

# THE INCREDIBLE LIGHTNESS OF BEING FOCUSED



The 80/20 rule applies to careers: our most significant accomplishments result from just a few decisions or actions. How to stay focused on the essential.

After practically every championship game, the athletes on the winning team attribute their success to "being focused." They talk about "getting priorities straight," "eliminating distractions," and "putting extraneous things out of mind."

At moments like these it's obvious that accomplishment simply requires defining the essence of the task and then doing it the best you can. The task itself teaches you the best way to perform it.

Now, does it seem possible that you could go about your work following this simple principle? Let's take a moment and see how you might do it.

What first comes to mind is the need to turn your back on all those distractions that creep into your days. It's the question of being focused, not in the sense of concentrating intensely, but more in the sense of keeping your attention on the most important thing.

Sometimes it's as easy as not acting on the thought, "I'd better check my email" or "I wonder if my boss has left me a voice mail." How much of what we feverishly respond to seems to take care of itself with a bit of benign neglect. It's amazing how many questions, issues, and requests take care of themselves if left alone overnight.

Perhaps, you say, it was easier to concentrate on what's truly essential before the advent of 7/24 communication. But I ask you: Is that capacity there to serve us, or are we meant to serve it?

We also waste our own time and that of others by holding unnecessary meetings, by waiting for others who habitually come to conference calls late, or by forgetting to prepare. These wasteful habits can be much easier to fix than most of us assume. Just by asking yourself the question, "Am I working effectively right now?" you will begin to see chance after chance to work more effortlessly. As you change, people around you will also change. And pretty soon your work group will begin to have more fun and get more satisfaction from their accomplishments. And from these feelings, people can affect the behavior of others, even of the most hard-bitten managers.

In the face of the essential, the trivial has little relevance. By focusing on the vital, you will stop paying attention to the inconsequential.

Then there is knowing the essence of your job. It's like the story of the dishwasher who was asked by an efficiency expert what he did. The man replied, "Well when I first took this job I thought it was to clean the all those dishes that were passed from the dining room. But you know, one day I realized that my job wasn't actually about washing dishes. It was about making sure that the kitchen was able to serve the right food on the right plate at the right time."

At that moment of insight he went from being just a dishwasher, the least respected job in the kitchen, to seeing that a Dishwasher was essential to the success of the entire food-service operation.

Now whom would you rather have working for you, someone who saw only the activity associated with his or her job, or someone like the dishwasher who could understand the vital aspects of the assignment and describe them clearly?

Yet, have you ever taken time to reflect on the essential nature of your own work? At first, it can be hard to put this essence into words. People commonly cite the activities that seem intrinsic to the required duties. In other words they examine the surface of things rather than seeing the essentials.

Just today, during a conference call, someone commented on how smoothly our work for a particular client was going even though there was a lot happening. Someone else immediately said, "It's going more smoothly because you're now seeing the link between what the client is doing and results they're getting. Until a few weeks ago, you weren't seeing this link. But once you began to make this explicit, you began having revelation after revelation about how to work more effectively with them. This is not only giving you more satisfaction but also showing you what you can do differently to be even more effective."

Perhaps the hardest thing about becoming focused is allowing the job to teach you what is required to do it well. It's hard because it takes a lot of humility to be able to say, "I really don't know." After all, most of us assume that we have been hired for our "job" because someone thinks we already have the knowledge and experience to fulfill its requirements.

There is a scene in the movie, *The Karate Kid*, where the teacher, Mr. Miyagi, teaches the Kid how to polish a car. The lesson is that even a seemingly mundane task, taking almost no mental energy, still requires technique, the term Plato used to describe what is essential about every task no matter how mundane.

But the deeper point is that mastering even the smallest part of the job is possible only if we are willing to look in the direction of "not knowing" rather than assuming that we know it all.

Children are naturally curious and exploratory. Have you ever heard a child make a profound observation that touches on the very core of what you are doing at that moment? Well, adopting that perspective is really all it takes – and that should be reassuring since all of us were once children and looked at the world from that perspective!

One last point: as we take this journey, sooner or later it occurs to us that something like the 80/20 rule applies to our work, just as it does to almost everything else in business life. To understand what I mean, just take a look backwards at your own career. Didn't your most significant accomplishments result from just a few decisions or actions?

It is as if life is playing a cosmic joke on us, giving us the best it has to offer for the least effort, not the most.

So starting today, why not ask yourself what you could be doing that is most likely to accomplish the desired results and do exactly that! Yes, it can be frightening at first, but fear is just a thought and we have the power not to dwell on negativity or give it undue attention.

As this habit takes hold, you will begin to realize how little effort it can take to produce the desired result. When this began happening to me, I was amazed by how much time I had on my hands. I went from feeling as though I would never, ever complete my "to-do" list to not even needing the list. I found myself working through the day with no more effort than just waiting for something obvious to pop into my head, something that would help me achieve the result I wanted. Then I simply did it. The only guidepost needed was to be mindful of the intended outcome, in other words, what was essential today.

I also began to realize how much extra, needless work our team could add to the simplest task. This habit was so deeply ingrained that none of us could see it. But as we began to ask questions like "What are we trying to accomplish?" or "Isn't there an easier way to do this?" the extraneous effort vanished. In a short time our team's productivity shot way up. Our conference calls went from taking longer than an hour to often taking 10 to 15 minutes or less. And face-to-face sessions went from all-day affairs to a half day or less.

Staying focused, being a willing student, and doing only what is essential permits us not only to accomplish far more than we dreamed possible but also to enjoy feelings of lightness and joy at work.

For more information email [Partners@AccompliGroup.com](mailto:Partners@AccompliGroup.com)