

Attention -- the path from Interest to Commitment

(excerpted from an upcoming book)

Attention

Definition according to Webster's Dictionary of the English Language, Unabridged Edition
(noun)

1. *the act of attending (being present) or heeding*
2. *the ability to give heed or observe carefully*
3. *careful observation; heed; notice*
4. *thoughtful consideration for others*
5. *an act of civility, courtesy, or consideration*
6. *in military science, (a) the erect, motionless posture of soldiers in readiness for another command; (b) a command to assume this posture*
7. *in psychology, a readiness to respond to stimuli*

The concept of "Attention" describes the experience of a flow of human energy from one person or a group of people directed at some object, person, or idea. This flow has a direction and magnitude. The direction is determined by "Interest", some measure of importance or priority, and the amount of effort being expended, a measure of the "Commitment", determines how much attention-energy is being placed on the object of the attention.

Interest in anything is based on human feelings, i.e., emotional reactions. When our feelings are stimulated, toward either positive or negative reactions, attention flows to the object that caused the stimulation. We are interested in things that have some importance to us. Commitment to something is reflected in the output of spiritual energy. After interest is established, and attention is directed, a conscious, deliberate decision is made that will establish a level of commitment, a measure of willingness to put a certain amount of effort, or attention-energy on the object.

If this were a classroom and you were giving attention to me as a lecturer, it would be because you value the experience of my lecture. Whether you really enjoy or care about the subject is another matter entirely. Your attention-energy would be directed toward me. The effort, or Commitment, involves your using your eyes, ears, and body to receive all the verbal and non-verbal communication originating from me. Your brain might even be engaged in processing what you are receiving. We are all familiar with the counter-example, the student who is so totally uninvolved in the classroom experience, that he/she is asleep in the back row, hoping the teacher will not notice. Clearly, no attention-energy is coming from that student toward anything outside of his/her own head.

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Because this simple principle of “Attention” includes the dynamics of motivation, we can design easy, practical exercises to monitor and manage changes in all kinds of human behavior and interaction. Do you feel frustrated with your job? Would you like to know what aspects of your work, if changed, would make you feel more satisfied with it? Do you participate in a team effort where you feel there is a genuine sense of synergy among the team members, mutual respect and understanding? In your personal relationships, e.g., with a spouse, how do you feel about the flow of attention between the two of you, especially when you are in conflict over some issue? Most importantly, in all of these cases, would you like to know how to change your life, to produce an outcome that you consider more positive and satisfying for you?

Attention can be used as a tool to manage change

Change happens all the time, within ourselves and all around us. How do you, as a particular individual, respond to or create change in your life? Only you can decide what direction you will take and what steps are appropriate for you. So, the question is - in what direction do you want to go? More precisely, in what direction is "healthy growth" possible for you (healthy growth = positive attention to yourself = satisfaction)?

The essence of you, your spirit, "naturally" seeks some kind of balance, a comfort zone, where you will feel "challenged enough" to keep life interesting and "satisfied enough" at the same time. The key is to understand how you feel about yourself, your own values, your own integrity and how you choose to live your life. How do your activities contribute to your sense of growth and self-satisfaction?

Here is a simple exercise in "attention" that can help clarify where you are headed. This is a tool which I have developed to build alignment among a team, but the model applies to all kinds of personal and business situations because it addresses some fundamental aspects of human behavior. If you can accept the concept that "Attention is the path from Interest to Commitment", then it will be easy for you to proceed with the exercise.

To understand where your attention is currently focussed, select a goal that you want to achieve. For example, suppose the goal is to lose weight. Then, make a table with three columns. In the first column, list all or most of the significant activities in your daily life that relate to that goal -- work, rest, recreation, family time, exercise, etc. It is not necessary to be comprehensive or exact. In the second column, assign a rating for each activity, on an arbitrary scale of 1 to 10, the scale being whatever you choose it to be. The rating should reflect a level of Interest or Priority according to your personal value scheme (a measure of the sense of importance or value in your life). In the third column, assign another rating, on an arbitrary scale of 1 to 10, this time to measure the Effort or Commitment you make for each activity. The completed table shows how you organize your activities. You can now map these activities on a chart with Interest/Priority along the y-axis and Effort/Commitment along the x-axis.

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One activity might be eating healthy food (mostly vegetables, low salt, low fat), for which you rate Interest/Priority as an 8, but Commitment/Effort maybe is rated only 4, because you eat a lot of meals in restaurants with business associates. Another activity might be 90 minutes of working out in a gym 3 times a week. You might assign an Interest of only 3, because you don't enjoy it, but rate the Effort/Commitment as a 7 because you are very disciplined about scheduling this activity regularly. As a third activity, let's say you play tennis with your family for 2 hours, 2 times a week, for which you rate the Interest/Priority as a 7 and your Commitment/Effort as a 6. Ask yourself how you feel about each of those activities. What emotions do you feel are associated with your participation in those activities?

You will quickly see that activities that have high Interest/Priority but low Commitment/Effort or vice versa are associated with feelings of frustration, irritation, or some other description of dissatisfaction. You will realize that those activities, like playing tennis with the family, that map into a "zone", a band on either side of a line drawn at 45 degrees to both axes are the most satisfying - for these, there is some rough match between Interest/Priority and Effort/Commitment. This is the essence of the truth about behavior - that we, as humans, find "satisfaction" when we believe that our efforts and interest somehow "fit", that the result of our efforts is "fair", for us. Then, we are most likely to feel that our activities are effective in making progress toward our goal.

For those activities that are not "satisfying", note that they will continue to be frustrating in the future, until you make a conscious, deliberate decision to change either the level of Interest/Priority or the Commitment/Effort. You have to fundamentally change your point of view about that activity, your value assessment, before your emotional response can change.

This process can be used to test whether you are in alignment with your own integrity or whether you are in alignment with someone else, or whether your activities are in alignment with specific goals, e.g., corporate objectives. It works because it measures subjective feelings about current activities, which reflect personal values. It is semi-quantitative, which allows a kind of objectivity. It can actually be used "objectively", by allowing someone else to rate your activities (this becomes a management tool). You might be surprised to see how your spouse rates some of your activities, for example. The model predicts a direction for the future, and a way to change that direction, if you so choose. This is a tool to monitor and manage change.

Consider some other common situations where a successful outcome depends heavily on the motivation, values and integrity of the people involved. Suppose you are the manager of a work group, about to hire a new employee. In addition to the usual job description that includes skills, education, and past experience, you will interview the candidate in person. You may also call a number of personal references, to get some idea of how the candidate has performed in previous situations. When you finally decide to hire a particular candidate, you will still have made a leap of faith, based on a combination of intuitive sense plus as much rational evaluation as possible.

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At that point, though, you will still only be hoping that this person will, in fact, be compatible with your group and productive at his/her job. You have no way of directly testing that person's integrity to him or herself and identifying the values he or she manifests through his or her activities.

However, using this "Attention" model, you can ask the candidate to list some of the major activities performed in hi or her last job, as directed toward specific corporate or group goals. During an interview with the candidate, you can fill out the table by listing the candidate's own assessment of Interest/Priority and Commitment/Effort, so that you can chart all the activities as described above. You will then literally have a clear picture of how well aligned that candidate was with the previous goals. You can also verify the accuracy of this picture by speaking to appropriate references, such as former colleagues or superiors. Because this model requires the candidate to volunteer his or her own feelings and a personal assessment of Interest/Priority and Commitment/Effort, this model has a built-in mechanism to show what really was happening with the candidate's attention during his or her previous occupation. That pattern will persist in any new job as well, unless the candidate makes a conscious, deliberate decision to change.

Even if her or she attempts to fabricate a scenario that presents him or herself as having been perfectly aligned, and can speak very convincingly about his or her willingness to align with your corporate objectives, use of this model, coupled with the reference checks, will quickly reveal whether the scenario is true or not.

What is very significant for this model is that it actually helps the candidate develop a better awareness of how he or she can have a satisfying relationship with a new job and a new employer. With the right attitude, the candidate will be more likely to perform above expectations and grow more quickly as a person.

This "Attention" model provides great clarity into personal relationships, with a spouse, between a parent and a child, or between business partners, for example. Any relationship between people requires consideration of the emotional interaction. Conventional business thinking often tries to minimize this aspect, but such an attitude is short-sighted and eventually leads to greater confusion and conflict. With a spouse, how would you define the kind of relationship that you truly want to have? Can you look at your own activities, where you place your attention every day, over weeks and months, and can you honestly say that your activities are aligned with that goal?

As a parent, when you provide guidance to your child, what kind of relationship are you actually creating with your communications? Is your attention on the child, on loving unconditionally, respecting and appreciating all that the child is (and can be), or is your attention more on your sense of responsibility as a parent, as someone older and wiser? Are you communicating your own fears and limitations to the child as rules for him or her to follow, so that he or she does not make the same mistakes you did? A rule-based approach to parenting has a couple of fundamental flaws. First, you can never make enough rules to cover all the possible consequences. Second, how you know that the rules you promulgate will be relevant for your child?

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If you use this “Attention” model conscientiously, and share it with your child, you may be quite amazed at how your energy affects the energy, i.e., motivation and attitude, of your child. The more negative energy you feed your child, in the form of criticism and correction, the more the child learns fear from you. This is not the same as healthy respect. This is a limiting fear, one that will stunt their growth – and yours, too. Conversely, as you adjust your attitude so that your attention results in positive energy directed toward your child, your child will respond with positive energy, i.e., enthusiasm and love. Isn't this the kind of relationship you truly want to have? Isn't this the kind of environment that will encourage the most effective growth for your child to become a productive, happy contributor to society?

You can see how this tool facilitates communication between people, as it allows a much clearer, less confrontational discussion of what is happening and what needs to be done to achieve certain goals. The meaning of a chart is always easier to absorb than a lot of words, either written or verbal. There's nothing like the direct awareness that comes when you see one pattern overlaid on another. The differences are so clearly defined.

Of course, quarrelsome people can find lots of details to pick at in this process, but if the conversation goes in that direction, you can be sure that they are not focused on what the chart is showing. They are completely "in their own heads", feeling defensive, justifying themselves and their points of view. While that discussion may not advance progress toward the goal, it does clarify where those people are placing their attention - and together, you can decide whether you can make progress working with them.

What I am offering here is not a "magic wand" that will make everything work to everyone's satisfaction. That is not only unrealistic, that makes no sense at all. The tool does show how a successful outcome can be possible, if the energies are aligned. It also points out that non-aligned energies are doomed to fail, at least in the long-term. One outcome of the process is that people can realize, by themselves, that they are not aligned with their own integrity or with others and that could mean they will decide to change.

Before you make a change, what you really need to decide for yourself is - have you learned as much from this experience as you can? Have you gotten to the core lessons of the experience? This is a better question to ask than to think regretfully about the "past investment of time and effort" or "what benefit might happen in the future". What's past is gone and what "might" happen also might not happen. Place your attention on the present -- what gives you, today, a feeling of satisfying growth (direction = interest)? Where does your attention "naturally" want to go? That is the only direction that allows you to motivate yourself optimally - your energy will be most positive and hence you will be most effective in achieving success.

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I leave you with a parting thought. At my age, I feel that the 3 most important aspects of my life are: (1) I choose to create a happy life for my family, (2) I choose work that I really enjoy (actually am passionate about), and (3) I choose the people that I want to work with - it's about the power to choose. If I satisfy myself in these aspects, my life is about as good as I have any right to expect. We all have this power (and responsibility to ourselves). Never be afraid that you don't have it. Even if you "follow" the lead of others, you choose that, you choose to help someone else create their vision (not yours, by definition). It is always you who chooses anyway, so why not choose directions that are positive for you (in the long-term)?

Take the initiative to create the future that really excites and motivates you to do more than you could ever have thought possible. Using conscious, deliberate choices, place your attention, not just a focus, on your own vision, with all the creativity and energy that is within you. We all want to leave this world a little bit better for our having been here. Working together, with our attention in alignment, we can accomplish more than any of us dared dream.