

# KEEP YOUR EYE ON THE BALL!



Whether it's a batter standing in at the plate to face a 95-mph fastball or a fleet-footed receiver racing downfield to make a game-winning catch, great athletes know that their on-the-field success will be largely determined by how well they focus on the task at hand.

Business leaders face the same challenge. Only in addition to keeping their own eyes on the ball, they have to act as the coach, making sure that everyone else in the organization maintains focus as well. Keeping a workplace full of employees with different wants, needs and expectations aligned and working together is hard enough during good times. During turbulent times, it can seem nearly impossible. So it's no surprise that the question I hear most often from business leaders these days is, "How do I stay focused when everything around me is constantly changing?"

My short answer, as noted above, is simple: keep your eye on the ball! My long answer offers some concrete advice.

Get clear on what winning looks like for your organization. In order to keep your eye on the ball, you first have to define the ball. In other words, define what winning means for your organization. In sports, defining winning is simple—run faster, jump higher or score more points than the other team. In business, what constitutes winning is not always so clear-cut. But as a general rule I recommend that your definition at least include the following:

- Key operating achievements
- The work processes and metrics used to measure progress
- The tools and systems necessary to accomplish what needs to get done
- The behaviors, beliefs and operating practices that serve you well
- The products that will deliver maximum value and growth in the short term
- What your brand stands for or means to others

I also recommend you create a profile of your best and most profitable customers and devise strategies to retain them and/or get more share of their wallet. It also helps to identify your greatest competitive threat and come up with a plan to neutralize or mitigate it.

**EXAMINE AND EVALUATE.** Gaining clarity and focus requires doing less, not more. Review all your strategic initiatives (the projects or efforts taking most of the resources in your organization) and decide which ones you should continue doing and, more important, which ones you should stop doing. Evaluate each initiative based on how well it supports your definition of winning, determine its strategic value. Don't make decision just on how much it costs or who thinks it's a good idea.

**COMMUNICATE FOR CLARITY AND MORALE.** In times of uncertainty, many companies cut back on communicating with employees for fear of harming morale with constant bad news. In reality, employees want and need to know more. If you don't keep them informed, employees will fill the information gap by making things up, and most of what they make up is not good! To keep employees from getting angry, anxious and distracted, constantly communicate about your organization's key initiatives. Let people know that you have a plan for getting through the uncertain times. Tell them why you will still win.

**LEVERAGE YOUR EMPLOYEES.** When surrounded by chaos, the last thing you need is high turnover. Your employees know better than anyone else what needs to be changed to make your company better, so tap into them as a resource and learn to do more of the right things versus doing a lot of things. Listen more and keep employees vested in everyone's success. Encourage teamwork and build morale by offering low-cost incentives like potluck lunches, lunch-and-learn sessions, stock grants (for private companies), and opportunities to work on retaining customers or doing sales.

**SHOW SOME LOVE.** To your customers, that is. It costs a lot less to retain existing customers than it does to acquire new ones, so even small investments in building deeper customer relationships will have big payoffs. Assign a senior executive to your top accounts and give them extra attention. Talk to all of your current customers more,

but listen more than you talk. Ask questions like, "What has changed for you in the past six to 12 months? How can we better meet your new needs? What else can we do for you?"

These offer some good ideas for the organization. But what are you doing to stay focused? Start by paying attention to what you pay attention to throughout the day. Identify what will have the biggest impact on your organization a year from now, and start putting the information and people in front of you that will lead to getting those things done.

Humans are highly visual creatures, so make your goals and objectives visible throughout the day. Stick them on your computer screen or carry them in your notebook. Set up task reminders to ping yourself, write them on your whiteboard, post them in the lobby of your office or on a mirror at home—whatever works to stage your field of vision and set yourself up for success.

Put a damper on unwanted interruptions by limiting your responses to emails, PDAs and twitters to certain times of the day. Don't allow yourself to get distracted from vital tasks by the endless "technology chatter" coming at you from all directions.

Finally, it's always easier to stay focused when you take the time to clarify your destination. So do it now! When you finish reading this article, take a moment to close your eyes and imagine what it looks like when you get to where you want to go. Then take out a pencil and paper and write it down. Consider the steps you will need to take in order to get there and how you will know if you are making progress. Write those down as well.

As you go through your busy day, pause from time to time and ask, "Of all the things I need to do today, what will make the most difference a year from now? Am I working on that now? If not, what is getting in the way?" Maintaining focus is a learned behavior. Get clear on where you want to go. Surround yourself visually with what will help you get there. And remember to keep your eye on the ball. You'll be amazed at how much of what you think you need to do actually requires none of your attention if you just leave it alone and stay focused. **P&P**

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~Holly Green is author of "More Than A Minute," and the CEO and Managing Director of The Human Factor, Inc. She has more than 20 years of executive level and operationsexperienceinFORTUNE100,entrepreneurial, and management consulting organizations. She was previously President of The Ken Blanchard Companies, a global consulting and training organization as well as LumMed, Inc. a biotech start up. For more information, please visit: [www.morethanaminute.com](http://www.morethanaminute.com).