

Deliberate Leadership in a Distracted World

by DAVID A. O'BRIEN



Although I have been fortunate to discover many leadership truths over the last 30 years, one truth continues to have the most far reaching benefit in my life. To be sure, there are numerous leadership lessons that have served me well, but all of them combined don't equal the cumulative power of believing that there is no *off switch* on leadership. The truth is that every one of us can demonstrate leadership in every role we play, not just at work but everywhere, every day.

While most leaders would be quick to acknowledge the opportunity this truth presents, most would also agree that it's a challenge to seize the opportunity at every juncture. Despite the fact that real leadership is so desperately needed in all corners of our society today, the multitude of distractions we face often prevent us from not only seeing the opportunity but seizing it too.

The National Science Foundation and other prestigious research organizations have confirmed that on average, our brains produce anywhere from 35,000 to 50,000 thoughts each day. Add to this the accelerating drive for enhanced productivity and the dizzying array of technology available to us and it's no wonder that we are distracted at a near epic level.

The truth is that we live in an increasingly distracted world where it is difficult to focus on any one thought for more than a few seconds before new distractions arise. While the implications of this truth are many, the most significant may very well be its impact on our capacity to seize the leadership opportunity with clarity and consistency. Absent a deliberate, focused effort to manage our daily distractions, we simply cannot expect to be highly effective leaders in any of our roles.

Like the word *leadership*, the word *deliberate* means different things to different people. At a foundational level, *deliberate* is the absence of being impulsive or hurried. In many ways it is the opposite of distracted in that it allows us to be far more purposeful in whatever action we take. Being purposeful not only affords us a better range of decision making possibilities but also allows us to lead more often and in more places.



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Several years ago, I had the realization that like most people I knew, my life was a series of one distraction after another from the moment I awoke each day. Knowing that this had the potential to prevent me from spending most of my waking hours on the leadership path, I decided that I had to manage it in a more proactive way. What followed was a combination of Divine intervention and the wisdom of a few dear friends.

For as long as I can remember, I have started my day with a few minutes of quiet time and self-reflection. Most of which was focused on building my “to do” list for the day ahead. I still invest the time to do my daily “to do” list but my morning routine has taken on a far more deliberate dimension.

Every morning of every day, I devote at least 20 minutes to what I call my compass calibration time. In this quiet space, I reflect on three questions. The first is *what's important to me today?* This question allows me to reconnect to my moral compass and associated values. It reminds me of who I am and what I stand for. The second question is *why are these things important to me?* Beyond allowing me to connect more deeply to my core values, this question allows me to connect to my true purpose. Finally, I explore the third question which is, *what do I want to be known for today?* This question not only allows me to have far more clarity around my behavior but in doing so fosters leadership congruence across every role I play that day.



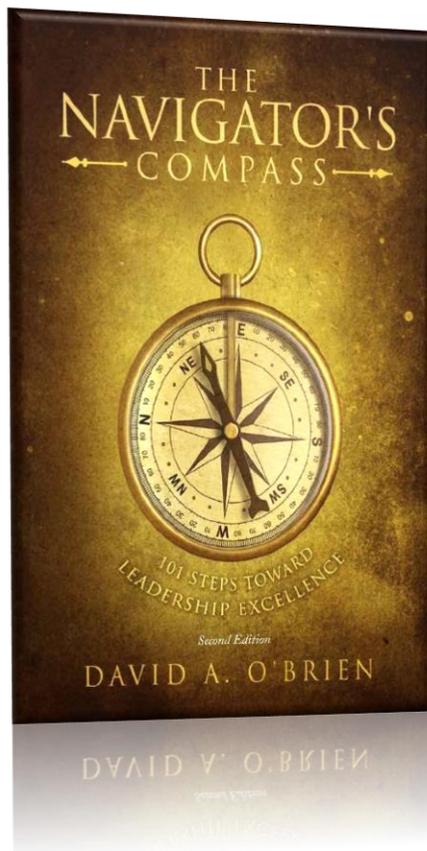
Is it easy and convenient to do this every day? Of course not. I find myself struggling with it at times and occasionally, am so distracted that I have a hard time focusing on all three questions. In fact, some days it takes me the full 20 minutes just to quiet my mind. What follows however is far more clarity and the capacity to manage my daily distractions in a deliberate way.

10 More Things You Can Do Now:

1. Invest the time to assess the most common distractions in your day and consider ways to limit or minimize your exposure to these distractions.
2. Calibrate your compass every morning through deliberate meditation, prayer or self-reflection.
3. Make an effort to slow down and shut off the “auto pilot” more frequently.
4. Initiate a conversation with your team to assess their most common distractions and identify actions that you can take to remove or limit their daily distractions.
5. Focus on your short-term goals. Consider why you want to achieve these goals and redirect your attention and energy to getting back on track.
6. Remember your purpose and what truly matters to reduce the distractions and re-energize your focus and motivation.
7. Take short breaks to clear your mind. Even 5 minutes away from the distraction can help you to refocus and prioritize.
8. Utilize a daily affirmation or mantra to help stay grounded.
9. Resist the urge to allow distractions to put you in the panic mode.
10. Remember, you have some control over what distracts you. When you re-focus your attention on what is in your control and re-adjust your focus on your goals, the distractions diminish

About David A. O'Brien

David is President of CT based WorkChoice Solutions, a trusted provider of leadership and team effectiveness consulting services that was founded in 2000. He works with a wide range of corporate, nonprofit and municipal clients to help bring about sustainable improvements in organizational effectiveness. He is also an in-demand keynote speaker on the topic of leadership excellence. His first book, *The Navigator's Handbook, 101 Leadership Lessons for Work & Life* is available on-line and in bookstores nationwide. His second book, *The Navigator's Compass, 101 Steps Toward Leadership Excellence* was released in 2016 and is also available wherever books are sold. David's third book, *The Navigator's Journal* will be released in the summer of 2020. To learn more about the scope of David's work in helping leaders and teams to be more effective or to arrange for David to speak at your next conference or other special event, please visit WorkChoice Solutions on line at: www.workchoicesolutions.com or call him directly at 860.242.1070.



Read more of David A. O'Brien's formula for leadership excellence in his popular book, *The Navigator's Compass, 101 Steps Toward Leadership Excellence*.

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