Are you focusing on the wrong things?

When people and organizations aren't seeing the results they want, it's often because their focus doesn't align with their values or goals, John Stoker writes. He explores this concept of the "misalignment of what purportedly is important and the performance that actually produces results."

Are You Engaging in “Fake Focus?”

During the last several months, we have heard a lot about “fake” news or “fake” media. The frequent use of these terms made me think of the term “fake focus” and how it can cause problems in our organizations. So what does the word “fake” refer to? “Fake” may be defined as something that is not real or it may mean to pretend, falsify, or fictionalize something. “Focus” is defined as a concentrated activity or influence that leads to a particular outcome. Consequently, one’s focus is a devotion or dedication to a particular effort with a specific outcome in mind.

Fake focus, then, would encompass a pretended or fictionalized activity or effort toward an outcome that will never be accomplished. Such focus may be deliberate, but more often than not, fake focus may be unintentional. Nevertheless, fake focus, no matter how it occurs, does not deliver the desired results.

For example, a friend of mine was trying to teach his daughter how to ride a bike. He was practicing with her on a country road that ran parallel to an irrigation ditch. As he was running behind her, he gave her what he thought would be a bit of helpful advice before he let her go: “Don’t ride into the ditch!” Because he changed her focus from the road to the ditch, sure enough--she ended up in the ditch.

Fake focus occurs because of a misalignment of what purportedly is important and the performance that actually produces results. And it can exist simultaneously at an individual, managerial, and organizational level. The following questions will help you assess the presence or absence of fake focus at these levels.

Individual Fake Focus

Individual fake focus arises from how we see ourselves. Our lack of an accurate point of reference will more than likely negatively impact our results, as mentioned previously in the bicycle example.

Do you see yourself accurately?
Most of us have an inaccurate view of our abilities, capacity, thinking, and experience. A deficiency in any of these areas may contribute to our lack of success. Often when we are less than successful, we end up judging ourselves based on our intent rather than our actual performance. When we do this, we lose the opportunity to learn from our mistakes and make needed changes or improvements. Unfortunately, good intentions do not equate to good results.

**Do your stories substitute for your results?**

When we don’t achieve the results we want, we often invent a story as an explanation for our lack of results. The more we tell ourselves these stories, the more we come to believe them. While our stories often serve as the justification for our lack of results, they do not help us to objectively identify what we need to change to improve. Thus our stories hinder us from an honest exploration of the field of possibilities. Such behavior keeps us drinking from the same fountain, while ignoring the vast ocean that is before us. A story, no matter how good it may be, is not a substitute for results.

**Do your actions align with your goal?**

Many times we set an objective and outline a plan for success, then unknowingly our actions end up being out of alignment with the desired goal. If you want to lose weight, it’s important to realize that eating a dozen donuts and a quart of milk before bedtime will not help you reach your desired goal. Even if you really want to lose weight, having a dozen donuts in the house will likely be a major distraction. Although we are well intended, we may inadvertently lose sight of our goal by the misguided actions that we take or distractions along the way. If we aren’t careful, our focus can become the journey rather than our original objective.

**Managerial Fake Focus**

This type of fake focus is pretty easy to spot because it occurs as people in leadership say one thing and do another. They simply don’t walk the talk.

**Do you keep your word?**

It is often easier to react and respond to things that happen in the moment than to stop and think about what we are about to say or commit to. So, we make commitments or declarations that we may not be able to keep or that aren’t realistic. Others tend to “think out loud” and say things that they really don’t have any intention of doing—they are just exploring possibilities. The problem comes when those who hear what the manager says takes it at face value. Unfortunately, this type of behavior results in mistrust by those with whom you work on a daily basis. Taking a minute to think through what you will commit to beforehand can have a huge impact on the quality of your leadership and how others view your reliability.

**Are you just giving lip service to company values?**

Let’s suppose a leader verbally expresses support for a new company initiative, but then fails to support that program with his or her behavior. This leader may complain about having to do more, or critically ascribe the lack of results to the new plan. The misalignment between what one thinks and what one actually does speaks louder than anything this leader ever said. Actions are more important than words. Our actions are indications of our focus.

**Do you focus on results at the expense of the behaviors that can create the desired results?**

It is easy to state that you want people to be more collaborative within their teams for the sake of improving problem-solving and the quality of solutions. But when the heat is on, the focus may turn to
meeting a deadline at any cost, rather than the actual quality of the results. If the goal is to have people work together and use their best thinking to truly create superior results, but that goal is supplanted by the need for results, this fake focus will result in missing the goal. Fake focus occurs when we commit to one thing while demanding something entirely different.

**Organizational Fake Focus**

The fake focus of organizations is on full display when the prescribed vision, values, processes, and protocols do not yield the desired results.

**Do the organization’s systems and processes produce the desired results?**

Someone once said to me that there are systems in theory and systems in fact. The in-theory systems are those that have been documented and are espoused, but the in-fact systems are those that people actually use to get the work done. When there is a disconnect between what the company wants and what people actually do, the system needs to be examined to make sure the desired results are being achieved.

**Does your organization reward or recognize what is of greatest importance?**

I did consulting for an organization that wanted to create a culture of respect and collaboration. They were trying to increase their efficiency by increasing candor and openness about what was working and not working. They devoted extensive resources to training, coaching, and supporting a variety of new behaviors. And yet, at the end of the year, they rewarded a manager who was the most disrespectful, autocratic, and dictatorial leader in their organization. When I pressed senior management for an explanation, they answered, "He always gets results." The organization’s selection and recognition of this individual ended up undermining their efforts to improve company culture. Fake focus strikes again.

**What kind of information does the organization provide to its members?**

Another challenge is created from the types of information or news that is circulated either formally or informally by the organization. If people begin to focus on fake, vague, or speculative information, then that information may lead them to focus on the wrong issues or behaviors. This form of fake focus may lead people to take action on the wrong things. Consequently, individuals, teams, and departments may focus their efforts in the wrong direction. Such directional misalignment also leads to poor results as well as a loss of time and money.

Whether we are talking about individual, managerial, or organizational fake focus, one thing is clear—the misalignment of focus leads to behavior or performance that is inefficient, wasteful, and debilitating to the achievement of the desired results. Fake focus leads to fake talk that leads to fake work that leads to poor results. Fixing your focus will help you fix your results.

Have you ever experienced "fake focus" in the workplace? Comment below and tell me what happened. I'd love to hear your experiences.