



# The Signature Voice

the quarterly newsletter for clients and friends of Isis Associates

## Focus: Transforming Overwhelm into Efficiency

In a world filled with endless choice, opportunity, and instant communication, we manage plates too full, run on auto-pilot, and multi-task to keep our heads above water. In our effort to “get it done”, we have lost the joy of the process leaving many things, ironically, incomplete. Yet, research has shown that focus is an essential ingredient to leading a successful and fulfilled life. How then do we build and cultivate the quality of focus?

### **Make Decisions and Stick to Them**

Breakdowns in focus often occur before we begin. We skip the very foundation necessary for true focus to exist – making a conscious decision and then sticking to it. This includes everything – from choosing our life’s work, determining the priorities for our teams, down to what we will accomplish in a given day. Focus begins with setting intentions, declaring our commitments, and then acting directly from these. While decisions are not locked in stone, there is value to making them, sticking to them, and then consciously adjusting them when need be. Conscious adjustment is different than consistent indecision and worry.

A client, Susan, struggled for many years with focus before settling into her current role as a principal in a marketing-services firm. “I’ve always been interested in many things that it has been hard to choose a career path – even now, I find myself distracted wondering if I should be following my life’s passion of working in non-profit.”

### **Eliminate/Manage Distractions**

Maintaining focus is not only hard on the big decisions in life but also difficult in our daily lives as well. After two weeks of self-observation, Susan uncovered two key sources of “focus saboteurs”. First, unexpected requests from other people, which she usually responded to immediately, interrupted her flow of work. Second, she became conscious of how frequently she responded to email to procrastinate on high priority work that she either did not enjoy or required a significant chunk of “thinking time” to complete.

### **Create Systems & Structure**

Armed with her patterns, Susan experimented with new systems to support her focus. She created a “filtering” system for handling the influx of requests. She blocked two early morning “work chunks” when her energy was highest for reflective time for her higher priority strategic work and administrative responsibilities she did not enjoy. More difficult was designating times to respond to email in blocks versus answering each one as they came in. Her biggest breakthrough came when she realized she would revisit her larger life question of career path at periodic points in the year with greater consciousness (versus having it “buzz” in the background) and be engaged with her current work on a daily basis.

### **Cultivate the Quality of Focus**

Short-term, structures and systems can support our focus but ultimately, we must cultivate the *quality of our focus* for highest impact. This involves shifting the hard-wiring in our bodies filled with anxiety, tension, and “pushing” to flow, attentiveness, and presence when engaged in an activity. Quality of focus ensures that when we are working on a document, we’re fully engaged in the process. When we’re with our families, then we are fully present with them versus thinking about work deliverables.

Cultivating this quality of focus requires slowing down, engaging in meditative practices designed to build awareness and attention, and quieting ourselves enough to really “hear” what we want. Susan learned that the big paradox in all of this was that by actually slowing herself down, she became more efficient – now eliminating many things on her list that were there because she lacked focus in the first place.

- Amy Jen Su

## Quarterly Reflection: Cultivating Focus into Flow

*Flow is the mental state of operation in which the person is fully immersed in what he or she is doing, characterized by a feeling of energized focus, full involvement, and success in the process of the activity.”*  
--Wikipedia Encyclopedia

As we nurture the quality, style, and attitude of our focus – we begin to experience greater flow with life – we swim with the current of our lives, versus against it, with greater ease, confidence, and contentment. We use and replenish our energy, accept what is there, and literally “go with the flow”.

### Reflection Questions:

1. In what area of your life would having greater focus benefit you?
2. Throughout your day, what distracts you from your highest priorities or intentions?
3. Throughout your day, what conditions were in place when you experienced great focus or flow?
4. What new systems, structures, or practices could further support your ability to focus?

## Quarterly Book Selection: Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience

*What dog-eared, highlight-filled books are on our bookshelves that we find ourselves turning to time and time again and frequently recommending to others? Here’s our book selection for this quarter:*

“Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience”

By Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi

Leading researcher, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, brings us his life’s work in an easy to read book describing the concept of “flow” and its application to our daily lives. Csikszentmihalyi describes such optimal experiences: *“It is what a sailor holding a tight course feels when the wind whips through her hair...it is what a painter feels when the colors on the canvas begin to set up a magnetic tension with each other, and a new thing, a living form, takes shapes in front of the astonished creator. Or it is the feeling a father has when his child for the first time responds to his smile.”*

While the book is not a classic “how-to” book nor a scientific deep dive into original research, it does open our minds and empowers us with the general thesis that flow and optimal experience arises from our ability to control and work with our consciousness. While Csikszentmihalyi wrote Flow in the early 1990’s, his book is an important foundational piece giving context to the rise of many trends this last decade in working with the conscious and how we interpret our world around us. His framework for creating the conditions for flow (a function of the challenge of a task relative to the skill at hand) has significant leadership implications as leaders consider how to optimize their own experience and that of others who work within their teams.

## From the Coach's Corner: "C-SPEAK: Communicating Effectively with the C-Suite"

### From the Client:

"In my role, I am required to interact with senior level individuals both within and outside of my organization. These executives often have far more industry experience than me and are 10 – 20 years my senior. I am typically confident in dealing with others but effectively influencing the C-suite in high stakes situations is often daunting to me. Do you have some tips or tactics on how to deal with these types of situations?"

### From the Coach's Corner:

Whether you are a rising star in your organization finding yourself in more meetings in the C-suite or a newly minted manager in a professional services firm that requires you to influence and sell to top executives, learning to communicate with the C-suite is a new competency to grasp. Through our experience coaching executives, it is clear this skill comes with ease for some but for most it requires venturing into a new language altogether. As a start, there are core principles that one must embrace to master the language known as "C-SPEAK".

**C – Confident vs. Compensate:** Projecting confidence delivers a different impact on others than when one tries to over-compensate. Confidence comes from knowing what one brings to the table and a comfort level with who they are. Compensating appears more like a fraud – one who is trying to be something they are not – that quickly diminishes credibility. When dealing with the C-suite, be secure of how your role can add value and bring knowledge but do not over compensate by overspeaking, overqualifying and proving why you are there.

**S – Synthesize outcomes vs. Summarize outputs:** C-level executives tell us they wish others would focus on giving them the "key take-aways" rather than all the factual details when communicating with them. There is a difference when one synthesizes the outcomes vs. summarizing the output. The latter sounds like "On Monday we completed the IT process project. We then passed the data to the operations team for further investigation on how it might help them. We estimate to be completed by next month." The former sounds like: "With the completion of the IT process project, there are two main areas that may be of interest to you. The first are the financial implications – we estimate savings of over \$2.5 million over the next 18 months. The second point is the project will free up production capacity for the operations group enabling them to support the strategic objectives set by the executive committee earlier this year." Notice the difference. Synthesis of outcomes grabs attention.

**P - Strategic Perspective vs. Myopic Perspective:** When dealing with the C-suite, you must helicopter up and adapt to their perspective. Often this requires taking a strategic perspective, looking at ideas and actions through the lens of a longer time horizon, the competitive landscape and the implications on the overall business. Gaining a strategic perspective begins with a firm understanding of what the organization's strategy and the executive suite's agenda is. Only then will you be able to anchor your points and ideas in their sphere of interest rather than your own.

**E – Engage vs. Educate:** In an effort to make a good impression in the C-suite, I have seen far too many individuals focus solely on "educating" the executives with everything that they know rather than focusing on engaging their audience. What is the difference? Educating can be a one-sided, "show and tell" communication style. Engaging invokes getting both parties to participate and take interest in the communication. It lays the foundation for building a relationship rather than a transactional conversation. Beware of falling into lecture mode while neglecting what you may learn from what the C-Suite has to say to you.

**A – Asking vs. Avoiding Questions:** This is not the old adage, "there is no stupid question". Rather, this is to support the fact that there are smart questions that can help facilitate a discussion, demonstrate strength in your thinking, and help reframe an executive's own point of view on the matter at hand. Do not avoid all questions. Instead, ask questions that uncover insights and clarify the C-suite's perspective and informs your own.

**K – Know what you know vs. what you don't know:** Trying to "fake" one's way through a topic one knows nothing about is a show stopper. While you do not want every other word to be "I don't know", you certainly want to be transparent about where your knowledge strength lies. Focus on communicating what it is that you do know about the topic rather than the gaps in your knowledge - - "I don't have data to support that idea but what I do know is that our experience with XYZ can be used as a platform to more fully understand the situation". You'll often surprise yourself by the depth and breadth of knowledge you do bring to a situation.

- Muriel Maignan Wilkins