



Helping leaders and organizations live up to their promise

Distractions

We're hearing a lot about distractions these days. The pilots of Northwest Airlines Flight 188 with 144 passengers recently overshot their Minneapolis runway by 150 miles and were out of radio contact for 91 minutes, distracted by personal conversation and computer use; military jets were scrambling to intercept the airliner before radio contact was reestablished. Last year there were nearly 43,000 US traffic fatalities, and a Nationwide Insurance study estimates that distracted driving accounts for 25% of auto crashes reported to the police. The U.S. Department of Transportation recently hosted a distracted driver summit; after the distracted pilot incident Transportation Secretary LaHood expressed concern about "distractions as they apply beyond cars - to rail, buses, and now, planes." In my last [newsletter](#) I shared how my canoe partner and I nearly went over Basswood Falls in the Boundary Waters Canoe Area, so focused on fishing that we lost situational awareness.

Focus and managing distractions characterize true professionals. We admire military and medical professionals who perform admirably in challenging circumstances. We are impressed with professional writers who produce quality work and meet tight deadlines by blocking distractions for hours or days. And who can forget Captain "Sully" landing his 155-passenger US Airways jet liner in the middle of the Hudson River without casualties, despite the distractions of failed gear and prospects of disaster? Every day there are teachers, mechanics, equipment operators, nurses and workers of all stripes who model professionalism and perform admirably despite the odds and significant distractions. Part of what distinguishes these individuals is dedication to their purpose and trueness to the principles of their profession - professional integrity. Whether observing them over the course of their careers or performing a singular task, true professionals keep their priorities in order and live up to the promise of their profession.

Organizations of integrity and worthy of our admiration also demonstrate dedication to their purpose by managing distractions and keeping their priorities in order; as Steven Covey described such organizations and their leaders, they consistently "keep the main thing the main thing." How many organizations and leaders lately, however, have clearly not been true to their purpose or principles - succumbing to distractions and not "keeping their main thing the main thing?" Examples include political party representatives seemingly more intent on "scoring points" and disparaging the other party than any deliberation or bi-partisan collaboration for the public good. Certainly over the last few years numerous failed financial institutions lost sight of their purpose and principles around protecting investments and increasing financial security, in many instances distracted by prospects of quick wealth - at least for some individuals in those institutions with twisted and overly generous bonus schemes. Additional examples include some colleges, health care providers and churches that become

distracted from their "main thing" - higher learning, health care and spiritual life respectively. Colleges can lose focus on higher learning out of concern for things like ratings or lucrative consulting contracts; hospitals and physicians can lose focus on quality of care on account of distractions around the need to cut costs, increase efficiency and improve margins; churches can become distracted by plans to grow their membership and coffers. "No margin, no mission" is certainly a reality, but when margin becomes the mission, it defeats the purpose. We can get distracted by a scoreboard at the expense of playing the game we are meant to play.

Integrity requires managing our own personal distractions as well. We can fail to deliver our best when distracted by a need to look good or be the focus of attention. We can get distracted from the best course of action or from doing what's best for customers out of a need to be right or do things as we have in the past. We need to guard against judging ideas or comments when distracted by who offers them. Our own self-talk ("I never could do this." . . . "This will never work." . . . "Who do I think I am?" and the like) are powerful negative distractions, and we can minimize others' distractions by not adding to performance anxiety they already have. And we can get distracted by things that don't really matter - in the end. We regularly need to ask ourselves: "Given what we are trying to accomplish" - or more broadly "how we want to live our lives - how important is this for me to be paying attention to here?"

- *What is your organization's "main thing?" What does it above all promise to those it serves?*
- *What distractions endanger your organization's ability to "keep its main thing the main thing" and live up to its promise? What can you do about that?*
- *What distractions interfere with your ability to accomplish an important task or to live your life as you intend? What can you do about that?*

"The shortest and surest way to live with honor in the world is to be in reality what we would appear to be."

Socrates

"Follow the grain in your own wood."

Howard Thurman

"The secret of success is constancy to purpose."

Benjamin Disraeli *

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