doing before.” Where Wallenda had always been keenly intent on his goal — walking safely across the wire — his focus in this instance had shifted to not falling.

This story provides a tragic example of how negative focusing can pull us toward an outcome we’re trying to avoid. Some of us have been taught this principle as it relates to life and death situations in the world. For example, we know that if we focus upon oncoming car headlights when driving at night we may have a head-on collision, and if we look at objects, such as power lines, in our path when hang gliding or parachuting we are likely to fly right into them. Or, if we stare at the car beside us in traffic, we are likely to move towards it. We must shift our attention to where we *want* to go or what we *want* to create, not on what we want to avoid.

This principle applies equally well to what can become life and death situations in the corporate world. For example, where is our attention when we are focused on zero defects? When we

are focused on zero defects, we are focused on *defects*, and we are likely to have more of them. Our model of choices that suggests the appropriate direction for our focus would be:



The organizations that produce the highest quality are focused on seeing how close they can get to 100% yield in parts, assemblies, service, or whatever. They are not focused on zero defects. Of course, as they create better and better yield, they do indeed approach zero defects, but not by focusing on them.

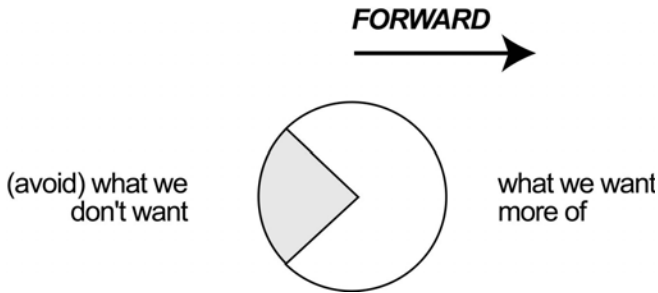
(*Note:* It is our experience that *some* short-term success can be achieved by focusing on zero defects *if* defects are very high. To achieve extraordinary long-term reduction in defects, however, requires a shift in focus to improving yield.)

An example of this was a manufacturing firm we worked with in New York. Management had tried various approaches to “reduce scrap” below 8% and had used charts that recorded their progress by plotting percentage of scrap. Over and over, they were frustrated in their attempts.

After beginning to manage the focus of their people and move it towards what they wanted more of, instead of what they didn’t want, management changed the parameters on the charts they were using. Instead of measuring percentage of scrap, they began measuring percentage of good parts (% yield) produced. When people’s focus shifted from what they *wanted more of*, instead of what they *did not want*, good parts were increased by 2% in only six weeks. This slight increase in yield translated

into a reduction in scrap of 25%! The only thing that changed was what they focused upon.

Another way of seeing this model of choices is:



So, rather than focusing on what we want to avoid, which obviously poses some hazards, we must learn to focus our attention in a more effective direction — on what we want more of or on our goal. In the approaching headlight example, we choose to focus on our side of the road. In the hang glider example, we focus on exactly where we want to fly or land. In traffic we focus on our own lane, in business we focus on our goals, our objectives, our mission, our vision of where we want to be. We need focus targets to move towards.

*When was your organization being distracted from its mission by trying to avoid something?*

*On the other side of the equation, what obstacles have you overcome recently by keeping focused on what you want to accomplish?*

Remember, however, that it is important to reset our focus continually. It is natural for day to day problems and other distractions to pull us off the desired focus. For example, an airline crew flying from New York to San Francisco continually checks the plane's position and resets its course. For only a small percentage of the trip is the plane actually right on course, but by keeping focused on the destination, it is a simple matter for the crew to check its position and correct the plane's course as

needed. By checking and correcting frequently, only minor adjustments are needed.

No matter what we are doing or where we are going, deviations from the desired course will occur. By staying focused on the objective, however, it is a simple matter to make corrections and do what is necessary to move closer to our goal.

## **PROBLEM VS. SOLUTIONS ORIENTATION**

At times, organizational problems loom so large that it seems almost impossible to focus on the solutions we want to achieve rather than on the problems themselves. Yet, the differences between the two approaches are dramatic.

A problem orientation:

- Puts a spotlight on what is not working — on what is wrong
- Looks for someone to blame
- Causes defensiveness
- Stifles creativity
- Causes more problems as attention is drawn to the problems that already exist
- Drains off valuable energy
- Keeps us stuck in boxes

Many organizations tend toward a problem orientation, because most individuals in them have a natural inclination to focus on what is wrong or on what is not working. This tendency goes all the way back to our early conditioning and our self-image. It gets us mired down in the problems themselves. Subsequently, the energy we use to focus on problems reduces the amount of energy available to apply to achieving the results we want or to creating the solutions we need.

*Think of what happens when someone has a personal problem that is distracting them. How does this affect their work performance?*

*When someone is distracted by a work related problem, how does this affect the energy they put into their job objectives? How does this affect the results they get?*

*What is this effect on people's performance costing your organization in wasted time? In productivity? In stress?*

When we center our attention on any problem, all of our energy gets focused on that problem. In the process, we may only see the problem and may neglect other things that need our attention. For one, we may be so mired in the problem we may miss seeing the solution.

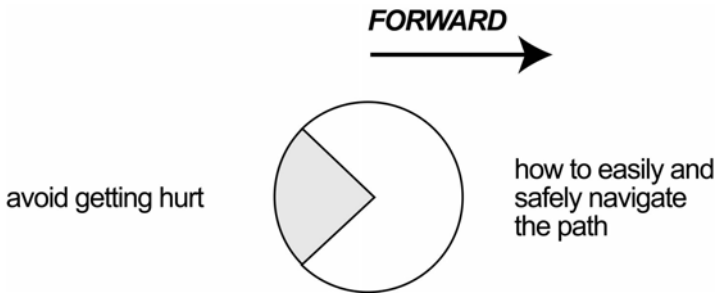
On the other hand, a solution orientation:

- Puts the spotlight on strengthening what is already working
- Develops openness and involvement
- Naturally moves us towards the goal it is focused upon
- Creates energy and enthusiasm
- Creates open communication and continuous renewal
- Develops the atmosphere best suited for generating creative solutions

Ed tells this account of an experience he had that highlights this point: “One day while we were working on this chapter, I went out jogging. I was thinking about how to best get these focus concepts across. My usual course takes me down a well-worn footpath by a stream. As I neared a particular segment of the path, I began to dread what was ahead. One short section of the path is covered with a thick layer of loose sand. It is difficult to run through, slows me down, creates the possibility of twisting an ankle, and forces me to break my stride. The thought of running on this part of the path always sapped my energy.

“This particular day, I was suddenly aware of my mindset around the issue and realized I could choose to look at it differently. I realized a more appropriate objective than to avoid getting hurt or slowing down might be to see how easily and safely I

could navigate this part of the path. Instead of focusing on all the problems with the sand, I knew I could focus on a new objective instead. As soon as I focused on this new objective, I noticed something. On the right edge of the path was an area where the sand was not as thick. Of the numerous times I had jogged this trail, I had never seen this before. I took this right edge route. It was easy, safe and didn't slow me down or break my stride — and I was energized by the discovery.



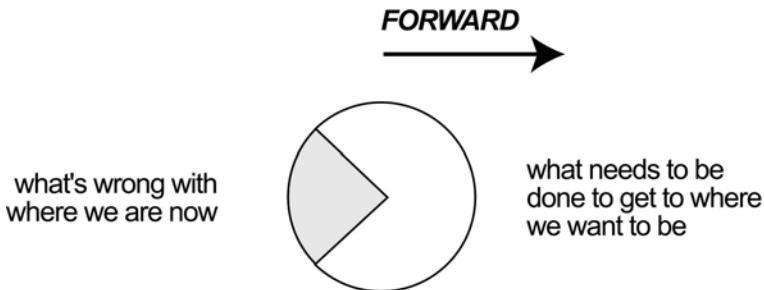
“In the past, I had been so mired in the problem of the sand that I could not see the seemingly obvious solution. By simply shifting my attention to the results I wanted, the solution appeared instantly.”

All of us run into sand traps on the road of life, but the successful people and organizations we encounter look upon these situations not as problems in which to get mired but as challenges or opportunities — things that need to be handled on the way to the end result. They keep their focus on the objective, and with this focus they are more easily able to come up with solutions to the problems they encounter. They certainly spend time looking at and understanding the problem. But they spend very little time on the problem itself. They quickly shift their attention to the solution side. This is a subtle, yet very strategic, difference in mindset.

Failure to understand the subtle distinction between focusing on *what is wrong with where we are* instead of on *what will it take to get to where we want to be* costs organizations dearly.

The losses show up in: poor quality, lower productivity, higher costs, increased stress levels, embittered relationships (often at times when cooperation is most essential), lowered levels of trust and cooperation, untimely loss of key people, and strained customer relations — all of which show up on the bottom line as lost profits.

It is important to note that the fundamental focus principle is not about ignoring problems or pretending they do not exist. It is about dealing with problems as they arise without letting them bog us down. It is about staying focused on what we want to achieve. It is the difference between looking at *what is wrong with where we are now* (energy focused on the past) and looking at *what needs to be done to get to where we want to be* (energy focused on creating the future from where we are now). This subtle shift in focus puts most of our energy into finding solutions instead of into getting mired in the problem. The model of the choices would be:



*How much more effective would your organization be if more of your people approached their work by focusing on the desired results consistently rather than focusing on the problems or reasons they cannot achieve the result?*

*Where in your organization could you have the most immediate impact by shifting where your people are focusing their attention?*

*What would be the benefits to your team when the shift is made? To the organization as a whole? For you personally?*

*What is one thing you could do today to begin causing that shift to take place?*

Internalizing this focus concept is essential to making the mindset shift required to become a continually renewing person or organization. Enlightened Leaders understand that this is a subtle but significant shift and that it is critical to moving people beyond their resistance. It also may be vital to your organization's very survival and success. The next chapter will provide a framework for creating this critical mindset shift.

*In what ways do you already support your people in staying focused on the desired results?*

*Knowing that our culture tends to pull us into the problem orientation, what can you do to get your people back on the solutions-orientation track?*

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**Change-Friendly Highlights**

- (1) How and where individuals and organizations focus their attention dramatically impacts the results they achieve.
- (2) A person or team has a great deal of choice about where they focus their attention.
- (3) How and where we focus also determines what we will attract more of. The amount of energy we focus on problems reduces the energy available to create the desired solutions.
- (4) The attention and energy we put into trying to avoid something frequently draws us closer to what we are trying to avoid.
- (5) The distinction between focusing on *what's wrong with where we are* and *what will it take to get to where we want to be* can be astounding in its impact on our ability to achieve an objective.
- (6) A primary role of leadership is to manage where our people's energy and attention are focused.

*It is  
a process  
of diverting  
one's scattered forces  
into one powerful channel.*

James Allen