

Harness the Power of Focus

Hosted by Dr. Mike Armour

Episode UYL2326

Podcast Date: November 16, 2023



Leadership thrives in a world of goal setting. Leaders always have some objective which they are rallying people to pursue. It's in our interest as leaders, therefore, to be as astute as possible in attaining goals which we set.

I've long been struck, however, by the number of leaders who excel at meeting goals in their organization, but are not nearly so proficient at achieving the goals which they set in their personal life.

No matter how good we are at reaching organizational goals, we never achieve our peak potential as leaders if we do not excel at accomplishing personal goals. And that's our topic for today. Becoming more proficient in attaining your goals in every aspect of your life is sure to Upsize Your Leadership.

Thanksgiving is just days away. Christmas sales are in full swing. In a word, 2023 is rapidly coming to a close.

Already we're looking ahead to what we want to accomplish next year. Companies are setting revenue goals. Athletes are fine-tuning performance goals. Families are structuring household goals.

And soon we will be in the season of New Year's resolutions. If you're one of the millions caught up in goal-setting for next year, pause for a moment and ask yourself, "How fully did I achieve the personal goals that I set for myself last year at this time?"

I hope a broad smile comes over your face when you ponder that question – a smile that radiates from the thrill of having met or even surpassed 100% of those targeted accomplishments.

If so, the odds are that you're in a distinct minority. The sad truth is, most of us have a somewhat lackluster track record at achieving our personal goals for a given year. We've become accustomed to only partial success in turning our resolutions at the beginning of the year into realities by the end of the year.

And this tendency is as commonplace in organizational life as in personal life. Not only that, it even happens to people who are quite accomplished at defining goals, establishing priorities, and developing plans. In spite of their best efforts, somewhere along the way, the goal becomes

© Copyright 2023, Dr. Mike Armour

www.UpsizeYourLeadership.com

unattainable in the time left to achieve it. Intentions may have been good. The planning may have been great. But the execution fell short.

Which invites the question, what went wrong with the execution? Of course, a variety of answers are possible. But one culprit seems particularly common. Failure to maintain focus. It's not enough to set goals and priorities. We must also remain focused on them.

But staying focused is a daily battle. Distractions come at us in torrents. A friend of mine calls it being "nibbled to death by a duck." No one nibble takes much out of us. But this constant nibbling has a way of drawing attention away from the goals, priorities, and values that deserve our focus.

As a youngster, I used to spend long hours playing with a magnifying glass. Not only was I fascinated by what I could see through one, I was equally taken aback by its other distinct property — its ability to focus sunlight so intently that I could actually burn things with it.

Not that I was some sort of would-be arsonist, finding great joy in starting fires. Nothing like that. I was simply amazed that a little piece of glass, held in the proper relationship between a bright sun and a combustible object, could char the object, or even set it aflame.

This result was possible because of the power of focus. Without the focusing presence of the lens, the sunlight was far less powerful. Its rays could be blocked entirely by even the flimsiest of material. Properly focused, however, sunlight passing through the lens could set a dry leaf or a piece of paper aflame in a matter of seconds.

In fact, I would create games to see just how fast I could burn through leaves or paper. When I could do it consistently in twenty seconds, I would try to get the time down to nineteen seconds, then eighteen.

The Power Of Focus

The key to speed was keeping the distance between the magnifying glass and the "target" at the precise focal length of the lens. At that distance the lens had the greatest "burning power." If I moved the lens even slightly from that distance, I cut down the burning power significantly. And once I deviated from the focal length by an inch or so, there was almost no burning power at all.

That's the way it is with goals. Being focused on them means more than simply keeping them prominently posted. Or calling them regularly to mind. The power of goals is keeping them in the sharpest possible focus.

In order to maintain such focus, it's important to limit the number of critical goals we set for ourselves. If we have so many goals that we can't keep each one in sharp focus at all times, the goals lose their power. Two or three well-defined goals, kept in focus, are far more powerful than seven or eight that flit in and out of focus.

How many goals can you genuinely keep in focus at any given time? Exceeding that number dilutes the power of each individual goal.

As you are setting goals for the year ahead, it's likely that the number of things which you want to accomplish is greater than the number of goals on which you can focus simultaneously. So,

does that mean simply paring down what you want to do to a smaller size? Perhaps. But not necessarily.

Taking On Goals A Few At A Time

Let's imagine that you have nine overall goals which you want to achieve next year. And let's imagine that you've determined that you're fairly efficient at staying focused — truly focused — on four goals at a time. Identify four of the nine goals that you want to focus on in the first quarter of the year. Don't ignore the others. But don't fret about making major headway with them, either. Keep your attention and your energies focused on the four goals for the first quarter.

Now let's say that because of the power of your focus, you achieve two of the goals in the first quarter. Two are left unfinished. As you move to the second quarter you keep focus fixed on the unfinished items and add two of the remaining five goals to your field of focus.

Continue this pattern through the year, picking up an additional "focus goal" each time one of your goals is completed. Some goals may take the entire year to accomplish. Others may be substantively completed in a quarter, or even less. But the key is never to exceed your "focus capacity" in the number of goals that you are working on.

New Year's Resolutions That Succeed

The reason so many New Year's resolutions fail is that we start off on January 1 trying to tackle all of the resolutions at once. As the inevitable distractions of life thrust themselves into our schedule — as those ducks start nibbling at us — we gradually lose focus on first this resolution, then another.

By mid-year we are writing off most of the resolutions as a lost cause. As leaders, we can do the same thing with business or organizational goals. It's not only important to set goals for the year, but to sequence them and time them so that we are never overtaxed by trying to focus on too many priorities at once. We get the most done by doing a few things well.

And let me close by touching on one other valuable benefit which comes from maintaining focus. It helps immensely in knowing what to say "no" to. By nature, goals are important endeavors to which we've said, "Yes." But if we indiscriminately say "yes" to too many opportunities which come along, we easily lose a crisp focus on what we have consciously identified as highly important.

The older I get — and next year will see me pass the age 80 mark — I find it easier to say "no" to things. And it's not just because I have less energy, strength, and stamina than I once had. It's largely because I'm acutely aware of the finite amount of time I have left to achieve the things that I genuinely want to do.

When something begins robbing me of time, attention, and resources which I need to accomplish my more important aspirations, I find it easier and easier to walk away from undertakings which are not proving fruitful. In fact, I've done that twice this month with efforts which had taken an unpromising turn. Twenty years ago, I would have probably stuck with both of them longer, hoping against hope that with time, their fortunes would turn around. But that's no longer the cut of my jib, to borrow an old sailing term.

And I've been amazed at how little regret or second-guessing has followed in the wake of these decisions. The limited number of productive years which remain have forced me to be more focused in my effort. Now, looking back, I see how much more I could have achieved had I disciplined myself to be more focused of my own accord, not because nature was forcing it upon me.

I leave you, then, with one recommendation. As you compile your resolutions for next year, make the very first one a commitment to stay more focused on the goals you set.

Dr. Mike Armour is the managing principal of Strategic Leadership Development International, which he founded in Dallas in 2001. Learn more about his leadership development services at www.LeaderPerfect.com.

Upsize Your Leadership is a featured podcast on the C-Suite Radio Network (<https://c-suitenetwork.com/radio/shows/upsized-your-leadership/>). It can also be accessed on iTunes, Google Play/Google Podcasts, Stitcher, Spotify, iHeart Radio and many other platforms which distribute podcasts.

Scripts for all episodes can be downloaded at <https://www.UpsizeYourLeadership/episodes>.

Notice: You are free to duplicate or redistribute this script so long as the authorship and copyright information are retained. This material is not in the public domain and is the intellectual property of the host.