

Defocus: Leadership Attribute to Solving Problems

"Concentrate all your thoughts upon the work at hand. The sun's rays do not burn until brought to a focus." - Alexander Graham Bell's message some 100 years ago.

Please focus. In today's world of constant distractions with the ubiquitous nature of social media probably this is the common phrase we advise someone or ourselves. We constantly struggle to focus on the task at hand while the mind travels around the world and comes back asking, "What was I working on?"

While focusing is important many times in our roles as engineers, business leaders, and people managers we need to "de-focus" but with awareness.

Consider the practical scenarios.

- As an engineer, when faced with a technical problem the immediate reaction is to find a technical solution. The mind starts focusing on various ways to solve the problem.
- In a leadership position, when met with a crisis and with an unhappy customer the quick action is to put everything aside and focus on this burning issue.
- People managers have a constant worry during 1:1s as to how to handle difficult conversations. The best method that we know is to focus on the discussion and observe verbal and non-verbal communication cues to decide on the next steps.

In the above practical scenarios, the stated responses do work. But before taking a decision think of an alternation option. What if you *de-focus* and think by stepping out of the *problem zone*? Think of *zoom-out*.

FIGURE-1: Zoom out



How to defocus in above scenarios?

- In the engineer's case, maybe the customer or the manager just needs a *quick and reliable assurance* that it is not a catastrophic problem and could be solved without a major loss of time or money. An immediate technical solution is not expected unlike what was assumed to be earlier.
- The leader when met with a crisis needs to pick up the phone or travel to the customer site and listen. The burning issue is probably not that hot after all!

- Many people managers have experienced that talking about a different, unrelated topic (like hobbies, or family) will bring a new perspective to the discussion. The realization that the problem is not even work-related is not surprising. Many people managers that I know have built a personal connection with the team which helps them correlate with work-related issues which makes problem-solving easier.

In all the above scenarios rather than focusing on the task at hand the idea is to ***defocus***, be aware, and take a different approach. Instead of getting distracted involuntarily, practice the voluntary defocus technique

What is your experience?