



Focus

Get Time to Focus on What Matters – Step by Step

NAHID CASAZZA, MBA, BCC



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Introduction

The purpose of this workbook is to help you thoughtfully build more focus time into your day so that you can produce higher quality work, get ahead of the chaos, and show up as more confident and on top of things.





Why is Focus Important?

If you are interested in self-development, getting smarter, increasing your value to the world, and seeing how close you can get to your true potential, carving out time to focus on important work will make a huge difference:

1. When you focus without interruptions, your brain has time to explore the challenge at hand more deeply, allowing you to access more ideas and insights, leading to more innovative results.
2. When you challenge your brain, it begins to forge new connections. This is how you learn and grow smarter.
3. If you love collaborating, scheduling focus time after brainstorming meetings allows you to integrate the ideas more deeply.
4. When you focus on one thing at a time, you are several times more productive, leaving you more space to proactively manage situations you had to react to in the past.
5. The more you focus, staying on top of important work, the more peaceful and confident you feel as you move through your day. This energy is infectious, and people are attracted to your calm leadership presence.
6. The work you produce when you focus tends to be higher quality, giving you a personal competitive edge, and providing more value to those you serve.

What to Focus On

Focus time is not for routine work – it is for the most important work you have that requires concentration. To choose what to use your focus time for, we have two popular productivity exercises.

1. Stephen Covey's Time Management Matrix, from *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*
2. The 80/20 rule, or Pareto Principle

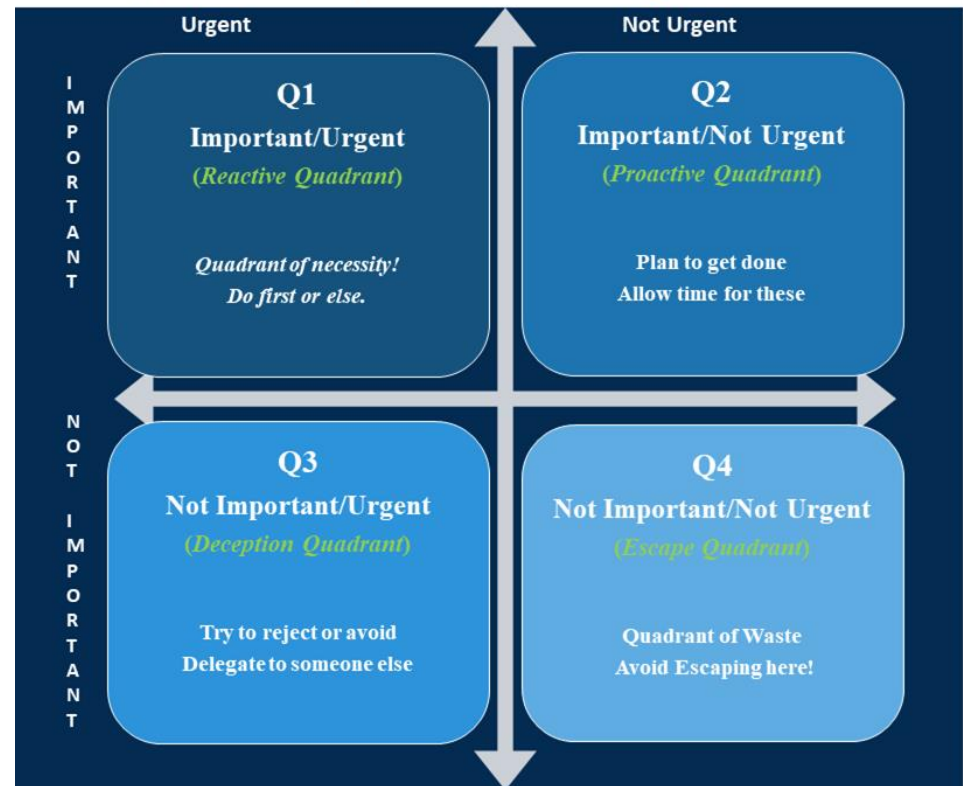


Covey's Matrix

The most important work to focus on resides in Quadrant 2: Important but Not Urgent.

The more work you do in Quadrant 2, the more the “urgent” quadrants shrink, because you are proactively preventing problems and crises.

Stephen Covey's Time Management Matrix



Exercise: Draw your Time Management Matrix

Urgent

Non-Urgent

Important

Non-Important

Pareto Principle



80% of your results come from 20% of your work. Use focus time for work in the 20% that requires concentration.

To identify your 20% you need to be clear on your CORE OBJECTIVE.

Identifying your CORE OBJECTIVE

Ask yourself, What is the ONE thing I will be evaluated on in this position? If you are unclear, a conversation with your boss might help.

If not, here are some additional tips:

1. If you are a business owner, even though you wear many hats, your CORE objective is to build a successful business. In this case, you measure each of your activities in terms of how much it positively impacts the overall health of the business.
2. If you are a functional leader in an organization, such as marketing, finance or technology, you may think your most important objective is that function, but if you have a team, your MORE important objective is to build an effective team to handle the function you are responsible for.
3. It's okay to have sequential main objectives. You might have one initiative that is most important for the next few months and then change to another.

Choosing your Focus

When it comes to choosing what to dedicate your focus time to, there are two rules to follow:

- (1) it's important work, and
- (2) it's work that requires concentration.

If your most important work is making sales calls, motivating your team, or being in meetings all day, you want to make sure you are carving out time for that, but you won't need focus time.

Focus time is for the work that is important and also requires concentration to do well. In business, most executives use focus time for strategic thinking, planning, decision making, writing and preparing. Individual producers use focus time for product, program and process development, writing, coding, analyzing, or proactively learning and improving.

Write here what you believe is your most important work to use focus time for: _____





How Much Time to Block?

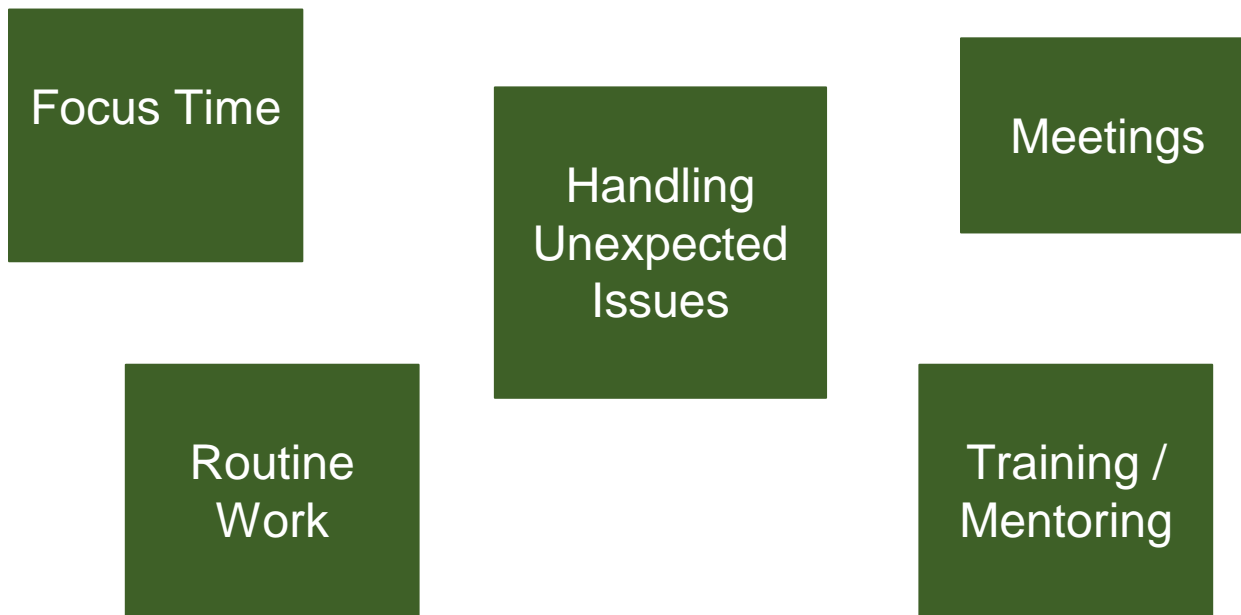
The amount of time you need to focus depends not only on your work environment but also on YOU. How long do you like to focus without interruption? Some people with technical or creative jobs block one or two full days each week, while others get restless if they don't scan their environment frequently, so they may set a timer for 20 minutes to focus and then spend 10 minutes standing, stretching, scanning email and texts, and then dive in for another 20 minutes.

Most executives find that the maximum amount of focus time they can schedule is two hours per day, or ten hours per week. Often they have to work their way up, starting with a half hour per week.

Start with what seems reasonable for you, but will give you enough of an experience to see what kind of results you get.

Time Blocking

Once you're clear on what to focus on, you are ready to start blocking out focus time. The first technique we use is time blocking. Start by drawing 5 to 8 boxes and labeling them with the main things you spend time on. For most leaders, these are the categories:



You can add or change boxes as you see fit based on your individual work situation, but do not create more than ten categories.

Exercise – Create your Time Blocks



Schedule Focus Time First

This is the most difficult block of time to schedule and stick to, so take into account the natural rhythm of your day and when your head is most clear.

If you are a morning person it might make sense to get up at 5 or 6am to work for a couple of hours, but if you don't get going until afternoon, that would be a horrible waste of time.

Consistency is important because it subconsciously programs others to accommodate your schedule. People usually develop a "sense" for when you are most available to them, and over time they reach out to you when they have the best chance of getting an answer.

For example, if you are always available in the afternoons after 1pm, you'll find that you get more interruptions then.

So, if you move your focus time around and people can't predict when you will and won't be available, you'll have more interruptions during your focus time.

But if you can be consistent on a daily or weekly basis, others will pick up on your pattern and start accommodating it very quickly, even if they aren't aware of it.





Frame your Focus Time

If you have lots of people pinging you with requests and interruptions, it's important to “frame” your focus time with what I call “reach out” time.

Reach out time is when you proactively reach out to your team and others who typically need things from you before you start your focus time and then again after you finish with your focus time.

Over time, especially if you are consistent about when you take your focus time, you'll find that fewer and fewer people interrupt you, because they've just talked to you, and they know they'll talk with you again in just a few hours.



Different ways to Leverage Focus

1. **Sets:** Alternate 20 minutes of focus with 10 minutes to scan messages, address issues and regroup. Work up to six sets each day.
2. **Time-Blocking:** Use your calendar to schedule focus time, up to two hours per day or ten per week.
3. **Focus Days:** Alternate focus days with meeting days.
4. **Two-week Sprints:** Great for a team – focus on achieving one important milestone on one project and back burner everything else for two weeks. Alternate with one week to debrief and catch up before the next sprint.
5. **Theme of the Month:** Great for improving skills like listening, and other changes that require you to approach routine situations differently. Come up with a mantra to repeat and guide your decisions.

Stages of Practice

Most learning fades away quickly unless it's immediately applied.

We use a five-stage process that allows you to experiment with using new tools in your environment so that they work optimally for you:

Stage One – Initial Experiment – choose something to practice and see how well it goes.

Stage Two – Identify Obstacles and Re-Strategize – learn from what got in the way and adjust your plan to make it easier to succeed.

Stage Three – Describe the Gap and Leverage Opportunities – compare successes with failures and adjust your plan to set yourself up for success.

Stage Four – Reassess What Matters and Adjust – Reflect on what you've learned, where you got most value, and decide what habit or routine would be worth your effort to build.

Stage Five – Build the Habit – get the support you need to create routines and habits that integrate the most valuable parts of what you learned into your life and make them automatic.

Practice Stage One – The Experiment



Overview: In your initial experiment, you'll want to come up with the easiest way to try the concept given your current situation. If you work in a chaotic environment, have a lot of guilt around not responding to others right away, and worry a lot about what else might be going on that you are missing, then you might want to try with 20 or 30 minutes of focus during one part of your day. If you love working quietly and already have a location to work where you can be protected from interruptions, you can start with a larger block of focus time.

In your experiment, you want to make one simple change that is realistic for you but will give you enough information on what works and what doesn't work. One period of focus time is not going to give you enough data, even if it's a long period. Generally, I recommend that you set up an experiment that gives you at least 10 focus periods, and write down what happens.

Instructions: Experiment with Focus for one week. Choose one habit you can try one or more times each day. Your goal is to learn what works and what doesn't work, with special attention to when and how you get derailed. You want at least ten data points during this week, so come up with at least ten intentional times to focus, and better fifteen.

What do you want to experiment with?



Debrief Questions

1. Did you actually focus during this time?
2. If not, what got in the way?
3. If you did get to focus, how well did you concentrate during this time?
4. If you couldn't concentrate, what distracted you?
5. If you were able to focus and concentrate, how was the experience?
6. What happened as a result?
7. What might you change to have an even better experience?

Practice Stage Two – Obstacles

Usually in your initial experiment you will have identified your biggest obstacles to success, and your most important task in phase two is to see what you can do to mitigate those obstacles.

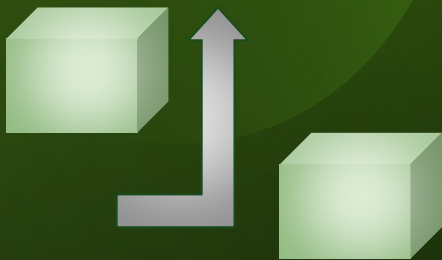
If you are completely blowing off your focus time, you've scheduled too much to start, and you'll want to start smaller.

If you get started but then get interrupted, you might want to practice ways to handle interruptions, such as asking if you can get back to someone at a specific time, or writing a note to yourself so you can feel assured you won't forget.

Recognizing what gets in the way shows you your biggest opportunities for growth.

You might find that whatever is getting in your way is not going to change easily, and you may wonder if you should abandon your desire for focus. In general, I recommend acknowledging the obstacles and getting creative about how to work around them.

Uncovering what gets in the way usually gives you more clarity on your biggest opportunities for long-term growth. In the short term, you can work on focus while also considering how you might want to approach the deeper growth work.



Practice Stage Two - Identify Obstacles

Instructions: Identify what got in the way during your first practice week and use these insights to adjust how you want to practice in stage two:

1. In general, what usually got in the way when you tried to focus?
2. In your thoughts, what stories were you telling yourself that made it hard to focus?
3. In your interactions with others, when did you face the conflict of their needs versus your focus time?
4. In what moments did you feel you were able to balance the needs of others with your focus time and achieve a win-win?
5. Do you feel that your biggest barrier to getting more focus for yourself comes from inside or outside?
6. What changes do you want to make to your practice to give yourself a better chance of success?



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Practice Stage Three: The Gap



In your second week of practice, you should expect to have somewhat variable results in terms of times when things worked well and times when they did not work as well.

The most important thing to learn in stage three is what is the pattern that is different between the times you are able to successfully focus and the times you are unable to?

Here are some questions to reflect on:

1. If you compare the times you were able to successfully focus with the times you were unable to, what do you notice is different?
2. What are three things you can do to influence your situation to create more situations that set you up for successful focus?
3. What changes do you want to make in your practice for the next week?



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Practice Stage Four: Reassess

By now you've had three "practice periods" giving you a good opportunity to sit back and reassess what you really want. The question to ask yourself now is what actually works for you?

In order for any change to work, it has to line up with your personality and values. If you are resisting the habits you are trying to build, that isn't necessarily a sign that you need more willpower; it could be a sign that something important is not lining up in your approach.

The following questions can help you think through this:

1. What is the most valuable thing you are getting from your focus practice so far?
2. If you are able to successfully build a habit of getting regular focus time, what do you believe will change for you?
3. What is the most enjoyable and exciting part of getting more focus for you?
4. When do you get frustrated and not want to focus?
5. What is one way to change your practice that gets you more of what you want, with less of the frustration?



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Practice Stage Five: Build a Habit

In stage five, you've usually practiced enough to decide how you want to build focus into your life.

Now is the time to decide what habit or routine you want to build that will incorporate focus so well that it becomes an automatic part of your life.

Habits take time to build, but they are powerful in that once they are built they no longer drain your energy, and you can use that energy to accomplish your "next thing".

In this last stage of practice, we will pull out all the stops to help you create a habit of getting regular time to focus.

Be sure not to overreach. It's better to develop a small successful habit than to go for a habit you will need to put tremendous energy into sticking with. You can always build on successful small habits.

Your goal for the next three to four weeks will be to practice one thing long enough to get good at it and have it become automatic for you.

To this end, you may want to engage a buddy or accountability partner and check in with each other daily on how you're doing.




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Congratulations on completing your practice!

After spending a good chunk of time thinking about and applying these concepts, you may still not be where you'd like to be, but you've ingrained enough learning to use the tools effectively whenever and however you need them.

On the next page we have some final reflection questions to help you ingrain your learning and choose what you want to take forward.



Debrief and Reflection

One of the most important parts of integrating a new practice into your life is thoughtful reflection about what has changed. Life will get busy again making it easy to fall back into old habits. Reflecting on what you've learned, why it's important, and what you want to take with you can help solidify your learning and continue to build a solid foundation of growth.

Here are some questions you can ask yourself as you debrief:

1. Why is focus important?
2. What did I learn about myself from the experiments and practice?
3. For me, specifically, what is the optimal way to integrate focus time into my work and / or life?
4. What do I want to commit to take forward and keep practicing?
5. When obstacles get in my way, or when I notice myself falling back into old habits, how do I want to handle it?
6. If I am able to consistently get the optimal amount of focus for the next six to twelve months, what will change for me?
7. What excites me the most about what's possible here?
8. Where can I get additional support if I need it?

The Journey Continues

Congratulations on completing this leg of your journey! Your commitment to continuous growth and improvement gives you an edge most people in this fast-paced world don't take the time for.

If you would like to go deeper, to explore how you might be getting in your own way, or how to build more personal confidence and empower yourself on this journey – don't hesitate to reach out!

Nahid Casazza
(714) 931-2133
nahid@coachnahid.com

