

Book review

Focus

The hidden driver of excellence

Category: Book Reviews / Self-help

Author: Daniel Goleman

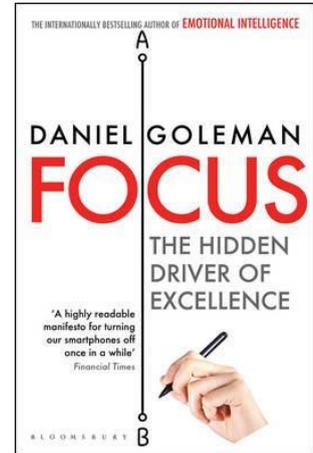
Year: 2014

Publisher: Bloomsbury Publishing, UK

ISBN: 9781408845882

Audience: Supporting Myself

Summary: Goleman dives into the science on attention and mindfulness



Being a practitioner of mindfulness (personally and professionally) I was looking forward to reading Daniel Goleman's book to gain further insights into its application and effectiveness.

While I finished the book with a tinge of disappointment, this was due I believe to my initial misreading of the audience the book targets. *Focus* is essentially about business and leadership psychology, which incorporates the more recent research findings on mindfulness and its effective use within organisations. At least it ends up with this focus.

Bottom-up and top-down circuitry

Goleman starts by comparing the neuroscience that has helped to differentiate the bottom-up (our more automatic and reactive processes, e.g. fight-flight) and top-down circuitry (reasoning and decision-making processes, e.g. deliberation and planning) of our brain.

He uses this differentiation throughout the book to highlight research that further confirms the effectiveness of being able to combine the gut 'I' and the rational 'me' for more effective action and behaviour.

I could go through the different brain areas that he identifies as producing our different types of awareness (of our own body, others and the world around us) but suffice to say that the prefrontal cortex is vital to integrating many of these various functions into meaningful and purpose-driven action.

Mindfulness as an activator

This is where mindfulness comes in. Research shows mindfulness activates crucial areas of this part of the brain and helps to create new and enhanced neural connections with a variety of other areas of the brain.

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Goleman talks about the tripod of awareness; inner, other and outer, and he cites numerous examples of research that confirm the positive impacts of mindfulness on all of these at a time when many of us live in a culture of information overload.

Goleman's key point is that in this world of social media and rapid technological change we struggle to focus appropriately on the things that make a difference in our own lives and those around us. He calls it a poverty of attention because for him our current focus becomes our reality.

Enjoyable mindfulness discussion

I particularly enjoyed his discussion on teaching mindfulness skills to children, even pre-schoolers, through programmes and activities like breathing buddies, peace corners, traffic light imaging and social and emotional learning.

Research shows disadvantaged kids who learn to self-regulate their emotions learn better and go on to attain similar earnings and health outcomes as those from higher socio-economic groups (these latest findings coming from our very own Dunedin Multidisciplinary study).

In summary, *Focus* was an interesting read and while my interests lie in the application of focused attending and a more open awareness toward experience, Goleman did cover this but not in the depth I personally would have liked.

However, his application to the business world is still extremely relevant and the insights he offers, while not groundbreaking, make sense because of the importance of self-awareness to how we relate to others and the world around us.

Review by Dr Brian Tuck, Programme Coordinator, Mental Health, Whanganui UCOL

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