

Quit Managing Your Time... and Start Managing Your

# *Attention*



Lee J. Colan & David Cottrell



*“Only one thing has to change  
for us to know happiness  
in our lives: where we focus  
our attention.”*

Greg Anderson

## Staying “Inside the Boat”

Charlie Jones is a sportscaster who has covered several Olympic games in his long career. At the 1996 games in Atlanta, he was assigned to announce the rowing, canoeing and kayaking events—a situation that left him less than thrilled, since it was broadcast at 7 a.m. and the venue was an hour’s drive from Atlanta.

What Jones discovered, however, was that it ended up being one of the most memorable sporting events in his career, because he gained a chance to understand the mental workings of these Olympic athletes. Preparing for the broadcast, Jones interviewed the rowers and asked them what they would do in cases of rain, strong winds, or breaking an oar. The response was always the same: “That’s outside my boat.”

After hearing the same answer again and again, Jones realized that these Olympic athletes had a remarkable focus. In their attempt to win an Olympic medal, he wrote, “They were interested only in what they could control—and that was what was going on inside their boat.”

Everything else was beyond their control and not worth expending the mental energy and attention on—it would only distract them from their ultimate goal. Jones says that this single insight made the event “by far the best Olympics of my life.”

We all have moments when we need to redirect our efforts—or those of others—“inside the boat” to keep ourselves and our team focused. (We may even have to jump out of the boat a few times to rescue those who have gone overboard and drifted away.) We stay inside our boat by managing our attention instead of trying to manage time.

## Attention!

You may have been told, perhaps after turning in that term paper three days late, that you had to learn to manage your time. But how do you manage time? Your parents and teachers never explained that, and for a good reason: time is not manageable.

No matter what you do, time marches on at its own pace—tick, tick, tick—and there’s nothing you can do to change that (unless you can go pretty close to the speed of light). Time is a great equalizer; it runs at the same speed for everybody, rich or poor, jet pilot or snail farmer. True, time seems to run faster when you’re out with friends, slower when you’re sitting in the doctor’s waiting room, but it’s actually chugging along constantly at its normal pace, exactly 168 hours a week, leaving behind a trail of unrecoverable seconds and minutes and hours.

The myth of time management never dies. Many people enroll in “time management” classes and learn techniques like making to-do lists. That’s fine. Lists can be useful, even satisfying. It’s great to experience that rush—Ahhhh!—as we check something off the list. However, by the end of the day, or the week, or the month, most people discover projects that are still not checked off and some projects they haven’t even started. That’s when frustration begins to set in. The time is gone, and there’s no way to get it back.

You can’t manufacture time, you can’t reproduce time, you can’t slow time down or turn it around and make it run in the other direction.

You can’t trade bad hours for good ones, either. About all the time management you can do is to cram as much productive work as possible into each day.

What you can manage, however, is your attention.

Attention is a resource we all possess. It's a lot like time. In fact, as long as we are awake, we produce a continuous stream of it. But how effectively do we use this valuable resource? That depends on where we direct our attention and how intensely we keep it focused to produce the desired results.

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Your attention reflects your conscious decisions about which activities will occupy your time. The world we live in today is wired, and we are connected as never before, both at work and at home. We are LinkedIn, Facebooked, beeped, Twittered, mapped, GPSed, Web Paged, My Spaced, emailed, blogged, Blackberried, iPhoned, IMed, LexisNexised, Yahooed and Googled with real-time news alerts, stock updates, and traffic reports. Earth-orbiting satellites know where we are every second, how many inches we are from our favorite restaurant, and whether our air bags have deployed. Most of us are so connected that we forget what it's like to be alone with our own thoughts.

 *“Genius is nothing but continued attention.”*

Claude-Adrien Helvétius

Most jobs today have multiple responsibilities that are constantly pull–ing our attention in many directions. If it’s true that we can recognize when things need to be done and direct our attention to doing them, then why do we so often run out of time before getting the important things done? It’s because we let our attention get diverted. There’s usually a plausible reason—an unexpected event or other distraction that seemed important at the time—and we may be able to justify why we were not able to mark the task “done” on our checklist. Or maybe we say we just weren’t firing on all eight cylinders that day.

The problem is not time, and it’s not our to-do list. We knew how much time we had and we made out a list of what we wanted to do with it. The problem is that our attention was reallocated to something that was not leading us toward our goals.

So, you can’t manage your time. Well, then, how do you manage your attention? Here’s what winners do: they identify their priorities, and they know when to say no.

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## The Yellow Car Phenomenon

One way to manage attention is to harness the power of the Yellow Car Phenomenon. This is a phenomenon that you have undoubtedly experienced and perhaps wondered about. It happens when something unusual catches your attention—let’s say, you see a bright yellow car driving by. You think to yourself, “hmm, I don’t see one of those very often.”

Later that same day, you see two more bright yellow cars. The next day, you see three more. Has there been a sudden invasion of bright yellow cars? No, they’ve been there all along. The difference is that you’ve suddenly become aware of them; you have a heightened awareness of yellow cars. We call this the Yellow Car Phenomenon.

First-time expecting parents frequently experience this phenomenon. They have breezed by hundreds of expectant mothers before, never paying much attention. Now that they’re pregnant, doesn’t it seem like everybody else is too? Amazing, isn’t it?

It’s the power of personal attention. If your mind is ready to pay attention to something—new people you want to meet, selling opportunities, new applications for an old product, ways to save money, chances to learn a new skill—we tend to draw those things into our consciousness. They have always been there, but now we’re paying attention to them.

Instead of paying attention to every single piece of information in our stimulus-rich world, if we really look for those things we want in our life, that’s exactly what we will find. Need proof? Just count how many yellow cars you notice today. Now—how many did you see yesterday?

 *“Time flies.*

*It is up to you to be  
the navigator.”*

Robert Orben

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## Strive to Prioritize

The first step in managing your attention is to *precisely understand your priorities*. There's a big difference between managing your attention to accomplish priorities and checking off items on your to-do list. Our natural tendency is to do what is fun, convenient, or absolutely necessary at any given time—but your true priorities may not fit into any of those categories. In the absence of clearly defined priorities, you'll find yourself involved in trivial pursuits. These will keep you from doing what needs to be done, but you'll convince yourself that you're accomplishing something.

It's a bad idea to lie to yourself about how productively you're managing your attention. Here's a question to ask yourself that will help you stay on track: If I could accomplish only one thing right now, what would that one thing be? Your answer will quickly identify what your priority should be and where you should be directing your attention. Write the priority at the top of your to-do list and drop secondary priorities to the bottom—or completely off the list.



*“Stay focused.  
Discover what is  
important...  
then stick to it.”*  
Lee J. Colan

What are your priorities? Stated in simple terms, they are the goals that define your life: being promoted to a higher position, providing a good education for your children, living in a particular community, mastering a new skill. You set the priority and you manage your attention toward that priority.

Dwight D. Eisenhower, the World War II general who went on to become a popular president of the United States, used what is now called the Eisenhower Method for setting priorities. After identifying the tasks confronting him, he drew a square and divided it into four quadrants. One axis was a scale of important to unimportant; the other was urgent to not urgent. Tasks that fell into the unimportant/not urgent quadrant were dropped. Tasks in the important/urgent sector were accomplished immediately, and by Ike personally. Tasks in the unimportant/urgent quadrant were delegated, and those in the important/not urgent quadrant were assigned due dates and done later personally.

When using the Eisenhower Method, be sure to distinguish between “urgent” and “important” activities. Something that’s important is something that is beneficial and should be accomplished—if not right away, then eventually. Something that’s urgent is time sensitive, but not necessarily crucial.

As you identify priorities, be realistic about what you can accomplish, and honest with yourself about what you truly want to achieve in your life and work. Where do you want to invest your attention? Although important tasks are your top priorities, most of the time these are not the things that appear to be urgent. And don’t be fooled into thinking that whatever seems urgent is worth taking your mind off your most important goal. Eisenhower’s mantra was “What’s important is seldom urgent, and what’s urgent is seldom important.”

## Using the 4 Ds to Prioritize

|            | Important    | Unimportant        |
|------------|--------------|--------------------|
| Urgent     | <b>Do it</b> | <b>Delegate it</b> |
| Not Urgent | <b>Do it</b> | <b>Delegate it</b> |

## Know When to Say No

The sun pours out billions of kilowatts of energy, yet we can deflect most of its harmful effects with an ultra-thin application of sunscreen or a visor. On the other hand, a laser beam focusing only a few kilowatts of energy can cut a diamond in half or even eradicate certain types of cancer.

Laser-like clarity puts you in the winner's circle. The most important decision to make is what is most important. Your time and energy are precious resources, and once you spend them, you don't get

them back. Therefore, saying yes to one thing always means saying no to something else. Winners create laser-like clarity by saying no to low-priority activities so they can say yes to the things they are really committed to—their top priorities.

Don't think that saying no just means saying it to others. Most of the time winners say it to themselves—they sacrifice today (by saying no to something that might be fun or tempting) to gain tomorrow's rewards (saying yes to their ultimate goal).

**Your time and energy are precious resources,  
and once you spend them, you don't get them back.**

Knowing when to say no is not a once-in-a-while thing; it's a daily winning habit. For example, if you spend two hours in a meeting that doesn't help your team achieve its goals, you pay an opportunity cost by spending time on tasks that do not support your commitments. If you find yourself saying, "That was a waste of time," "Boy, that didn't add any value," or "Why was I attending that meeting?"—these questions may be signs that you need to say no. The biggest winners consistently ask themselves, "Is this the best investment of my attention at this moment?" If it is, they get busy. If it's not, they refocus their attention.



*“If you try to be everything  
to everyone, you will  
be nothing to anyone.”*  
Unknown

When planning your goals, in addition to the things you need to do to achieve the goals, create a “stop doing” list. Write down all activities, tasks, reports, meetings, and projects that do not directly support your goals. This will help you focus your attention more effectively on the things that are most important to you and your team—whether it’s at work, at home, or in the community.

So why do we find ourselves saying yes when we should be saying no? Because we’ve been taken in by several social myths.

**Myth 1:** If you say no, you’ll hurt people’s feelings.

**Reality:** You have no control over another person’s feelings. If you’re honest in telling the person what your priorities are and why you have to say no, most of the time she will respect that. She would rather hear “Sorry, I can’t do it” up front rather than “I’m sorry, I didn’t get to it” later. Just tell the truth.

**Myth 2:** I cannot say no to my subordinates or my boss.

**Reality:** Actually, you can. You are ultimately responsible for achieving results, and if it’s clear that the activity your subordinates or supervisors are suggesting will keep you from accomplishing your priorities, you need to say no and be clear on why you are saying no. If you explain your priorities and they’re not in line with the priorities of your subordinates or your boss, something is out of sync.

**Myth 3:** If I say no to this person, I could irreparably damage the relationship.

**Reality:** If saying no could damage the relationship, your relationship is probably pretty toxic already. Relationships are damaged more by misunderstandings and unspoken perceptions than by disagreements. If you are open and honest, chances are you’ll be able to work through an issue of disagreement.

There is great power in understanding your priorities and maintaining a laser focus. Effectively managing your attention boils down to self-discipline (which, according to former coach Bum Phillips, is “the only discipline that lasts”). There is no set formula. What works for someone else may not work for you because your priorities are different. However, if you know your priorities, focus your attention, and consistently make the best use of your time, you will discover that the right things will get done.

When planning your goals, in addition to the things you need to do to achieve the goals, create a “stop doing” list.

## Manage Your Attention: Winning Tips

- Pay attention to your “Yellow Cars.” Focus your mind on the things you want more of in your life, and you’ll find them more often within your reach.
- Learn to focus your attention purposefully.
- Write down five current challenges you have on your plate.

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- Apply the Eisenhower method to the challenges you’ve listed. Next to each, write “do,” “delegate,” “defer,” or “dump.”
- Create a “stop doing” list. Identify three tasks you could quit doing so that you could focus more attention on your top priorities.

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## BUY THE BOOK

Get more details or buy a copy of Colan and Cottrell's [Winners Always Quit](#).

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

**Lee J. Colan, Ph.D.** is president of The L Group, Inc. He is a leadership advisor, speaker and author of 10 rapid-read books. Lee's best-seller is titled *Sticking to It: The Art of Adherence* (yes, we must quit the good things so we can stick to the great things). Learn more at [theLgroup.com](#).

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