

KNOW AND FEEL THE POWER OF LASER FOCUS

If you follow every dream, you might get lost.

—Neil Young, “The Painter,” from the album *Prairie Wind*

Understand that it’s the compelling goal—the vision—that creates the drive, not the other way around. People don’t normally drive super-fast when they can’t see where they’re going. Speeding in heavy fog is foolish.

—Steve Pavlina, “Graduating College in Three Semesters,” at StevePavlina.com

In a Nutshell

What does it mean to be focused like a laser beam? Laser-focused leaders use methods that improve their clarity, thinking, and results. Both individuals and organizations can be focused, and the two are linked. Focused leaders often manage focused groups.

Here are six indicators of organizational focus: shared perspective, universally understood drumbeat, relevance of tasks, organization alignment, self-correction, and results. It is critical to know whether you are focused and in what ways you or your organization could benefit from improvements.



Is focus something that happens only for a moment, or is it an overall way of being? Can both individuals and groups achieve focus? Can you be overwhelmed and focused at the same time? The answers to all three questions are both “yes” and “it depends.” You can experience a moment of laser focus, a precious time where all philosophical planets align to produce mental clarity and resolve. Many of the techniques offered in this book will help you create that kind of intense but momentary focus, but that is not its main purpose. Its main purpose is to maximize long-term performance and satisfaction, for which steady and continuous improvement of focus is best.

Individuals focus and, together, the organization focuses. Contrary to what some senior executives may believe, no company can achieve focus unless each leader and team executes with clarity and velocity. Leaders need to ensure that they focus on what matters most. Scattered and discombobulated leaders cause havoc and confusion. Unfocused leaders manage unfocused teams. Within an organization, there may be many pockets of high and low performance and high and low focus. To succeed, you must be a focused leader with a focused team that produces outstanding results together. You should also serve as a catalyst to improve focus within the company.

You can be simultaneously overwhelmed and focused, but only for a short time. When leaders operate in a state of overwhelm, they respond to urgent tasks first and may not get beyond them. Feeling overwhelmed is perhaps the most debilitating condition a leader can suffer. A vicious cycle of procrastination and reactive fire fighting instead of proactive leadership makes the problem worse and worse. Departments, divisions, and even entire companies can suffer when leaders operate in overwhelm. Results are late, incomplete, and inadequate. Stress and frustration shroud the department like a dense wet fog. Haplessly overwhelmed leaders are often fired. The bottom line is that leaders must overcome overwhelm in order to focus and succeed.

On the other hand, being overwhelmed can be good. A temporary state of overwhelm, for example, one brought on by a sud-

den breakthrough, is not cause for alarm and may be wonderfully energizing. If feelings of overwhelm continue for more than two weeks, something needs to be done to improve focus. For example, the Acme Company wants to grow and has pitched long-term proposals to several large clients. If any one of these contracts comes through, it will be a significant gain in business. Acme did such a great job pitching the benefits of its products and services that two companies agreed to sign on for long-term contracts. One of them wants giant anvils and the other wants pianos, both suitable for dropping on unsuspecting roadrunners along remote desert paths. This is great news and in an instant, the company, leaders, and all the employees are overwhelmed. The excitement and pride will enable Acme to get by for a short time, but these changes call for realignment and a reprioritization of what's important. Acme's leaders need to determine how to focus and meet the needs of their growing business. If they don't, employees will begin to burn out and their productivity will fall at the very time it needs to rise.

Key Point: Laser focus is a practice. Leaders can improve focus over time by practicing effective methods that support clarity and results.

Leaders need to know what laser focus looks and feels like. The first and most obvious sign of focus is that everyone knows what's important. Having everyone on board is critical. In most organizations, some people are clear about priorities, but many people feel left out and clueless about what they should be doing and how their work supports the company's priorities. Disconnects can occur between senior and middle management, middle and frontline management, and frontline management and individuals. Some functions are clear while others work from their own sheet music. Why do these gaps in clarity and agreement occur? How and to whom you communicate makes a big difference. The quality of relationships also has an impact on communication. You are likely to communicate more frequently and more clearly with people you

like than those you dislike. To achieve laser focus, everyone must understand what's most important. This includes the overall mission, short-term and long-term goals, and priorities.

Key Point: Laser focus = Universally shared vision of what's important.

The second indicator of laser focus is a consistent and shared drumbeat that reverberates throughout the organization. The drumbeat is the speed at which work is or should be flowing. The cadence. The rhythm. The pace of the organization. You might find agreement about what's most important but vastly different interpretations about when it needs to get done. Drumbeat differences can cause finger-pointing, resentment, stress, pressure, and worse. Your team members don't want to be the group that others look down upon nor do they want to feel like the only ones working hard to meet deadlines. Peer leaders often disagree about drumbeat and this is deadly to the organization. Think about a high school dance. As each song changes, dancers adjust their movements to match the drumbeat. People have their own style of dance, but everyone dances to the beat. The same should occur in your organization. The drumbeat might need to change from time to time, but the organization should keep pace and adjust as needed. Some companies will see seasonal differences in the drumbeat.

To achieve laser focus, everyone should be clear about the pace of work needed to produce results. If you get out of synch with the rhythm of the organization, it feels odd, off, and uncomfortable. By contrast, when you are dancing in step with music, it is fun; things feel right. Here's a real example: Along an obscure side street next to a railroad yard on the south side of Seattle, there was once a small Amazon.com distribution center. The shelves of books, videos, and music were emptied and stocked twenty-four hours a day. In the corner of the main open space, hung high on the wall, was a traffic light. The red, yellow, and green light let everyone know how many orders needed to be processed. The green light told people that things were humming along just fine. The yellow

light indicated that the orders were starting to back up too much and the red light warned that the plant was in the weeds. The drumbeat changed depending on the color of the traffic light. Supervisors would drop what they were doing to help get shipments processed if the backlog got too large. People revved up and chilled out together like disco dancers. In addition to regular variances, the drumbeat increased during the holiday buying season when all Amazon.com hands packed as many gifts as the people and machines could move.

Key Point: Laser focus = The desired drumbeat is clear and everyone moves in synch with this pace.

The third indicator of laser focus is determined by how people spend their time. To achieve focus, people should be spending time on relevant tasks. This is much more difficult than it sounds because the ways in which leaders define relevance are often cloudy. Many leaders would consider any directionally correct task relevant. This leads to watered-down performance and suboptimization of resources. To achieve laser focus, definitions of relevance need to be narrow.

When you define success, you define relevance, although you might not realize it at the time. If success means doing good work, then any task that is considered good could also be considered relevant. Unfortunately, good tasks are far too numerous for all to be done, so using goodness as a filter is not helpful. How do you ensure that you are doing only those tasks that will make the greatest possible difference? You need to change your definition of success to reflect a higher threshold for relevance. For example, imagine that Sally works for you and she supports several projects. If you defined Sally's success as supporting projects, she could do any task that loosely supports any project and her work would be relevant. What if you changed your definition of success for Sally to *enabling the success of the organization by supporting projects in a way that optimizes their timely completion and success*? Would any task that supports a project be relevant now? No. To achieve laser focus, leaders need to

take care when defining success and then ensure people are spending their time in ways that best support the organization's goals.

Key Point: Laser focus = People are spending time on relevant work.

Organization alignment is the fourth indicator of focus. Alignment means that each element of the organization is designed to support the most important company goals. In other words, are you set up for success? Often the answer is emphatically no! As goals and conditions change, you may need to realign the organization to maintain focus. It is difficult to do great work when you regularly fight to make internal processes or systems function at all. The more aligned the organization, the easier it will be for people to do their best work. Poor alignment soaks up physical and mental energy and adds hassle to the workplace. Hassle, rework, inefficiencies, and sluggish progress are all common symptoms of inadequate alignment. The best way to de-hassle the organization and improve efficiencies is to realign it. To align the organization, look at and adjust the following elements if needed: structure, roles, culture, processes, practices, goals, metrics, communication, decision-making processes, technology and systems, workflow, skills, and management practices. Ensure that every organizational element is set up to support what's most important.

Key Point: Laser focus = The organization is aligned.

Laser-focused organizations are self-correcting. This fifth indicator of laser focus relies on the health of the work environment. In a self-correcting organization, employees catch problems before they become large and gnarly. Leaders use lively banter to evaluate opportunities as soon as they emerge. Teams see, discuss, and learn from failures. The only way an organization can maintain focus is by creating an environment where all employees are engaged and help the organization to quickly respond to and learn from changes. Leaders who appreciate and model candid communication will

have more responsive teams. You can get a sense for whether your organization is self-correcting by answering the following questions:

- How often is the organization blindsided by problems?
- When a failure or problem occurs, how quickly do you hear about it?
- Does your team see and communicate potential problems before they occur?

Your organization's ability to self-correct will enable it to spend less time reacting and more time working on relevant tasks. Increasing engagement and tuned dialogue will improve your team's motivation and ability to self-correct.

Key Point: Laser focus = The organization is self-correcting.

The sixth indicator of laser focus is results. Focus facilitates and enables success and allows the organization to accomplish its most important goals. Not all results come as a result of focus, however. Companies can get results by doing things the hard way. They can succeed in the short term by driving people beyond their comfort zone. Some leaders get the job done through coercion and pressure. You do not need to focus like a laser beam to achieve results. Remember the Acme Company? Its managers could meet the demand of two new large clients without refocusing their efforts—and given the historical success rate of the company's products, that's probably the pattern they'll choose to follow. The costs of doing this will be high, but it is possible. Results obtained in spite of focus stress the organization and may not last. Who wants to work for this kind of organization? If you run your company and people into the ground, you will suffer high turnover and low morale. This makes every bit of success harder and less pleasant.

Focus is necessary if you want success that does not kill the organization along the way. When you focus like a laser beam you achieve results in a way that makes employees want to stay and contribute. Work is more meaningful and fun. People feel pride in

the part they play to support the company's success. Inside the organization there's pride, ownership, and passion that can be felt and seen by customers and competitors.

Key Point: Laser focus = Excellent results with few casualties.

Those are the six indicators of laser focus. How is your organization doing? How focused are you? These indicators should show you why focus is a long-term endeavor and practice. Leaders do many things that affect their and their organization's ability to focus. If you feel like you need help becoming more focused, you are not alone. In a survey of 130 professionals, 87 percent said that focus was very important and 64 percent said it was difficult to achieve. Only 15 percent reported that their department focused well, and 22 percent said their company was focused. And only 15 percent said they were meeting or beating their goals. These professionals said that multiple distractions (a problem of relevance and alignment), too many things to do (a problem of relevance and alignment), and competing or conflicting priorities (a problem of alignment and sharing what's important) were the biggest obstacles to focus.

Obtaining and maintaining focus is not easy. The rest of the book zeros in on methods that will help you improve clarity and results. Focusing is intentional. You cannot just try harder and expect to achieve laser focus. In fact, work should be easier and more fluid. When you choose to focus—really focus—like a laser beam focus—you are releasing a powerful force into the organization. That's right, a force. When the right work flows well, the environment feels different. The positive energy is palpable. You can feel it, and your employees will too.

In the Real World

The six indicators of laser focus can help you determine where improvements are needed. This section offers a chart, a worksheet, and a story to further illustrate these points.

How This Book Addresses the Six Indicators of Focus

As mentioned in the Introduction, this book is organized around three qualities of laser beams and offers ten techniques. You can use these ten techniques to strengthen the indicators of focus. Here's how the ten techniques relate to the six indicators. Each "X" flags a direct link between the technique and building the indicator of focus.

| | <i>What's Important Is Shared</i> | <i>Drumbeat Clear</i> | <i>Relevance</i> | <i>Alignment</i> | <i>Self- Correction</i> | <i>Results</i> |
|--|---|---------------------------|------------------|------------------|-----------------------------|----------------|
| Know and feel the power of laser focus | X | X | X | X | X | X |
| Pump energy into the work environment | X | X | X | | X | X |
| Make work personal | X | | X | | X | X |
| Relax to energize | | | X | | X | X |
| Turn meetings into focus sessions | X | X | X | X | X | X |
| Invite a challenge | | | X | X | X | X |
| Huddle | X | X | X | | X | X |
| Stop multitasking, start chunking | X | | X | | | X |
| Do one great thing | X | X | X | | X | X |
| Let go | X | | X | X | | X |

Focus Assessment

Take this worksheet to your next staff meeting. Ask the participants how they would assess the organization’s focus and suggest the results be used to map needed improvements.

| <i>Indicators of Organizational Focus</i> | <i>Needs Improvement</i> | <i>Good</i> | <i>Strength</i> |
|---|--------------------------|-------------|-----------------|
| The mission, goals, and top priorities are known and understood by all employees. | | | |
| The desired drumbeat is clear. The desired pace, speed of work, and sense of urgency is known and shared. | | | |
| People are spending time on relevant work (that is, on tasks that support what’s most important). | | | |
| The organization is aligned. We are set up for success. Our structure, roles, systems, and processes optimally support our goals. | | | |
| The organization is self-correcting. Problems are caught quickly and failures don’t often blindside us. | | | |
| We achieve great results without overstressing the organization. | | | |

From the CEO’s Perspective

Ken Thrasher is the CEO at Compli, an Oregon-based company that provides compliance management systems. He answered a few questions about focus:

Q: How do you know when you are focused?

A: When the team is aligned around a common set of goals and objectives that have measurable results in a time line that is reasonable and you are tracking progress against them. The key

word is *alignment*, where teamwork results in all members of the team rowing in the same direction. The focus needs to come from the board and senior management where people understand their role clearly in the mission of the organization.

Q: How can you tell whether employees are focused?

A: I read body language and observe people. I can tell by how they react and act. For example, I sometimes see people camping—getting into little groups—and this is a signal there might be a problem or some dysfunction. We need to address those situations quickly or relationships become strained. Deal with it right away. You have to get out to see what's happening. I don't use it to micromanage the organization. I communicate openly with my managers and ensure that people are not surprised to see me as I MBWA [manage by wandering around].

Q: To what degree do you believe how people feel about their work affects focus?

A: How people feel impacts focus 100 percent. Our business is built on relationships and knowing our customers. We need to create a positive service orientation and help people with finding solutions that build customer satisfaction and loyalty. I want people to feel comfortable raising their hands if they need help.

Q: In your experience, what can a leader do to energize the work environment?

A: It starts with leadership, setting the right environment where employees feel they have a voice in the organization, dealing with environmental issues, and taking time to recognize employees' efforts and do things that are fun. Energy determines output. If employees do not have balance, they cannot do their best work. They are not mentally with you, so focus cannot be achieved. This is critical for senior leaders, too. If anything is out of balance, you cannot manage effectively. A couple of years ago, I discovered I was out of balance physically and spiritually. I

started exercising and such, and I felt better in all areas and am a more effective leader.

Q: How much of a challenge is it to ensure that you are spending your time in ways that will benefit the business the most? What techniques or practices help you decide how to spend your time?

A: I'm a big believer in goal setting and being sure I accomplish what I set out to each day. It all has to relate to the strategic plan and what the business is trying to accomplish. I generally determine the day before what I want to accomplish the next day, and make sure things I don't necessarily like to do but must do are on the list. Too often those things that people don't like to do end up on the bottom of the to-do list and never get taken care of, which often leads to dysfunctions in the organization.

Q: Describe how a highly focused day looks and feels.

A: I start by reviewing my goals for the day and make sure they are scheduled around other activities I need to accomplish. I try to get out and talk to a few people in the organization to see how things are going, keep a finger on the pulse of the organization. I step back and think about what we may be missing, how are we doing against our goals, are there weak spots in our plan. Always be prepared for the unexpected, a customer that may be having issues, an employee with personal or business problems that wants to talk to me, or a shareholder that calls with questions. This is where customer service (employee, customer, shareholder) gets differentiated, the ability to respond effectively. When I am focused, I feel accomplishment, clarity, and alignment.

Q: In your organization, what are the greatest barriers to focus?

A: People operating in departmental silos without alignment and understanding what's important for the business. This often costs the organization time, rework, and cost. A previous organization I worked for was big into process analysis and understand-

ing who our customer is, both externally and internally. ECRS was an acronym for eliminate, combine, rearrange, and simplify, and we always first looked at elimination to be sure whatever we were doing added value. The lack of focus often results in doing things with little or no value, or even creating unnecessary costs. This requires constant communication to be effective.

