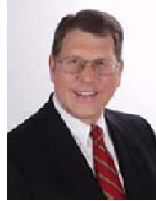# Intention and Attention

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Leaders, teams and organizations often set out with wonderful intentions to make needed improvements and take their performance to the next level. However, how they communicate intentions and what they pay attention to often gets in the way of achieving desired results. When this happens, we hear comments like: "they took their eyes off the ball," "they lost focus," or "they had poor execution."

 Intention is defined as the act of determining some action or result; the end or object intended; or purpose. On the other hand, attention is the act of attending, especially by directing the mind to an object; a concentration of the mind on an object or thought; or observant care or consideration.

 When several individuals, teams and layers of management are involved, a lot can get lost in the translation of what we intend to do, and what we need to pay attention to. Some leaders unintentionally encourage and reinforce average or below average performance, while others intentionally support and sustain high performance. What do they do differently?

 What we focus on is what we get

 Where and how leaders focus their personal attention and the attention of their organization can dramatically impact the results they achieve. When we focus our attention on where we want to go, our energy follows that focus, and we increase the likelihood that we will achieve what we set out to accomplish. However, if we focus too much on all the obstacles in our way, we can get bogged down, become distracted and discouraged, and hold ourselves back.

 What a leader or a leadership team chooses to focus on sets the tone for the entire organization. Often, leaders are not aware of what they are paying attention to, how they are coming across to the organization, or how they are affecting attitudes and performance.

As an example, two leaders in different companies were faced with the challenge of becoming more profitable. One leader engaged his key people in identifying areas that needed improvement, setting clear stretch goals, and organizing problem-solving teams. This leader expected and encouraged the teams to be well prepared, focused on their goals, and energized by the challenge. The teams engaged in open dialogue, challenged the status quo, and were willing to try new problem-solving methods to help them achieve breakthroughs. They identified hundreds of thousands of dollars in first year cost savings, and were justifiably proud of their achievements.

The other leader was cautious about setting stretch goals, and wanted to allow a margin for error in case the organization was not successful. There was a lot of discussion about how unique their situation was, how complex their business was, and how technical their problems were. The problem-solving teams were reluctant to set stretch improvement goals, and agreed on incremental improvement goals instead. Discussions focused primarily on what had already been tried before. They were not as willing to try new

problem-solving methods, preferring to stay with methods they were already familiar with. Rather than explore new approaches to old problems, the teams tended to get bogged down in detailed analyses and justifications. Although their opportunities for improvement were much greater than those of the other company, they were moderately successful, and their identified first year cost savings were only in the tens of thousands.

Looking back, each leader brought a different perspective to the situation. One had clear intentions and effectively role modeled what the teams needed to pay attention to. The other leader waffled on the goals, was impatient and critical, and focused more on the complexity of the situation and what had already been tried before rather than on the goal and the challenge. Both companies used the same process, but each achieved much different results. The important question is: what happens in your organization? Do you tend to focus more on what you want to achieve, and what you must do to overcome obstacles and achieve the goal? Or, do you pay so much attention to rehashing problems and discussing the reasons why you can't do something that you lose focus, energy, enthusiasm and creativity? What we focus on is what we get!

Another common mistake is focusing on what we don't want instead of what we want. For example, the idea of zero defects has been around for decades, and it is still goal that many organizations strive for. It seems perfectly logical to keep reducing defects until you reach zero defects. However, research shows that reducing defects is helpful when an organization is just getting started in making improvements. High performing organizations shift their focus on improving yield to achieve and sustain improvements. Why? Zero defects focuses attention more on what we don't want (defects) instead of what we want (100% yield). In effect, zero defects focuses more attention and energy on what we are trying to avoid than on what we want more of.

Align your Intentions and Attention

It is important that leaders be observant and aware of the dynamics that are taking place within themselves, their teams and their organizations regarding their intentions and where they focus their attention. It is helpful for leaders to supplement their personal observations by continuously seeking and obtaining honest feedback. With more perspective about where their focus is, leaders can better align their intentions and attention, and influence higher performance.

If you focus too much on problems, the emphasis is on what is not working, and what is wrong. People tend to blame and criticize more, have less energy and enthusiasm, and be less creative. With a more balanced focus on solutions, the spotlight is more on what is working, what is right, and what is possible. People feel encouraged to be more open, and less defensive. They tend to have more energy, enthusiasm and creativity in tackling challenges and solving problems. The next time you and your team are stuck, and struggling to make progress, ask where your focus is:

- On where you want to go, or on the obstacles in your path?
- On the results you want to accomplish, or on the reasons you cannot achieve them?
- On what you want, or on avoiding what you don't want?
- On what needs to be done to get where we want to be (solutions), or on what's wrong with where we are now (problems)?

When our intentions are clear and inspiring, and we align our attention with our intentions, we can influence higher levels of performance and better outcomes.