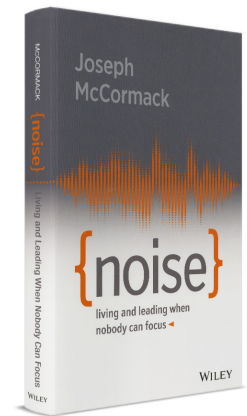


Noise

Living and Leading When Nobody Can Focus

by **Joseph McCormack**



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of Mass Distraction

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THE SUMMARY IN BRIEF

In the current digital age, it is becoming increasingly more difficult to stay focused. Smartphones, tablets, smart watches, and other devices constantly vie for our attention. We are constantly bombarded with tweets, likes, mentions, and a constant stream of information.

Not surprisingly, attention spans have gotten shorter. Already being pulled in a dozen directions every minute, managers and business leaders often struggle to address important issues and to focus on everything that needs attention.

Noise teaches managers and leaders how to help themselves and others sharpen their focusing skills. In this follow-up to his first book, **Brief**, author Joseph McCormack helps readers cut through the static and devote their attention to what is important.

Noise is a valuable resource for leaders and managers seeking to develop laser-sharp focus and apply it to everything they do.

IN THIS SUMMARY, YOU WILL LEARN:

- To avoid becoming a casualty of “weapons of mass distraction.”
- To understand how noise compromises short-term and working memory.
- To apply effective techniques to hone your focus and reduce interference.
- To use focus management to get others to dial in.

PART I: WEAPONS OF MASS DISTRACTION

Noise, Noise, So Much Noise

We're all connected, all day and in every way. Smartphones, laptops, tablets, and smart watches. Screens in cars, airports, gas stations, classrooms, offices, hospitals, and hotels. The constant buzzing of a 24-hour news cycle. The list goes on.

What? Did you just miss that? Maybe you got another text, news alert, or notification?

The daily experience is to consume information at every turn. It's nearly impossible to avoid the barrage from morning until night. How much of it is relevant? What's useful for us, and what is simply a waste of time and energy?

Infobesity is the new normal, and it can have dire consequences. There's a serious impact when we expose ourselves to these alarming conditions all day long. In a life with always-on access to information, we now face a shrinking, elusive attention span and an overstimulated, overfilled brain.

Attention Spans Will Remain Elusive

More and more information is competing for our attention. Our brains feel divided, yet we somehow enjoy it. There's a reward when we see a comment on social media or a like or share online. Any type of immediate online response reaction (like liking, clicking, swiping, or sharing) increases the release of dopamine in the brain, which makes people more inclined to keep swiping, clicking, and scrolling.

Because most of these interfaces are impersonal and subject to our instantaneous and shifting reactions, our communication with each other becomes less personal, affecting how we view and interact with each other. It's harder to pay attention to people because they don't behave the way technology does. Our real, authentic, personal connections will decrease as we consume more noise.

With more interruptions from technology, it will be very hard for people to concentrate on the task at hand without being distracted. Constant interruptions, continuous distractions, and persistent loss of focus will challenge leaders to engage and maintain focus on strategic objectives for long periods of time. If leaders can't accomplish this quickly, the likelihood of people losing interest and moving on to something else will increase.

Think about your diminishing focus in those terms. It is your brain, and you're really at risk.

Brain Basics: Are Your Penguins Falling Off the Iceberg?

It turns out that our brains aren't just being affected but are changing, especially in the young, who are exposed to infobesity from birth.

The human brain, which on average weighs about three pounds, contains about 100 billion nerve cells that work like a big computer. The brain has three sections: the cerebrum, which controls things like our conscious and unconscious thoughts and our speech and hearing; the brain stem, which transmits information to the spinal cord and controls eye movement and facial expressions; and the cerebellum, which controls complex motor functions like walking.

The cerebrum is responsible for our ability to focus and remember things. We have three types of memory—long-term, short-term, and working memory. It's our memory, particularly our short-term and working memories, that are changing in this age of infobesity.

Short-term and working memory are closely linked. It's what we rely upon every day to focus on a presentation at work or on what our boss is telling us, to remember what time to pick up our kids from soccer or where we put our wallets. It's also what is disrupted by things like text messages, email and social media alerts, and other common interruptions we face on a daily basis.

Working Memory in Decline

Working memory is like the brain's version of random-access memory (RAM) in a computer. It is simply defined as the part of our short-term memory responsible for holding and managing information for mental processing, reasoning, and decision-making. Like RAM, it can decline when overtaken.

Imagine using a computer and opening numerous software applications, each demanding lots of processing power. The RAM won't be enough to handle all of it, and the speed will slow. The same is true for a mental task that requires focus. If we look at the brain like a computer, we realize that when we try to process more information than our working memory can handle, our minds slow down. We become forgetful, inefficient, and we feel as if a fog is clouding our minds. Over time, all these interruptions make it harder for us to focus our attention or think about something for a sustained amount of time.

Adding more information into your brain is like getting penguins on an iceberg. As more are added, others are pushed off the other side.

Awareness management is . . . directing the mind like a flashlight on an object that's surrounded by shadows, dim light, and darkness.

This divided attention can have disastrous results both professionally and personally.

PART II: THE BIG TUNE-OUT IS COMING—A SHORT STORY TO WAKE YOU UP

A Misleading Leader

Jonas didn't think he would fail so miserably. The career-defining moment when he would orchestrate an acquisition touted as a "merger of equals" seemed like a done deal.

The deal had been years in the making, with a few key players making all the bold, behind-the-scenes moves. When all the financials were agreed to, they quickly raced to formulate a press release that would set the terms and create some buzz in the market. Like many deals like this, there was a lot of wishful thinking that people on both sides would embrace the "synergies" and follow their leadership teams forward.

In the weeks and months after the announcement, the communication poured out systematically, as Jonas had planned. There was a steady stream of email blasts, town-hall meetings, social media posts, video tutorials, and cascading messages that flowed from the "war room" with strategic purpose and precision. Change management teams performed flawlessly, following an elaborate process and meeting all key milestones, deadlines, and deliverables.

Many workers felt excited at first but started losing enthusiasm as the communication from above felt one-sided and too much like a sales pitch.

"I just didn't know what information was the most important and what I was supposed to act on," said Tobias, a veteran marketing specialist at the company. "We had all these meetings and updates, but there was no clear guidance on priorities. We all talked about it around the office. When a new action plan was sent out, we'd look out our cubicles at each other and say, almost unanimously, 'Did you understand that?' We'd all respond, 'Nope!'"

In meetings, employees weren't asked to provide input as much as spend time consuming updates and convincing their subordinates and cross-functional teams with even

more communication. The process flowed from the top down, pushing out updates but not moderating feedback nor adjusting the approach.

Powerful Monologue

"They buried any spark of enthusiasm and acceptance with a fire hose of internal communication," former head of strategy Paula said. "It was a powerful monologue that just fell on deaf ears. And that's when things went from bad to worse." Morale started to become an issue as people were spending so much time in meetings that they couldn't work. The expected layoffs didn't help, either, as the rumor mill spun into high gear.

Jonas felt strongly that putting more information out to people would be helpful, never realizing how he started a process that submerged them, greatly diminishing any chance of long-term success. It just became more noise and very little sound of clear direction. Talk didn't lead to action but to more talk, discussion, and murmuring.

It wasn't that employees didn't try to understand. They were just overfed with too much information.

PART III: TIME FOR YOU TO TUNE IN—AWARENESS MANAGEMENT (AM 101)

Awareness Management 101

Managing awareness is a personal responsibility. Awareness management is a conscious command of one's attention. It's directing the mind like a flashlight on an object that's surrounded by shadows, dim light, and darkness.

Our attention is an expendable, scarce resource. There's a serious energy cost to the misuse of the brain's gas tank. Even the term "paying attention" implies a transaction that depletes an account. Given the vast number of distractions around us, we must intentionally protect and preserve our attention balance from morning to night.

Waking Your Mind From Mindlessness to Mindfulness

There is a fundamental need to be more "aware of our

awareness”—and to actively do something about it. The issue is avoiding the mindless waste of mental energy and moving toward the conservation and preservation of concentration.

Where and how can we start to wake up and manage our awareness? Like trying to wake from a deep sleep, the best way to be more alert is to sound an awareness alarm in a few core areas of your life that may often feel flat or seriously underinflated:

- **Relationships:** Do I know people around me well, or are my relationships pretty superficial?
- **Reputation:** Am I known as a person who gets the job done, or do I jump around from one task to another and another, reaching few goals?
- **Productivity:** Do the things I spend my time on matter, or are they trivial? Do they waste my energy and generate few results?

This wake-up call—gaining an awareness of our awareness—makes us more willful, purposeful, and intentional. Moreover, just like a radio dial, we can create pre-set buttons to make managing our awareness a daily practice.

Take Aim: Set Your Sights on What Matters Most

Embrace the word “most.” What is the *most* important thing right now? Not what is *more* important between many choices, but what’s the *most* valuable—the top, highest, maximum, chief, greatest, uppermost. You get the point; that is where we all need to take precise aim.

In our age of infobesity and interruptions, our lives can meander in wild twists and turns. Many times, we may not even notice we do this at all. We won’t get very far unless we take aim at what matters most.

A minimalist movement has taken root in our culture, providing fewer moving parts to run our lives. Millennials have quickly embraced this movement. We’re more than overdue, since in the United States today, most homes have more televisions than residents, and we consume 50 percent more material goods than just 50 years ago.

Here are five specific ideas to help you take aim and prioritize a few essential things in your life.

Idea 1: A step forward: a silent retreat. Consider how moments of quiet contemplation can provide the

peace and serenity we need to go deeper to define what matters most for each of us. Schedule time away; do a turn-it-all-off weekend; wake up an hour earlier with no technology access. The result is that you will listen to what you hear; get some rest; feel at peace.

Idea 2: Write it down. Lest we forget, it’s critical to jot down our “north star” goals. David Allen, productivity speaker and author of *Getting Things Done*, says writing things down can help you capture and clarify what is important and what can be discarded. Get a coach or advisor to help you set a vision; buy a pack of Post-It Notes, frame your big goal, and post it somewhere that you will see often. Making a decision to set a specific course will empower and direct you.

Idea 3: Make a private, then public pact. As social beings, setting priorities transcends us personally. Our goals and dreams affect us as well as others in countless ways. Our co-workers, friends, kids, and clients all feel a difference when we focus on fewer things with greater intensity and purpose. Make a short list of “safe” people with whom to share your plan; schedule time to declare your objectives to them; ask others to spread the word. People around you can help keep you accountable and support you.

Idea 4: Keep it in the galaxy—in time and space. Setting a “north star” should not be a far-off, distant dream. We make our vision real by keeping our feet planted on earth and making time and space for it. This means moving schedules around and removing obstacles that impede our progress. Read the book *Getting Things Done* by David Allen; review your calendar and block off time; create a physical space at work or home to reflect on your progress.

Idea 5: Throw away something. Find an item that you don’t use and don’t need, and throw it in the trash. Clutter comes in many forms. You need to develop the habit and willpower to rid yourself of these excesses. Find a shirt or pair of shoes you don’t wear and give them to charity. Delete an app on your phone you haven’t used in the past six months. Uncluttering your world will encourage more minimalism.

Saying No to Noise

“No” is a powerful little word. It can stop bad decisions, sudden impulses, unwanted offers, and debilitating tendencies. It is as unambiguous as it is direct. Hear its power: “No, thank you!” “No more for me.” “No excuses.” “No ifs, ands, or buts.” “No pain, no gain.”

One of the biggest challenges we all face is the fear of missing out, or commonly called FOMO. We might feel something like this: “I’ve got to check that text right now because it might be important.” “I need to scroll indefinitely through my social media feeds because I might miss something.” “I have to check another option because I haven’t seen enough choices.”

Who wants to miss something that’s critical—an alert, a call, a breaking news story? Yet, we all make a pact to search constantly through haystacks of useless information looking for the needle that might be there. It not only wastes valuable time but also trains our brains to respond immediately and impulsively to triggers with constant anxiety and senseless anticipation.

So why is quiet time so important? It’s not meant to hush extroverts but rather to get all of us to rest, think, and recharge.

Five Small Steps to Make That Little Word a Big Part of Your Life

Say it out loud. Hearing yourself say “no” is very different than thinking it. Tell someone, “No, I can’t talk to you right now,” or tell yourself, “No, I’m done with checking email for the day” or “No, I am not going to do four things at once.”

Mute small distractions. Search for some simple, maybe silly things to avoid. Maybe it’s not changing a song to find a better one, putting your phone in the back seat while driving, or placing the TV remote control far away.

Say “yes” to something else. Any distraction, interruption, or invitation to shift focus needs to be met not only with a sharp “no” but also with a compelling “yes.” What is your personal reward when you resist more noise?

Embrace your “why”—no excuses. Justifications, pretenses, and rationalizations to juggle more will get you nowhere. Decipher why succumbing to more noise will only debilitate you.

Five out of seven isn’t bad. Don’t be a perfectionist. Avoiding noise all the time is improbable and unlikely. Dialing it down more to even half of the time will make your life better.

Quiet Time: Restoring and Recharging Your Mind

Stop right now and listen to what’s around you. What do you hear? Music? An alert from your phone? A news anchor chattering on the TV or radio?

The nonstop noise that surrounds us doesn’t abate. Clearly there’s need for more quiet in our day. Time to think, rest, reflect, and recharge. Quiet is our weapon to counter noise.

According to *Psychology Today*, approximately 50–75 percent of people are said to be extroverts. It seems that our world is designed by them and for them. An emphatic value is placed on what extroverts do naturally: make small talk, share opinions freely, and shine socially.

So why is quiet time so important? It’s not meant to hush extroverts but, rather, to get all of us to rest, think, and recharge. We need it because we’re all overstimulated. Our attention needs to be freed, not fried. According to Daniel Goleman, author of *Focus: The Hidden Driver of Excellence*, quiet time is needed for the same reason we need to recover after physical exercise. Our brains require rest as much as our bodies.

Steps Toward Quiet

Here are some suggestions for increasing quiet time and achieving strategic solitude in our lives:

Go to Sleep! If something is valuable, we need to schedule time for it. This starts with sleep, which we don’t get enough of in our busy, tech-tied lives. One of the many benefits of consistent sleep is that the brain can achieve what scientists call “consolidation,” a magical way the brain strengthens memories and practices skills you learned.

Practice the “7-to-7” rule. After 7 p.m., put your phone away and don’t check it until 7 a.m. the next day. It’s hard. But this habit not only reduces daily screen time, it sets boundaries to allow for other regenerative activities like reading, conversations, meditation, and exercise.

Look forward to a walk. Taking a simple walk does marvels for your mind. Melina B. Jampolis, MD, author of *The Doctor on Demand Diet*, says “Research shows that

regular walking actually modifies your nervous system so much that you'll experience a decrease in anger and hostility." It also exposes you to sunlight, which helps stave off Seasonal Affective Disorder.

You can set aside time for a short walk, whether it's first thing in the morning or later in the day, to clear your head and process what's happening in your life. It might be as simple as walking the dog or taking advantage of walking versus driving.

Present Listening: A Gift Worth Giving Now

Few people know how to listen well, or even care to learn. It's tough on so many fronts. We're super busy, generally distracted, and more concerned about our own thoughts, perspectives, and plans. Who has the time and mental energy to listen actively and deeply to someone else?

It's draining to listen. Yet, it gives you power to reveal hidden insights, deepen understanding, and build stronger connections.

"Present listening" is an intentional play on words. It means both that you are in the moment—not racing ahead or looking back but in the here and now—and giving your listening as a gift, not expecting anything in return, with little to no agenda. Present listeners have a power to lower the noise and get themselves and others to tune in.

Becoming a Present Listener—Seven Critical Considerations

There's not a single component that can make you an effective listener. With so much noise in your head and all around you, however, your ability to shift interest in the moment from yourself to someone else is possible, with effort and practice. Here are the key considerations.

Be present. Don't fast forward or rewind back, but stay in the moment. It's all about right now, so be patient.

Be interested. Ask better questions. It's much better for you to be attentive, involved, and concerned about the speaker than to try to stand out, tell your story, or give your opinion.

Know that it's not about you. Give the gift of yourself and your attention, and you might get something surprising in return. Just don't expect it right away.

Have little to no agenda. Try to avoid forcing a pre-

determined direction or engineering a specific outcome. Expect the best in people, and let the conversation flow freely with good questions to guide it.

Be understanding. If you're looking to agree or disagree, you're missing the point. Listen to learn and comprehend, with concern and empathy.

Be ready to suffer (a little). Your willingness to be kind and patient will feel pleasing to people, although it might be somewhat painful to you. Remember, it won't kill you.

Understand it's a decision, not a feeling. There's a reason so few people are good listeners. It's a choice they make to focus on someone else first, not follow momentary emotions.

PART IV: GETTING OTHERS TO DIAL IN—FOCUS MANAGEMENT (FM 101)

Focus Management 101

Focus management is the responsibility of getting others around us to improve their attention. As they drown in information, we stand on solid ground and throw them a lifeline. Our clients, co-workers, and kids might get swept out to sea since they are so heavily addicted, connected, and distracted that they cannot resist accessing more information and giving in to more diversions.

They need us to do something drastic and different to help them out.

See yourself as a "focus manager." This is an unofficial job title you can carry into a variety of circumstances and relationships. This hidden badge of honor might save people you know from going deaf by succumbing to the nonstop noise that is becoming their new normal.

Here's a list of some of the attributes a person needs to lead others to improve their attention:

- **Leadership.** Takes charge when others accept the status quo.
- **Clear communication.** Speaks and writes clearly, simply, and concisely.
- **Single-mindedness.** Core concern is improving others and their environment.
- **Unapologetic.** Doesn't ask permission. On a mission.
- **Selflessness.** Cares deeply about the well-being of others.

Like a magician, you will know and practice the techniques so well that people around you will connect magically to you.

- **Discipline.** Has willpower to say no consistently and decisively.
- **Courage.** Not afraid to be a contrarian.

It only takes one dedicated person to start a noise-abatement movement. In such a noisy world, a great place to start influencing and shaping change is within your immediate environments: schools, homes, offices, and social circles. Start small in some of the following ways:

Meetings that don't matter. Are you willing to demand a better agenda or walk out if a meeting is pointless?

Social media unfriended. Are you willing to decrease social media sharing about a sandwich you ate that isn't worth anyone's time? Or unplug entirely?

Tech love lost. Are you opting more for paper and pen versus screens and tablets?

Expecting always-on. Are you practicing patience and not criticizing people who don't respond right away to your texts or emails?

However small they might seem, each of these moments carries weight. We can shift the paradigm and expect something different. Gone is the status quo, and it starts with small steps.

Communicate Like a Magician

Magic confounds us, entertains us, and, amazingly, gets us to focus on the *wrong thing*. In the role of a focus manager, your responsibility is similar to the role of a magician yet different. You must get people to focus on the *right thing*.

Effective communicators are akin to magicians. What are the secrets that effective communicators can employ to become masterful focus managers? Author Susana Martinez-Conde and other experts have uncovered how effective magic tricks alter when and where you pay attention. The magician's techniques are powered by knowing exactly how our brains operate moment to moment.

It takes power to calm a distracted and divided mind. Like

a magician, you will know and practice the techniques so well that people around you will connect magically to you.

Communication Techniques, Tips, and Tricks

Consider these "secrets" to grab people's focus.

Name calling: This draws in someone personally and increases attention. In a conversation, mention a person by name twice, once near the beginning and another time toward the end. Don't do it too close together. Notice how their eyes move and how they tune in when you do it.

Good cop, bad cop: When you're talking to a co-worker and ask them how their day was, instead of asking the standard question, you say, "What was the best and worst part of your day?" See how frequently they stop, reflect, and answer more thoughtfully.

Flagging: In an email, identify the number of points you want to make, and state it first in the subject line (e.g., four ways we could improve safety), and then include a short sentence and four bullet points, ending with a simple call to action. Notice how quickly you get a response.

Preparing the Environment for Noise Abatement

Noise is pervasive, entering not just into our offices but also into our homes, cars, classrooms, and heads. Protecting ourselves from the constant barrage of mindless messages and streaming nonsense demands bold responses, starting with the basic environments where we live, learn, and work. We need to design against distractions.

If you've ever worked in a building with few to no offices, at first it seems so inviting, creative, and collaborative. Yet, the day-to-day reality is that these environments breed distraction. It's like they were designed by extroverts to make everyone have to talk and force them to collaborate; yet, it ends up being a constant fight to stay focused.

Research supports growing complaints from professionals who say that these environments look great on paper but are

a painful and unproductive space in which to work. In many of these open environments, there's practically no place to go for a private call or conversation, not to mention an area to work that's quieter and conducive to concentration.

So, what can we do to lead a redesign of our office environments? What are some smart, bold moves to put balance back into the workplace? Here are a few ideas:

Ban laptops at meetings. Make it a common practice to place laptops outside meeting rooms on a cart (with chargers and stacks of notepads and pens) to promote improved conversations and efficient exchanges.

Check your phones at the door. In secure military installations, there are lock boxes in which to check smartphones before entering the building. Install small cabinets with chargers and locks for phones and devices outside conference rooms and offices to promote fewer distractions.

Provide dedicated quiet rooms. Like airport lounges and libraries, set aside spaces where silence is mandatory. This will provide people a designated place to go that fosters reflection, contemplation, and concentration.

Replace screens with whiteboards. Ripping out a screen and repainting a part of a wall with Idea Paint fosters collaboration, conversation, and creativity.

Create Wi-Fi "cold spots." In a visionary design, a Harvard graduate student proposed building small enclosures that prevented any connectivity to ensure quiet concentration. Consider expanding that design to select zones in an office.

So much of the noise we deal with professionally every day can be abated if we take small steps to reinvent and protect

the spaces where we work. It starts with a thoughtful focus manager taking charge.

Do the workplace, schools, and homes become places of productivity and fulfillment or endless sources of distraction and frustration? Will email and texting lead to new methods and applications that batter and drain the brain? Will we become more addicted to devices and grow more isolated from each other? Will the art of listening and conversation be lost forever?

When we ponder these questions, it's really hard to be encouraged. How can we construct reasons for optimism?

The answer is in our strength to choose and fight for what's best for us, our friends, colleagues, and families. Although these social pressures may seem to inevitably force us to a darker, predetermined place, we can set our sights on how we want to manage this new reality, not have it manage us.

**IF YOU LIKED THIS SUMMARY,
YOU MIGHT ALSO LIKE:**

- *Brief: Make a Bigger Impact by Saying Less* by Joseph McCormack
- *Focus: The Hidden Driver of Excellence* by Daniel Goleman



Joseph McCormack is passionate about helping people gain clarity when there is so much competing for our attention. An experienced marketing executive, successful entrepreneur, and author, he is recognized for his work in concise, strategic communication and leadership development. His book *Brief: Make a Bigger Impact by Saying Less* tackles the timeliness of the less-is-more mandate. He founded The BRIEF Lab in 2013, whose mission is to help organizations create an elite standard of communication to improve operational efficiency and effectiveness.

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