

Information overload has made attention management the single biggest challenge that leaders now face in the workplace, says Julian Birkinshaw, London Business School professor and author of *Becoming a Better Boss*.^{*} By managing your own attention, learning to listen, and maximizing the impact of your messages you can win the long-term attention of your teams.



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How to manage your team's attention

Based on "Manage Your Team's Attention" (*Harvard Business Review*, January 2015), "Are you paying attention?" by **Julian BIRKINSHAW** (London Business School, March 2015) and "If You Want People to Listen, Stop Talking" de **Peter BREGMAN** (*Harvard Business Review*, May 2015).

1 / START BY MANAGING YOUR OWN ATTENTION

You must first become "thoughtful and disciplined" in how you manage your own attention before you can hope to focus the attention of teams on what matters.

Limit the amount of information you amass

"As Nobel Laureate, Herbert Simon, first suggested 40 years ago, when information is plentiful, attention becomes the scarce resource," writes Birkinshaw, who notes that this theory is more relevant than ever in today's information-rich world. "The net result of easy access to information is that we often keep on collecting information long after we have enough to make a decision or write a report," he explains. To avoid analysis paralysis:

- Filter what you consume: whenever you gather information, develop a hypothesis or argument early on in order to focus your research around only what either supports or refutes it.
- Set a deadline and stick to it.
- Don't be afraid to use your intuition: "An ounce of real insight is worth a pound of data," writes Birkinshaw.

Make time for reflection

"When we have plentiful access to information, we also need to find time for reflection," writes Birkinshaw. "Think of this as a low-tech version of meditation or mindfulness: it simply means creating breaks in the day, perhaps during a commute or while exercising, where you make sense of the stimuli you have been bombarded with, and where your ideas are allowed to gestate."

2 / LEARN HOW TO STAY SILENT

One of the most powerful ways to get your team to listen to you is by knowing how and when to stay silent, notes Peter Bregman in his 25 May 2015 Harvard Business Review post, "If You Want People to Listen, Stop Talking."

Let others speak

Bregman emphasizes that the leadership ideal is to create a space in which others contribute their own ideas. He quotes Chinese ...

... philosopher, Lau Tzu: "A leader is best when people barely know he exists, when his work is done, his aim fulfilled, they will say: we did it ourselves." To create such a space, however, requires you to withstand the pressure to speak: "Few resist it, which is why we seldom have silent moments in groups," notes Bregman, who suggests the following trick: "When you ask a question into a group, think of it as a competition. If you answer your own question, you've lost. You'll be answering your own questions all day and no one else will do the work. But wait in the silence — no matter how long — until someone in the group speaks."

Listen actively to what others say (and don't say)

Staying silent enables you as a leader to hear not only what is being said but also what's not being said: "There is almost always more substance below the surface of what people say than there is in their words. They have issues they are not willing to reveal. Agendas they won't share. Opinions too unacceptable to make public."

Acknowledge what you've heard

When you finally speak, it should be clear that you've heard what your team members have said before you and that what you've heard from them now informs your own perspective.

- Articulate the positions of the team members who have spoken before you.
- Look at them in acknowledgment when you speak about what they've said.
- Make it clear how what they have said has changed the way you think.
- Link what they said to the larger outcome you are all pursuing together.

"If you treat this silence thing as a game, or as a way to manipulate the views of others, it will backfire," warns Bregman. "Inevitably you will be discovered, and your betrayal will be felt more deeply. If people are lured into connection, only to feel manipulated, they may never trust you again. You have to use silence with respect."

3 / DELIVER THE RIGHT MESSAGE

Teams are highly attuned to the messages that they receive from their leaders, which is why you need to be so careful in how you craft and deliver every one of your messages to your teams.

Tell compelling stories that will resonate with your team

Identify the emotional core of your message, or why it will be meaningful for your team. While it can be difficult to identify the emotional core around subjects like "robust product road maps" or "incentivizing customer loyalty," Annette Ferrara says it is always possible to do so through "story therapy,"** which consists in reflecting on human-centric questions such as the following and delivering messages that convey those answers:

- What are you and your team passionate about?
- What is your purpose? Why are you doing what you're doing?
- What are your strengths?
- Where do you add the greatest value?

Keep messages clear, simple and consistent

"If you emphasize different objectives each week, employees get confused and they tune out," warns Julian Birkinshaw. "Conversely, they are more likely to share and understand your goals if you continue to deliver the same message. For example, most mining companies start each meeting talking about safety — it's a simple but effective way of keeping the issue high on employees' agenda." ■

* *Becoming a better boss: Why good management is so difficult* by Julian Birkinshaw (Jossey-Bass, October 2013).

** "Your Presentation Needs a Punch Line" by Annette Ferrara (*Harvard Business Review*, May 2015).