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The First Practice – Direct Attention

‘Choice of attention – to pay attention to this and ignore that – is to the inner life what choice of action is to the outer. In both cases, a man is responsible for his choice and must accept the consequences, whatever they may be.’

W. H. Auden

We can think of attention as a form of choice. Over time, out of the plethora of events, people and phenomena that bombard our senses, we develop a pattern of choice – paying attention to some cues and ignoring others. This pattern of choice may be conscious or it may be unconscious, but it exists. It is simply not possible to pay attention to every single phenomenon that sweeps fleetingly across our senses. Developing patterned choices saves a lot of time and effort, avoiding the need to consciously analyse the significance of every cue we perceive.¹

Once our choices are made, they have an immediate impact. As soon as we choose to pay attention to one area we begin to develop our cognitive, emotional and behavioural complexity in that area. However, this is often at the cost of other areas where the complexity of our living knowledge fails to develop as quickly. For example, a CEO may be worried about profitability and may focus her full

¹ See, for example, Louis, M. R. and Sutton, R. I. (1999) ‘Switching Cognitive Gears: From Habits of Mind to Active Thinking’. *Human Relations*, 44(1). Lord, R. G. and Foti, R. J. (1986) ‘Schema Theories, Information Processing and Organizational Behaviour’ in H. P. Sims and D. A. Gioia (Eds) *The Thinking Organization: Dynamics of Organizational Social Cognition*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, pp. 49–74.

attention on the company's cost base. She works tirelessly to bring the costs down, making staff redundant, putting financial monitoring systems in place and even closing down operations. Those who are worried about staff morale and its effect on customer service find that whilst the CEO acknowledges their concerns, she does not do anything about them. Her attention is not really focused on this area. As a result, these people do not feel they have been listened to. The CEO in this case is focusing her attention on one paradigm (costs) and as a result, is learning a lot about how the company's cost base operates. However, she is marginalizing other important areas (or paradigms) – the customer service paradigm and the people (or staff) paradigm. So, whilst her cognitive complexity in the area of cost control is growing, it is stagnating in the areas of staff, customers and the future strategic needs of the company. This limits her understanding of how these areas are all interconnected as part of a complex system. As a result, her cognitive complexity does not reflect the systemic complexity of the organization or problems she is dealing with. This is one reason that leaders are sometimes highly adept at dealing with certain situations (e.g. crisis, downsizing or cost control), but are unable to adapt to situations that require an entirely different kind of living knowledge.

It may be that our attentional choices seem sensible at the time. It seems sensible to focus on costs when they are spiralling out of control. But what really drives the choice to pay attention to A as opposed to B – is it a rational judgement or is it more emotional and personal? Do we have attentional blind spots that channel our attention towards some areas and away from others? Furthermore, is it possible to expand our attention capacity – for example, is it possible to pay attention to cost-cutting, staff morale, customer service *and* strategic growth?

Many would argue that this is exactly what is required of those in leadership positions – the more senior the role, the more it is necessary to expand one's attentional scope and complexity.² This is because the leader's attention patterns strongly influence the goals

² Charan, R., Drotter, S. and Noel, J. (2001) *The Leadership Pipeline – How to Build the Leadership-Powered Company*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

and priorities of the whole organization. A good example of this can be seen in the recent history of Marks and Spencer, once one of the UK's leading retailers. Judi Bevan's account of the company's rise and fall demonstrates how the leader's pattern of attention and blind spots hindered the organization's ability to identify and respond to external threats.

Marks and Spencer's biggest rise and its subsequent fall from grace occurred under the CEO and Chairman, Sir Richard Greenbury. Greenbury had been very successful during the 1980s and had led the organization to new heights in terms of its market and financial standing. Greenbury was courted by the City elite and increasingly began to narrow his attention, focusing almost exclusively on the company's financial results and share price. He set himself a personal goal. He was determined to become the first British retailer to reach the magic £1bn profit figure and, hence, go down in British corporate history. This goal became an obsession, and Greenbury, having been highly successful during the 1980s, believed he knew exactly how to achieve it.

However, the world of retailing was changing rapidly and whilst his formula may have worked in the 1980s it was not appropriate for the more competitive and fast moving 1990s. Greenbury developed a blind spot with regards to these changes in his market. The question that all M&S chairmen used to ask of their staff was 'what's new?'.³ This question symbolized a culturally embedded recognition that financial success relied on being in touch with changes in customer and market trends. According to Bevan, Greenbury stopped asking the question. He narrowed his attention on the paradigms that were truly important to him – the City and the financials.

In 1997, the non-executive directors identified problems:

'The company had become too big to be ruled by one man, and the directors could see they were not addressing the outside world. "We

³ Bevan, J. (2002) *The Rise and Fall of Marks and Spencer*. London: Profile Books Ltd.

don't spend enough time with investors", "We don't take the press seriously", "We do not meet our international partners often enough" were frequent comments'.⁴

But although his fellow board executives

'grumbled about him behind his back, none . . . tried to stop him; on the contrary, they aided and abetted him every step of the way. Whatever criticisms they had, the traditional sycophancy was so ingrained that none would ever reach the Chairman's ears.'⁵

A survey of customer attitudes was commissioned, showing a number of serious problems. Customers were increasingly dissatisfied with M&S and were shopping elsewhere:

'Greenbury was not impressed. He thanked Norgrove (the author of the survey) for his work, but found its conclusions hard to stomach. He refused to let him present the report at a full board meeting . . . When any of the non-executive directors tackled Greenbury privately on the matter – backed up as ever by complaints from their wives about how M&S was slipping – the answer was always "Look at the profits"'. (my unitalicized comments)⁶

Before his downfall, Bevan notes:

'To some, Greenbury's refusal to embrace technology for his own use may have seemed an endearing eccentricity. To others, it signalled that here was a man no longer open to the changes in the modern world. He had long since ceased to ask his young managers what was new; perhaps he didn't want to know. And he continued to pour scorn on the competition, be it in food or clothing. One friend recalled almost pulling him round a new Tesco (M&S's closest rival) to

⁴ Bevan, J. (2002) *The Rise and Fall of Marks and Spencer*. London: Profile Books Ltd, p. 165.

⁵ Bevan, J. (2002) *The Rise and Fall of Marks and Spencer*. London: Profile Books Ltd, p. 178.

⁶ Bevan, J. (2002) *The Rise and Fall of Marks and Spencer*. London: Profile Books Ltd, p. 179.

*make him aware of what it was doing. But Greenbury refused to show any interest.*⁷

Here we see how a highly intelligent and successful man suddenly decides to stop paying attention to the changes going on in his environment. He was focused on one goal ('Look at the profits'), and any other measures of success (customer attitudes and buying patterns, investors' opinions, competitive positioning) were ignored.

Paying attention is not always a rational business. Psychologists have long known that there are many non-rational factors that affect our attention patterns.⁸ We are subject to confirmatory biases, where we pay attention to anything that confirms what we already believe; self-serving biases, where we focus our attention on anything that boosts our sense of self esteem; and decisional biases, where we pay attention to information that supports recent decisions we may have made.⁹ But much of the writing and research in this area has been restricted to the worlds of academia or clinical psychology. These distortions are often regarded as interesting areas of academic study, as manifestations of psychological illness or sources of entertainment and amusement. However, these attentional and sensemaking biases suffuse our learning, impact our day-to-day decision making and affect the workings of our organizations. In the case of the Bristol Royal Infirmary, the attention patterns of the leaders affected people's lives.

So, what can we do to ensure that we pay attention to what our stakeholders need us to pay attention to, as opposed to what makes us feel comfortable and secure? How can we pay attention to a wider range of paradigms and issues? How can leaders ensure that they pay attention to what is important, avoiding the temptation to focus on the familiar and what has worked in the past? Our

⁷ Bevan, J. (2002) *The Rise and Fall of Marks and Spencer*. London: Profile Books Ltd, p.180. My comments in brackets.

⁸ Fiske, S. T. and Taylor, S. (1991) *Social Cognition*, second edition. Singapore: McGraw Hill. Engel, A. K., Debener, S. and Kranczioch, C. (2006) Coming to Attention. *Scientific American Mind*, August/September, p. 46.

⁹ Sutherland, S. (1992) *Irrationality – The Enemy Within*. London: Constable.

first learning practice introduces us to some of the ways of developing the effectiveness of our attention patterns. We have divided this practice into two areas: broadening attention and focusing attention.

Broadening Attention

In many respects we see what we already know. For example, if we have a well-developed political paradigm in organizations, we recognize the signs of political manoeuvring. We become more alert to certain behaviours and notice things that other people might miss. However, if we are more trusting, we may not have developed a sophisticated understanding of organizational politics. We will not 'see' certain behaviours and signs of hidden agendas. Having a political paradigm offers another way of interpreting information. If we do not have a strong political paradigm, we will neither 'see' certain phenomena nor will we generate certain interpretations. The more paradigms you use to interpret the world, the more information you will notice and the more varied the interpretations available to you. In other words, the more paradigms you use, the more you will develop cognitive complexity.

Let's look at a true example.

Icon Inc.

A number of people in the sales division of a major IT company were interviewed regarding their views of their company's performance. They were all asked some fairly broad-ranging and simple questions concerning their markets, their strategy and the organizational capacity to respond to the market demands. What was most noticeable about the responses was the number of paradigms used by people to answer the question.

One man responded very powerfully, with an intricate knowledge of the market, the competitors and the customers. However, he rather woefully explained that nobody listened to him! Another person described the internal organizational poli-

tics in great detail, linking key strategic decisions to a variety of competing interest groups and prominent players in the hierarchy. His description was linked, in a fairly general and vague way, to market demands and the organization's ability to respond to them. The HR person described the people side of the business, relating the skills, competencies and training needs of the people to the demands of the strategy and the finances.

The senior manager, on the other hand, talked with ease about the strategy, the competitors, the customers, the organizational processes and politics, the staff and financial constraints – effortlessly moving from one paradigm to another and describing the links between them. She had mastered the use of more than seven interlocking paradigms, whereas her staff mostly used two or three. The aforementioned strategist failed to understand organizational politics and the importance of networking. As a result, he could not communicate his insights to people and was marginalized in what was primarily a sales-led, present-focused company. The person who focused on the internal politics noticeably did not appear overly interested in the product or the customers or the market. He was focused on his own career and networks. It was not surprising when, shortly after the interview, he left to go to a competitor! However, the HR person was a trusted colleague of the senior manager, because he was able to talk not just about the people needs, but was able to relate them to the strategic needs of the whole business.

We naturally, effortlessly pay attention to those events or phenomena that are comfortable and easy for us. Our natural preferences, values, skills and strengths channel our attention patterns in certain directions. When this happens we develop detailed mental models in certain preferred paradigms, which we rely on in order to understand the world around us. Other paradigms, usually less preferred, languish – they are relatively undeveloped and hence have less explanatory power and are less used. This self-fulfilling prophecy

effect reinforces our belief that our preferred paradigms ‘work’ whilst our less preferred paradigms do not. This is an important source of blind spots.

The following tables represent just a few of the paradigms used in business – the higher you go in an organization, the more you need to employ.

Commercial Paradigms	
Clients	Do you know your clients as real people with their own needs, hopes and aspirations? Do you know their strategies, business plans, issues and concerns, what’s really important to them?
Strategy	Do you stay in touch with changes in your markets? Do you think about different strategies for dealing with them? How are you doing in the implementation of your strategy? What is the latest thinking/practice about strategy and how to implement it?
Competitors	Can you list your competitors, key individuals who work for them, their strengths, weaknesses, current concerns and activities, what’s going well for them and what isn’t, their strategies and plans? Do you know what their competitive advantages and disadvantages are?
Commercial	What current opportunities and risks are you dealing with? What major deals is your organization pursuing? How are they going? How do you manage risk? What attention do you pay to business development? Do you have a culture that supports people who respond to commercial opportunities?
Suppliers	What changes are taking place in your suppliers’ worlds? How do you treat them? How are you viewed by your suppliers? What changes are taking place which affect your relationship with your suppliers?
Global	What social, political, environmental and economic forces may impact your organization, both now and in the future? What about rising generations and countries and stakeholders – how will their changing expectations affect your organization?

Human Paradigms

Power	What are the main sources of power in your organization? What type of people ‘get on’ in your organization? What are your sources of power? Do you have access to lots of sources of information and networks of people? Are you generally known, trusted and liked by people?
Staff	What are the needs, drives, emotions, aspirations, hopes and dreams of your staff? What problems and issues are they facing right now? Do you have the right staff in the right roles? How do you feel about your key staff? How are you managing succession issues? How are you developing the talent of the future?
Self	Are you happy, content, fulfilled, valued? Are you aware of your strengths and the unique contribution you bring to your organization? To what extent do you take note of your feelings and respond appropriately to them? Do you consider the impact you have on others? Do you adapt your behaviour in order to meet the differing needs of those around you? Do you regularly review your performance, thinking about what is working and what you might need to change? What values do you role model in the organisation?
Climate	What is the emotional climate like in your organization? What does this say about the performance of the organization? In your view, how does emotional climate relate to organizational performance?
Leadership	What do you think makes a good leader? How do you develop followership? What do you want to be different as a result of your leadership? How do you influence your peers and those more senior to you? How are you personally developing the leaders below you? How is the leadership in your organization regarded? How do you know? Are you listening to the right people, paying attention to all the stakeholders in your leadership, regardless of whether they agree with you or not?
Relationships	Who do you have close relationships with? Where are your relationships more distant? How do you identify which relationships are important? How do you improve your relationships with different parts of the business? Which relationships do you value? What relationships do you ignore?

Organizational Paradigms

Structure	Does the structure meet the needs of your strategy? What is the latest thinking/practice on structure in your industry/field? What structures characterize the leaders and the up and coming leaders in your field?
Marketing	How efficient, creative, effective and useful is the contribution made by your marketing? How often do you speak to your marketing people? Do they have the right input into key strategic decisions?
HR	What is the role of HR in your organization? Do you know the key players well? What are they doing to support the organizational strategy? Are you aware of how HR could help implement the business strategy? What are the views from those in HR as to how the business could improve?
Processes	Are you aware of the latest business process tools? Do you know what is available in the market to help you align your processes? What are your competitors doing? Where are your processes efficient and where are they not? How do you know?
Culture	How well is your culture aligned to your strategy? Are your organizational values aligned? What are the espoused values of the senior team and what are the lived values? What messages does this send out to staff, clients and other stakeholders?
Corporate governance and business ethics	How much attention have you paid to this area? Who is working in this area? How often do you talk to them? What are their concerns and issues? What is your ethical role in the world – how do you behave in the countries where you have interests? Are you a positive force for good in your markets or do you just grab and run? What about the example set by your senior leaders?
Technological	How often do you talk to your IT people? Are you up to date with changes in IT and what your suppliers, customers and competitors are doing in this area? How is technology changing in your industry? How will changes in technology affect your markets in the future? What is your attitude towards technology – are you an innovator, an early adopter or do you lag behind your competitors?

Financial Paradigms

The stock market	Who are the main investors, how well do you know them and what they need of you? Are your people aware of how stock markets work and how their work feeds into the share price performance? How do you communicate with your institutional investors? How do they view you and why?
Management accounting	What are your systems like for recording costs, revenues, projected forecasts, monthly budgets and financial performance? How accurate and timely are they? How accessible? Are people aware of how their decisions affect budgets? Do they have the right information in order to make timely, informed financial decisions?
Financial accounting	How well do your staff understand balance sheets and profit and loss accounts? Do relevant staff analyse clients' accounts and competitors' accounts?

Our personal training and preferences will mean that we naturally develop some paradigms more than others. It can be difficult to pay attention to things that you do not like, that you do not feel comfortable with, that you are not good at or which go against your values! You say to yourself 'this is irrelevant'. We all have ways of dismissing approaches that do not suit us. The 'caring professions' attract people who have values around helping other people and promoting their wellbeing. Pressures to operate efficiently can be dismissed angrily as attempts to reduce everything to money. There may be a tendency to dismiss those who are trying to drive through efficiency as 'bean counters', 'heartless bureaucrats' or 'incompetent managers who don't understand anything about the organization or profession'. In certain organizations where people are driven primarily by financial reward, the opposite often occurs. HR professionals can be dismissed as

‘overheads’, ‘wishy washy’ or ‘irrelevant’. In both cases, people are dismissing complex and valid ways of looking at the world but making themselves feel good by rationalizing their blind spots with reference to their personal value set.

Nevertheless, in an increasingly complex world, it is incumbent on us to acknowledge a wide variety of paradigms – enabling us to see and interpret phenomena we would otherwise miss. This is the only way in which we can develop the requisite cognitive complexity to deal with our increasingly complex world. It also has the added advantage of enabling conversation across paradigms, as people can share common observations and interpretations.

The important point about broadening attention is to understand just where your attentional preferences lie and make sure you expand your attention beyond those preferences in order to better support your and your stakeholders’ priorities. One quick way of broadening your attention is to identify a weak paradigm on the paradigm list and find someone who is strong in this area. You could take them out for lunch or simply invite them in for a chat. Ask them about their goals and priorities for the organization; what they think is done well and what not so well. Listen for the constructs, ideas, beliefs and schemas they use. Listen for the names of the people they refer to. Use the opportunity to listen and learn from the conversation. The more senior you become in an organization, the more important it is to have people around you that can cover all these paradigms; and the more important it is that you develop your understanding of their language and constructs.

Broadening attention is actually quite easy – it’s about people. Sir Terry Leahy, CEO of Tesco, the UK’s most successful retailer and, in terms of profitability, second in the world, spends at least one day a month on the shop floor – talking to customers and staff. This enables him to understand the concerns and issues of those who are key to the effective delivery of the business model. By entering the world of different people, you expand your own world by absorbing their paradigms and perspectives. The easiest way to broaden attention is to speak to people you do not normally speak to. And the most important people to speak to are your customers and the people dealing with them. As a leader, people will try and skew your

attention in ways that suit them, so it is particularly important that you regularly get to the direct data.

Another way of broadening attention is to listen to people that you instinctively dismiss or dislike. They may be encapsulating a view that you find difficult or threatening. All the more reason to listen to it! This is not just about knowing your opposition; it is about understanding your own resistances and intolerances.

Once you start to broaden your attention and begin learning, you will find that you are on an exciting journey. The more you listen to people, the more you will gain access to ideas and perspectives that help you see things that you would have missed and understand things that you would have misinterpreted.

It will not always be easy. It is frustrating and annoying to listen to some people. It is deeply challenging to listen to people who have paradigms that we instinctively dismiss or do not understand. We will look at how to handle some of the difficult emotions associated with learning in the next chapter.

Focusing Attention

In July 2005, the UK Prime Minister, Tony Blair, was about to host the G8 summit at Gleneagles in Scotland. Bob Geldof, a world-renowned leader in the world of popular music and lobbyist for the poor in Africa, had organized a concert that was being broadcast worldwide in order to focus attention on what the G8 summit would deliver for Africa. The world's attention was on Tony Blair and his leadership of the G8. However, just three days before the summit began, Tony Blair flew out to Singapore. He wanted to provide support for London's bid for the 2012 Olympics. London was not in the running; Paris was the favourite. Very few people believed that London stood any chance of winning. So there was both shock and elation in the UK when London's winning bid was announced. People in London (and Paris) could not believe it. In the aftermath, the media commentators concluded that Blair's presence in Singapore just before the final vote probably swung it.

This is a great example of well-focused attention. Despite chairing an extremely important summit, with the eyes of the world upon him, Tony Blair decided to focus his attention for a brief period of time on Singapore and the Olympic Games, and, as a result, helped to win the games for London.

Having a wide range of paradigms to access gives you the ability to broaden your attention. It also gives you the ability to choose where best to focus your attention at any one time. Aware of what is going on in a number of different areas, you are able to choose – what area will most benefit if I pay it some personal attention? What is really important right now and where should I focus my attention to bring about the greatest benefit for the organization? These are the questions that effective leaders ask when they seek to focus their attention.

So, the first step in focusing attention is to be very clear about what you want. You will have to go through a process of defining your values, being clear about what is important to you (and why) and elaborating in some way what legacy you would like to leave behind you. This involves listening to yourself; finding your own authentic voice. As Steve Jobs puts it:

‘The only way to do great work is to love what you do . . . Your time is limited, so don’t waste it living someone else’s life . . . Don’t let the noise of others’ opinions drown out your own inner voice.’¹⁰

This is perhaps the most difficult challenge of leadership – tuning into and staying in touch with your own voice whilst also tuning into the voices of others. Whilst it is important never to lose touch with your inner voice, it is also important to listen to others. This is all part of developing cognitive, emotional and behavioural complexity – recognizing that surviving in a complex world is about reconciling tensions and managing dilemmas. What do your stakeholders want you to pay attention to? Who are your stakeholders (the list of business paradigms can help here)? What are their values, goals and

¹⁰ Steve Jobs, 114th Commencement Address at Stanford University on 12th June 2005. You can access a transcript of the speech at <http://news-service.stanford.edu/news/2005/june15/jobs-061505.html>.

desires? Where do they collide? What seems really important in all of this? And what do you have passion, energy and commitment for? It is no good pursuing a goal that does not fire you with passion – you will need the passion to get you through the journey that is leadership.

It is not possible to focus attention unless you have a clear idea of what is truly important – what are the issues *you* feel a passion for; what do your stakeholders need you to address; what are the most important questions that need to be answered; where do we need to get to and why?

It is not unusual for people in top positions to find themselves in a leadership role without any idea of what questions they would like to address or where they want to lead their organizations to. In the absence of a focus ‘out there’ in the form of a challenging but motivating goal or target, we all know where the natural focus of attention will default to – ‘*self*’! Am I doing all right? What do people think of me? Did I make a good presentation? Did they notice that mistake? If I get this then my options will be worth £1/2m. If I can clinch this deal I might be up for promotion. I wonder if I’m doing OK. I’m not quite sure what’s expected of me. . . . The value of having a shared direction and focus is that it liberates us from the clutches of our exhausting self-preoccupation. It enables people to put their energies into something that matters more than their personal self-doubts and insecurities. We all want to get outside our own haunting and debilitating thoughts, and a common goal enables us to do just that. When leaders focus their attention, it is empowering and liberating for others.

However, it is, of course, not quite as simple as that. If those in leadership positions do have a clear idea of where they want to go, they are sometimes overwhelmed by the sheer complexity and uncertainty of it all. This can leave leaders unsure as to whether their views are correct, what the right strategy should be, how to interpret events and trends, ‘how’ to go about getting everyone aligned – people in leadership positions often find themselves both anxious and uncertain.

They also find themselves having to respond to events and crises, and hence end up fire-fighting (the opposite of focusing attention).

This is why it is important to take regular ‘time out’ and, like American Presidents and other world leaders, go on retreat. This is a time to reconnect with your original purpose, to evaluate how it’s going and reflect on what is helping and hindering in its achievement. It is a time when you can look at what you are paying attention to and assess how useful this is. You can decide what to delegate and how to drop attention stealers. You can face the fact that you may be avoiding paying attention to some difficult issues, whilst at the same time paying attention to activities inside your comfort zone. Having done this work, you are then refreshed with a new focus, determination and clarity. These kinds of leadership retreats are remarkably powerful.¹¹

The challenge is to combine the focusing of attention with regular opportunities to broaden attention. The broadening of attention enables the organization to learn and adjust the focus accordingly. The focusing of attention helps provide the direction and psychological climate for people to take leadership throughout the organization. Our focus may or may not be ‘right’, but as long as we are continually feeding and updating our mental models by broadening our attention and listening to other voices, we can make changes in our focus, as necessary. Remember Greenbury’s story – he had a very clear focus for his attention (achieving a profit figure of £1bn), but ironically the extreme narrowness of this focus almost brought the organization down.

¹¹ At Waverley Learning, we regularly run retreats for leaders that address these issues. It is remarkable how many people leave with a refreshed clarity of purpose and a renewed sense of confidence and conviction that enables them to take leadership in an area where previously they would have felt disempowered.