

# Focus and Finish

The Difference between Flashlight Leadership  
and Laser Leadership

Jay Desko, Ph.D.

---

The Center Consulting Group is passionate about advancing leadership and organizational health. We believe this article on focusing and finishing will be a helpful resource for you and your team. As an extension of our vision of advancing organizational health, we are providing this resource without charge.

Copyright © 2023 by Jay Desko. The Center Consulting Group grants you permission to copy and distribute this publication within your organization.

*\*All characters appearing in this work are fictitious. Any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.*

“

*Let your eyes look straight ahead; fix your gaze directly before you.”*

*– Proverbs 4:25*

---

## Focus and Finish

### The Difference between Flashlight Leadership and Laser Leadership

Picture yourself sitting in the doctor’s office preparing to have a mole removed. In comes the doctor, ready to start the procedure, and then he pulls out a flashlight. That’s right, the kind you buy in the hardware store and use when the power goes out! You thought he was going to use a laser, but instead he shines the flashlight on that mole. What happens? Nothing. Why? Because even though a flashlight and a laser both use light, they differ in concentration and intensity. Highly focused light beams are powerful because all of the photons are aligned and heading in the same narrow direction. A flashlight doesn’t have the same strength but is very helpful if the power goes out or if you are looking for your keys that you dropped in the grass.

Leaders who want to have the most positive difference and make the greatest impact will strive towards being a laser rather than a flashlight. There is a significant link between leaders who focus their attention on what is most important for the organization and the organization being highly effective. This article will help you consider how to be a laser leader by focusing yourself and finishing what is most important.



## Flashlight Leadership

Diluting your focus by giving your attention to the urgent or interesting things.



## Laser Leadership

Focusing on the most important "few things".



## Focus

This concept of focusing in leadership is not new, and its significance is growing. Here are a few examples of what other leaders and researchers are saying about the importance of focus.

- In his book *8 To Be Great*, writer Richard St. John presents his findings after conducting 10 years of research and interviewing 500 successful leaders. The study concluded in the identification of eight things that the successful leaders had in common. One of these eight traits is focus.
- In *Essentialism: The Disciplined Pursuit of Less*, Greg McKeown notes that an essentialist leader is someone who relentlessly pursues “less but better.” He says this leadership style is all about asking yourself, “Am I investing in the right activities?”
- In his book *Focus*, Harvard researcher Daniel Goleman states that there is a strong link between attention and excellence. He likens focus to “beaming in on just one target while ignoring a staggering sea of incoming stimuli, each one a potential focus in itself.”



## Focus Takes Work

*Responding to e-mails. Preparing for meetings. Taking care of a sick child. Paying bills. Completing staff evaluations. Keeping up with reading. Getting the car inspected. Making investment decisions. Figuring out your medical benefits. Reading recent texts. Paying your college debt. Answering your spouse's call. Trying to help a struggling employee. Talking to your son while reading the news on your iPad.*

It should not come as a surprise that focus is hard work. There are an ever-growing number of things competing for our attention that can distract us from focusing or can cause us to miss what is right in front of us. This is what researchers call “inattention blindness.” One example of inattention blindness was shown through a study done by a team of Harvard researchers who observed 24 radiologists. They discovered that 83% of the radiologists missed an image of a gorilla inside a lung scan in spite of the fact that the gorilla image was 48 times larger than the nodule they were looking for!

## A Focused Leader Is Not One Dimensional!

A focused leader is not a one dimensional leader. There are some leaders who are obsessive workaholics. Some of them become very successful, but only in one dimension of their lives – work. While you can build a very successful organization or department focusing only on one dimension, you will not be a healthy leader in the long run. While there are multiple dimensions to each of us including relational, familial, spiritual, physical, and professional, we will simplify it by defining these dimensions of focus as Personal and Professional.

- **Personal focus** – includes our values, friendships, families, desires, and spiritual life.
- **Professional focus** – includes our careers, work relationships, and competencies.

In the past, people tried to completely separate these two areas, but that is unrealistic and even unhealthy. Our personal and professional focuses often



intersect. This can be good as long as we maintain some appropriate boundaries. For example, if you bring your kids to work often or if you cannot attend even a few of your kids' sporting events, the intersection may not be working so well. But, if your work aligns well with your desires and your friendships at work are strong, there can be great synergy between the two dimensions of focus! Why? Because having strong friendships with those you work with synthesizes Personal Focus and Professional Focus seamlessly together, not excluding one for the other. In addition, your spiritual life is very relevant to your career, but it is not reasonable to think you can take time from the organization to do your personal Bible study on a regular basis.

### People or Results?

Just as leaders struggle with balancing their focus on personal and professional dimensions of life, they also struggle with balancing between tasks and people. For many years, a debate has centered around whether someone who is people-focused or someone who is results-focused makes a better leader. While not surprising, research by Jack Zenger has concluded you need both areas of focus. Leaders who focused strongly on results were seen as great leaders 13% of the time, and leaders who focused strongly on people were seen as great leaders 9% of the time. However, leaders who balanced their focus between results and people were seen as great leaders 66% of the time! ("Key Insights From the Extraordinary Leader" by Jack Zenger and Joe Folkman). Laser Leaders who can focus in on both people and results are able to motivate their team while still accomplishing the mission.

### 7 Ways to Focus Better

How do you learn to focus better? Here are seven of the most helpful ways we have identified.



## **1. Define your Very Important Priorities (VIPs).**

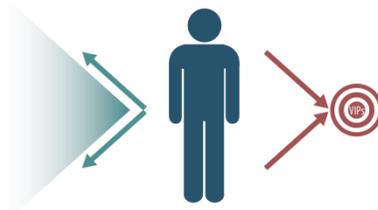
Don't make this more complicated than it is. Your Very Important Priorities are your bull's eye – your target. They may be your target for only a period of time or for your lifetime. If you are one of those who are lucky enough to have the lifetime vision nailed down, kudos to you. But if you don't, do not panic! It's ok. Strive for discovering and defining your VIPs for the foreseeable future. The VIPs define what you are aiming to accomplish and will serve as a point of reference in concentrating your time, talents, and other resources. You should have no more than 1-3 VIPs. The more you have, the less success you will experience since too many results in becoming a flashlight leader again! In Galatians 5:7 in the Bible, Paul writes to the churches in Galatia, "You were running a good race. Who cut in on you to keep you from obeying the truth?" Similarly, without VIPs, flashlight leaders lose sight of their mission and are easily sidetracked by all of the lesser problems and issues that arise.

## **2. Limit your activities.**

For many years, psychologists have studied how many chunks of information people can reasonably manage. They have determined that people can only handle about 4-5 chunks of information at once. Because of this, I suggest you limit yourself and your organization to focusing on the 4-5 important priorities and activities that are most essential to accomplishing your vision. This does not mean that nothing else is done besides these 4-5 priorities, but rather these priorities receive the greatest investment of your time, the time of your most talented people, and the most significant resources.

“Lack of direction, not lack of time, is the problem. We all have twenty-four hour days.” – Zig Ziglar





Example of a Flashlight Leader who does not have any clear VIPs	Example of a Laser Leader whose VIPs are: Build Family and Build Business
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Serves on three boards</li> <li>• Has season tickets to two sports teams</li> <li>• Volunteers on two committees at his church</li> <li>• Mentors three young men from his community</li> <li>• Owns a boat where he spends many weekends</li> <li>• Coaches his son’s baseball team</li> <li>• Attends 2-3 conferences each year</li> <li>• Speaks at multiple business conferences each year</li> <li>• Golfs 1-2 times per week</li> <li>• Participates in an annual missions trip to Africa</li> <li>• Teaches two courses yearly at the local college</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mentors two young leaders from his business</li> <li>• Has season tickets to one sports team and uses this time to be with his family and young leaders.</li> <li>• Coaches his son’s baseball team.</li> <li>• Speaks at one business conference most aligned with giving visibility to his business and providing contact with future people to hire.</li> <li>• Golfs once per week with a client, family member, or a person he is investing in.</li> </ul>

As you can see from the previous chart comparing a Flashlight Leader to a Laser Leader, both have a variety of similar activities, but the Laser Leader’s activities are more integrated towards his VIPs, and there are also fewer activities resulting in less distraction.

**3. Reduce distractions.**

On more than one occasion, I have met a flashlight leader whose life is defined by constant activities with little or no connection to a VIP. I sometimes refer to such leaders as “activity addicts.” They are constantly moving, but there is little to show for it at the end of the year. Such leaders love to attend conferences, read books, regularly post on social media, join fantasy football leagues, and even take sabbaticals! These sensory and time distractions may be helpful at times, but for too many leaders, these activities take their attention away from what is most important.

The most difficult types of distractions as leaders are ones we have a little less control over – they are emotional in nature such as a marriage that is struggling; a child that has mental health issues; a parent that has serious





*If you chase two rabbits, both will escape.*  
– Unknown

---

health issues; or a personal struggle with anxiety or depression. Live long enough and you will experience one or more of these. If you have ever dealt with any of these struggles, you know it is hard to shut them off long enough to concentrate on the work that is in front of you. A wise friend, leadership coach, or counselor can serve as a great resource in helping you learn coping strategies and thought patterns to help you more effectively focus in the midst of these emotional distractions.

#### **4. Limit your information.**

While this is not a formula for everyone, limiting the amount of information we consume may be a reasonably good fit for most of us when trying to tame information overload.

**Email** – Keep your inbox to 10-12 emails by delegating, deleting, or providing a response immediately. I know, it sounds impossible, but it really isn't!

**Reading** – Limit yourself to no more than 3-5 articles, magazines, or books and only read the sections that matter most to you. Find at least one element of new learning to use immediately.

**Seminars** – Attend a seminar if it will help you with your core vision, but be sure to find at least one element of new learning to use immediately. Remember, too many seminars and you may become a seminar addict, getting more and more information and leading less and less effectively. Seminars can use up a lot of money and time and can also create confusion in your mind and in your team when you try to incorporate new ideas too often, especially if the ideas do not help you with your organizational focus.

**Meetings** – I am amazed at how much leaders complain about meetings. But in an information-oriented culture, meetings are one way



ideas and important data are transmitted within a group. What's really interesting is that some researchers now believe one of the most productive and beneficial types of meetings is eating together! Researcher Kevin Kniffin of Cornell University believes that a simple way to nurture high performance in a team is to have them eat together. Kniffin notes, "Behavior that might seem superfluous or wasteful to outside observers ultimately carries significant importance for organizational performance." Beyond eating together, the three tests I use for evaluating meetings are:

1. Did I add any significant value to others or to the organization?
2. Did I or my areas of oversight receive value from the meeting?
3. Did our organization's health and effectiveness show any measureable benefit from the time invested in this meeting?

If you answer no to all of these, there is a big problem with the meeting.

If you answer yes to all three, you had a home run meeting!

**Social media** – While social media can play a valuable role for your VIPs, you may do well to ask yourself, "How is what I am now doing on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, etc. relevant to my vision?" Remember, do you want to be a Flashlight Leader or Laser Leader?!

#### **5. Keep the laser image in front of you.**

Sometimes just the image will help you to stop and briefly reflect on which light you are modeling and what needs to change to stay on focus.

#### **6. Focus your resources.**

It's our responsibility to help focus the time and attention of the staff and the organization's resources on the mission. Look at your finances, staffing, and your own time usage. Do they show reasonable focus on your VIPs? If not, why?

"Decide upon your major definite purpose in life and then organize all your activities around it." – Brian Tracey



## 7. Use a coach.

Some leaders who struggle with focus show dramatic improvement when they have the guidance and accountability of a leadership coach. A skilled coach can both help you to understand your VIPs and provide you with ideas on how to move from flashlight leadership to laser leadership.

Remember, if you do not have a clear sense of direction or know what you are aiming for, you will most likely default to flashlight leadership.

Concentration is the secret of strengths in politics, in war, in trade, in short in all management of human affairs. – Ralph Waldo Emerson

## Finish

In the Bible in John 17:4, right before he is arrested, Jesus prays, “I have brought you glory on earth by finishing the work you gave me to do.”

Focusing is an extremely important part of being able to finish, and finishing is an important part of fulfilling the tasks that we have been called to.

### Procrastination Will Kill You!

Putting off what you are supposed to be doing or not finishing what you started can be deadly in more ways than one. Such procrastination can kill your credibility and reputation since people will not view you as dependable or trust your word. In addition, researchers believe that putting off what needs to be done can actually harm your health as well. Dr. Fuschia Sirois of the University of Sheffield in England says procrastination creates a stress response in your body, keeping it on high alert all the time. This results in the ongoing release of stress hormones and damaging inflammation in the body. So, would you rather die or just “get ‘er done?”

### Two Top Characteristics of Those Who Finish Well

Did you know leaders who focus and finish have multiple traits in common? As stated earlier, in *8 To Be Great*, Richard St. John identified eight common



traits of some of the most successful people in the world. And in our consulting, we have consistently seen two of these traits in the leaders who were exceptional at the focus and finish duo.

**1. Passion.** They love what they do! Not everyone has the benefit of doing what they love, but when a person's job merges with what they are passionate about, it is easier to focus and finishing becomes the rule rather than the exception. It's as if the dividing line between work and recreation becomes muted. Work becomes enjoyable rather than a painful chore – at least most of the time. Nothing is perfect!

“Working hard for something we don't care about is called stress; working hard for something we love is called passion.” – Simon Sinek

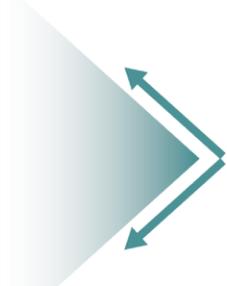
**2. Persistence.** Passion alone is not enough fuel to serve as a catalyst for even the most gifted leaders. It also requires a lot of hard work. These leaders push themselves and show what some psychologists call “grit.” Some younger leaders have been led to believe that if they have to work too hard or show so much persistence, something must be wrong with either themselves or with the company for which they work. Yet, we have never met a leader of a church, business, or non-profit who built a successful organization without serious sacrifice and persistence.

## Conclusion

There aren't too many leaders who would say they don't care if they make much of a difference in their churches, schools, organizations, or in their community. Any real leader desires to bring about positive and long lasting change. Flashlight leaders can touch lives and make a positive difference, but they will not have the same impact as a laser leader. Focus is one vital element that differentiates the good from the great. I encourage you to take a look at your life and leadership, set your VIPs, and work to become more of a laser leader.



## Personal Practice



## Flashlight Leadership

List all of the activities that are directly or indirectly related to your leadership role.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.
- 6.
- 7.

## Laser Leadership

Write your Very Important Priorities (VIPs) here.

List what is most important to your VIPs here. This may include items from your list to the left or new priorities and activities.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.



**Jay Desko** is the CEO of The Center Consulting Group and brings experience in the areas of organizational assessment, leadership coaching, decision-making, and strategic questioning. Jay's degrees include an M.Ed. in Instructional Systems Design from Pennsylvania State University and a Ph.D. in Organizational Behavior and Leadership from The Union Institute. If you would ever like to contact Jay, he can be reached at [jdesko@centerconsulting.org](mailto:jdesko@centerconsulting.org).

If you are a leader of a church, non-profit or business and would like to further advance the effectiveness and health of yourself or your organization, we can assist you through our proven guidance and relational approach. We provide customized solutions for your complex problems. Our solutions include coaching, assessment, communications, crisis guidance, planning, staffing & HR, succession planning, personalized coaching retreats and more. For more information, call our office at 215-723-2325 or visit our website [centerconsulting.org](http://centerconsulting.org).