

10 THE FOCUSING QUESTION

“There is an art to clearing away the clutter and focusing on what matters most. It is simple and it is transferable. It just requires the courage to take a different approach.”

—George Anders

On June 23, 1885, in the town of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, Andrew Carnegie addressed the students of the Curry Commercial College. At the height of his business success, the Carnegie Steel Company was the largest and most profitable industrial enterprise in the world. Carnegie would later become the second-richest man in history, after John D. Rockefeller. In Carnegie’s talk, entitled “The Road to Business Success,” he

discussed his life as a successful businessperson and gave this advice:

And here is the prime condition of success, the great secret—concentrate your energy, thought and capital exclusively upon the business in which you are engaged. Having begun on one line, resolve to fight it out on that line, to lead in it, adopt every improvement, have the best machinery, and know the most about it. The concerns which fail are those which have scattered their capital, which means that they have scattered their brains also. They have investments in this, or that, or the other, here, there and everywhere. “Don’t put all your eggs in one basket” is all wrong. I tell you “put all your eggs in one basket, and then watch that basket.” Look round you and take notice; men who do that do not often fail. It is easy to watch and carry the one basket. It is trying to carry too many baskets that breaks most eggs in this country.

So, how do you know which basket to pick? The Focusing Question.

Mark Twain agreed with Carnegie and described it this way:

The secret of getting ahead is getting started. The secret to getting started is breaking your complex overwhelming tasks into small manageable tasks and then starting on the first one.

So, how do you know what the first one should be? The Focusing Question.

Did you notice that both of these great men considered their advice a “secret”? I don’t think it’s so much a secret as something people know but don’t give proper weight or importance. Most people are familiar with the Chinese proverb “A journey of a thousand miles must begin with a single step.” They just never stop to fully appreciate that if this is true, then the wrong first step begins a journey that could end as far as two thousand miles from where they want to be. The Focusing Question helps keep your first step from being a misstep.

LIFE IS A QUESTION

You may be asking, “Why focus on a question when what we really crave is an answer?” It’s simple. Answers come from questions, and the quality of any answer is directly determined by the quality of the question. Ask the wrong question, get the wrong answer. Ask the right question, get the right answer. Ask the most powerful question possible, and the answer can be life altering.

Voltaire once wrote, “Judge a man by his questions rather than his answers.” Sir Francis Bacon added, “A prudent question is one-half of wisdom.” Indira Gandhi concluded that “the power to question is the basis of all human progress.”

Great questions are clearly the quickest path to great answers. Every discoverer and inventor begins his quest with a transformative question. The scientific method asks questions of the universe in hypothesis form. The more than 2,000-year-old Socratic Method, teaching through questions, is still embraced by educators from the heights of Harvard Law School to the local kindergarten class. Questions engage our critical thinking. Research shows that asking questions improves learning and performance by as much as 150 percent. In the end, it's hard to argue with author Nancy Willard, who wrote, "Sometimes questions are more important than answers."

I first became aware of the power of questions as a young man. I read a poem that affected me profoundly and I've carried it with me ever since.

MY WAGE

By J. B. Rittenhouse

I bargained with Life for a penny,
And Life would pay no more,
However I begged at evening
When I counted my scanty store.

For Life is a just employer,
He gives you what you ask,
But once you have set the wages,
Why, you must bear the task.

I worked for a menials hire,
Only to learn, dismayed,
That any wage I had asked of Life,
Life would have willingly paid.

The last two lines deserve repeating: "... any wage I had asked of Life, Life would have willingly paid." One of the most empowering moments of my life came when I realized that life is a question and how we live it is our answer. How we phrase the questions we ask ourselves determines the answers that eventually become our life.

The challenge is that the right question isn't always so obvious. Most things we want don't come with a road map or a set of instructions, so it can be difficult to frame the right question. Clarity must come from us. It seems we must envision our own journeys, make our own maps, and create our own compasses. To get the answers we seek, we have to invent the right questions—and we're left to devise our own. So how do you do this? How do you come up with uncommon questions that take you to uncommon answers?

You ask one question: the Focusing Question.

Anyone who dreams of an uncommon life eventually discovers there is no choice but to seek an uncommon approach to living it. The Focusing Question is that uncommon approach. In a world of no instructions, it becomes the simple formula for finding exceptional answers that lead to extraordinary results.

What's the ONE Thing I can do
such that by doing it
everything else will be easier or
unnecessary?

The Focusing Question is so deceptively simple that its power is easily dismissed by anyone who doesn't closely examine it. But that would be a mistake. The Focusing Question can lead you to answer not only "big picture" questions (Where am I going? What target should I aim for?) but also "small focus" ones as well (What must I do right now to be on the path to getting the big picture? Where's the bull's-eye?). It tells you not only what your basket should be, but also the first step toward getting it. It shows you how big your life can be and just how small you must go to get there. It's both a map for the big picture and a compass for your smallest next move.

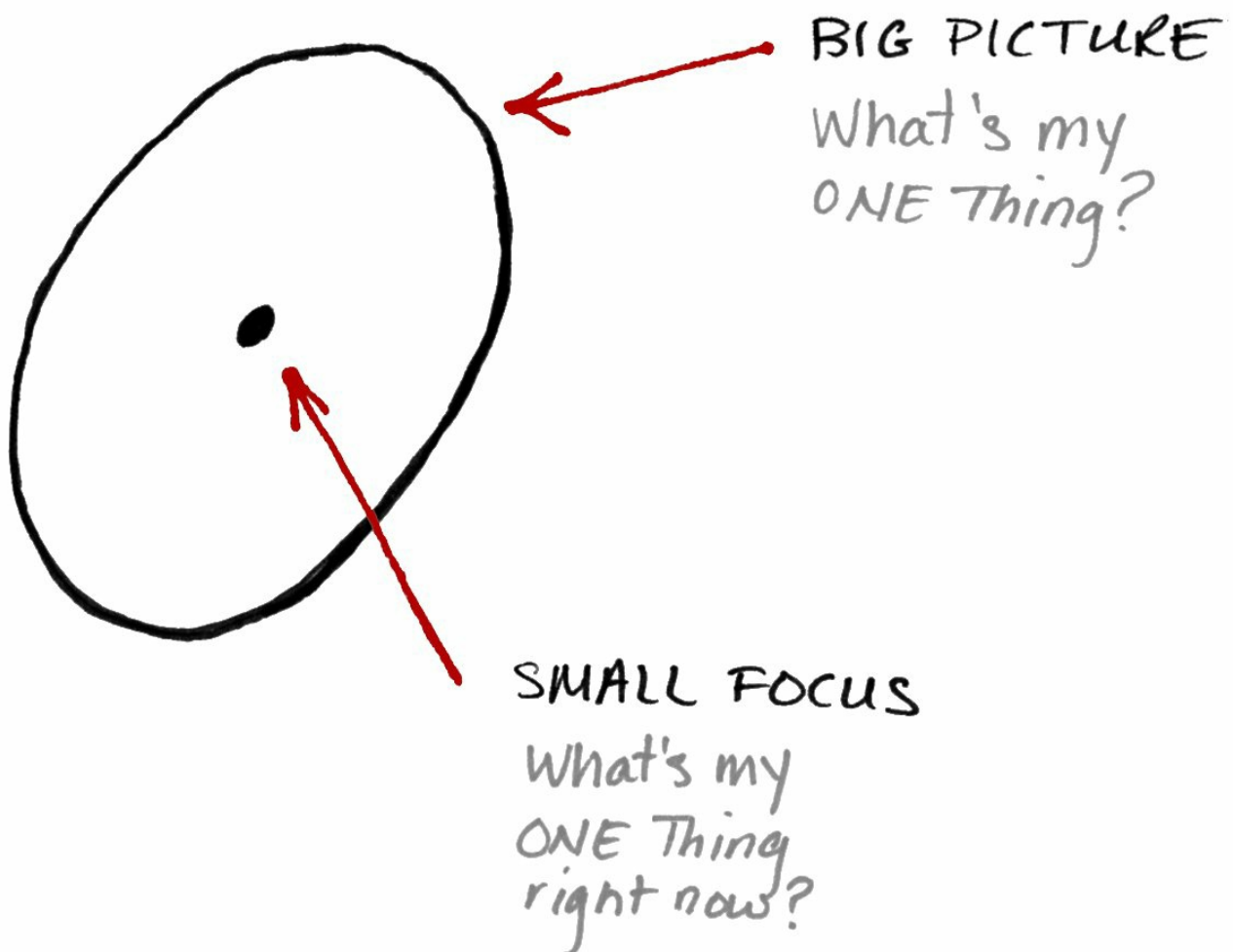


FIG. 15 The Focusing Question is a big-picture map and small-focus compass.

Extraordinary results are rarely happenstance. They come from the choices we make and the actions we take. The Focusing Question always aims you at the absolute best of both by forcing you to do what is essential to success—make a decision. But not just any decision—it drives you to make the best decision. It ignores what is doable and drills down to what is necessary, to what matters.

It leads you to the first domino.

To stay on track for the best possible day month, year, or career, you must keep asking the Focusing Question. Ask it again and again, and it forces you to line up tasks in their levered order of importance. Then, each time you ask it, you see your next priority. The power of this approach is that you're setting yourself up to accomplish one task on top of another. When you do the right task first, you also build the right mindset first, the right skill first, and the right relationship first. Powered by the Focusing Question, your actions become a natural progression of building one right thing on top of the previous right thing. When this happens, you're in position to experience the power of the domino effect.

ANATOMY OF THE QUESTION

The Focusing Question collapses all possible questions into one: “What’s the ONE Thing I can do / such that by doing it / everything else will be easier or unnecessary?”

PART ONE: “WHAT’S THE ONE THING I CAN DO...”

This sparks focused action. “What’s the ONE Thing” tells you the answer will be one thing versus many. It forces you toward something specific. It tells you right up front that, although you may consider many options, you need to take this seriously because you don’t get two, three, four, or more. You can’t hedge your bet. You’re allowed to pick one thing and one thing only.

The last phrase, “can do,” is an embedded command directing you to take action that is possible. People often want to change this to “should do,” “could do,” or “would do,” but those choices all miss the point. There are many things we should, could, or would do but never do. Action you “can do” beats intention every time.

PART TWO: “...SUCH THAT BY DOING IT...”

*“But those Woulda-Coulda-Shouldas all ran away
and hid from one little Did.”*

—Shel Silverstein

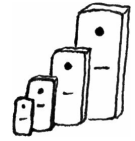
This tells you there’s a criterion your answer must meet. It’s the bridge between just doing something and doing something for a specific purpose. “Such that by doing it” lets you know you’re going to have to dig deep, because when you do this ONE Thing, something else is going to happen.

PART THREE: “... EVERYTHING ELSE WILL BE EASIER OR UNNECESSARY?”

Archimedes said, “Give me a lever long enough and I could move the world,” and that’s exactly what this last part tells you to find. “Everything else will be easier or unnecessary” is the ultimate leverage test. It tells you when you’ve found the first domino. It says that when you do this ONE Thing, everything else you could do to accomplish your goal will now be either doable with less effort or no longer even necessary. Most people struggle to comprehend how many things don’t need to be done, if they would just start by doing the right thing. In effect, this qualifier seeks to declutter your life by asking you to put on blinders. This elevates the answer’s potential to change your life by doing the leveraged thing and avoiding distractions.

The Focusing Question asks you to find the first domino and focus on it exclusively until you knock it over. Once you’ve done that, you’ll discover a line of dominoes behind it either ready to fall or already down.

BIG IDEAS



1. Great questions are the path to great answers. The Focusing Question is a great question designed to find a great answer. It will help you find the first domino for your job, your business, or any other area in which you want to achieve extraordinary results.
2. The Focusing Question is a double-duty question. It comes in two forms: big picture and small focus. One is about finding the right direction in life and the other is about finding the right action.
3. The Big-Picture Question: "What's my ONE Thing?" Use it to develop a vision for your life and the direction for your career or company; it is your strategic compass. It also works when considering what you want to master, what you want to give to others and your community, and how you want to be remembered. It keeps your relationships with friends, family, and colleagues in perspective and your daily actions on track.
4. The Small-Focus Question: "What's my ONE Thing right now?" Use this when you first wake up and throughout the day. It keeps you focused on your most important work and, whenever you need it, helps you find the "levered action" or first domino in any activity. The small-focus question prepares you for the most productive workweek possible. It's effective in your personal life too, keeping you attentive to your most important immediate needs, as well as those of the most important people in your life.

Extraordinary results come from asking the Focusing Question. It's how you'll plot your course through life and business, and how you'll make the best progress on your most important work.

Whether you seek answers big or small, asking the Focusing Question is the ultimate success habit for your life.