



TWO RULES OF MENTAL EFFECTIVENESS

ARTICLE

Two Rules of Mental Effectiveness

There are two basic rules that help you manage your focus and awareness in all activities to ensure greater effectiveness, less stress, better job satisfaction, and an improved overall sense of well-being. These rules also help to reduce your brain's tendency to multitask. These two rules are based on the foundational trainings in mindfulness described in [Chapters 2 and 3](#).

Rule #1: Focus on What You Choose

Staying focused on the object of your choice is the first rule of mental effectiveness. A focused mind helps you be more effective, productive, and at ease while doing your work. A focused mind does not multitask: instead, it's fully present on the person or task at hand.

To help bring this rule to life, consider the following scenario. On Monday morning, you arrive at work and are handed a task that needs to be finished in 30 minutes. To meet the deadline, you make this task the object of your focus. A coworker next to you starts talking on the telephone. Normally, your attention would wander away to your neighbor's conversation. Instead, you follow Rule #1 and stay focused on the task. You do this by recognizing that your neighbor's conversation is a distraction. Now you can make a choice. You can either choose to focus on the distraction or continue to maintain full focus on the task at hand.

Then an e-mail alert pops up. It attracts your attention. You feel a strong desire to see who sent the e-mail. But instead, you make a conscious choice to continue attending to the task at hand. So you let go of the new distraction and stay on task. You continue to make these types of conscious decisions throughout the half hour, until you've finished the task.

Focusing on what you choose depends on recognizing that the overwhelming majority of distractions are irrelevant and can be set aside in the moment. Almost all distractions should be let go. The awareness component of mindfulness training shows you that most of your thoughts are mental clutter. Your surroundings are also full of things you don't need to pay attention to in the moment. By consciously choosing where to focus your attention, you avoid becoming a victim of distraction. As simple as it sounds, Rule #1 is a powerful way to increase productivity and effectiveness.

Of course, some distractions do require our immediate attention. For example, let's imagine you're maintaining sharp focus on your task, and your boss walks up to your desk. She's agitated and says the company is about to lose its biggest account. She needs you in her office, "Now." But because of Rule #1, you ignore her and continue working on your task.

Would that be effective? No, of course not. And it might even get you fired.

Helpfulness, availability, and open communication are critical for organizational success. If we all focused solely on the tasks at hand, collaboration and creativity would suffer. So, while Rule #1 works most of the time, it isn't enough. We need a second rule.

Rule #2: Choose Your Distractions Mindfully

Rule #2 ensures you work in a focused way while remaining open to your surroundings and recognizing when you should change focus.

Let's look at the previous scenario again in light of Rule #2. When your coworker started talking on the telephone or the e-mail alert popped up, you did the right thing by letting go of these distractions. You needed to make a different choice, however, when your boss came up to your desk.

Rule #2 invites us to make a subtle evaluation of every distraction. Should I deal with this distraction now or let it go? If you want to keep your job, the correct response to your boss would be to give her your full attention.

This doesn't mean you keep working on the task and shift your attention back and forth between your boss and your task. That would be multitasking, and we already know that doesn't work. Instead, Rule #2 requires consciously choosing to let go of the task you were working on and focusing your full attention on your boss. Rule #1 becomes re-engaged at this point.

When you apply both rules, you have three options for responding to any distraction:

1. You can choose not to deal with the distraction and let it go completely. Then return to your task with full focus.
2. You can tell the distraction (external or internal) that you will deal with it at a specific time in the future. Then return to your task with full focus.
3. You can choose to fully turn your attention to the distraction and make it the new object of your focus. Your previous task is set aside to be dealt with at a specific time in the future.

The reality for most of us is that we need to manage many different tasks, projects, or people within limited time frames. While trying to hold them all center stage in your mind doesn't work, mindfully shifting between tasks, projects, or people does. To explore this further, let's place the two rules within a matrix that maps different levels of mental effectiveness in the context of work.

Source: One Second Ahead: Enhance Your Performance at Work with Mindfulness – Rasmus Hougaard, Jacquelin Carter, Gillian Coutts