

Focused and Flexible

By Faith Monson

One of the biggest obstacles to success for most people is learning how to stay focused on goals while remaining flexible enough to adapt to needed change.

How can you be both focused and flexible at the same time?

Don't get caught in a limiting "either/or" false choice. There's been a lot of noise in recent years that equates learning, changing, growing and factoring in new information with inconsistency. As a result, some people fear that "flexible" really means weak. Nothing could be further from the truth.

Growing up means letting go of old ideas, dysfunctional coping mechanisms and childish behaviors that harm us or hold us back. That process doesn't stop until we die. Inflexibility, rigidity and a stubborn refusal to evaluate new information and change accordingly isn't resolve—it's a recipe for disaster.

So how do you manage to be both focused and flexible?

I've found that balancing focus and flexibility means moving back and forth along a continuum instead of planting our flag on a single point. At any given moment, our knowledge of the big picture is limited. We have to do the best with the information we have at the time. So with that information, we make plans, set goals and create tasks. Focus is essential to keep us from diluting our efforts running off on tangents. By staying focused, we distill our energy, creativity and will-power into a force that attracts people to us like a magnet.

Now for the flexibility. Often, new information emerges after we've made our plans. That new information may strengthen our original direction, or it might require us to re-think our strategy. Imagine that you have mapped out a route to a destination, only to find out that there's a bridge out along the way. Only a fool would drive off the cliff rather than adjust course. Changes in the economy, our own health and family circumstances or other external factors may also suggest re-evaluation. That's not weak. It's sensible.

We like the feeling of being in control that we get when we feel focused. Flexibility, on the other hand, feels too much like having to admit that our original plans were wrong. Don't let your ego get in the way to achieving success. Someone once said "life is what happens when you're making other plans." The most successful people arm themselves with a plan and a laser-like focus, and then constantly gather and re-evaluate information to make course corrections when necessary.

Focus means staying on target and avoiding distractions, but it should never translate into becoming rigid. While some of my clients struggle to prioritize all their good ideas, others are naturally overly task-focused and need to be reminded to come up for air. Neither extreme is healthy. Healthy focus is neither a harsh task master nor a smorgasbord of too many choices. Ideally, focus should make you feel balanced, less stressed, confident and energized. Focused people feel as if they're in "the zone" for peak performance.

By the same token, flexibility means constantly scanning and incorporating new information to increase the odds of success. It means adapting methods to circumstances to find what works. Flexibility can also mean being willing to adopt "Plan B" (or C, D, etc.) when Plan A doesn't work. Healthy flexibility doesn't lose sight of the goal—but it's willing to admit that there may be more than one path to achievement and that some paths may be better than others. Flexible people don't freak out when something changes their environment. They know they can adapt, and they look for ways that the change can make them even stronger.

Flexibility and focus balance and complement each other. People who achieve success need both traits in order to accomplish goals in a world that is constantly changing. Mastering both flexibility and focus also assures that you won't become outdated, out-of-touch and passé, because you will evolve with the world around you. Add both to your success tool kit, and watch your accomplishments soar!

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