

## Focus

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I listened to a very useful audiobook several months ago. I listen to books instead of reading them because I spend a considerable amount of time driving. Plus, I seem to retain more information when I hear it rather than read it. *Deep Work: Rules for Focused Success in a Distracted World* (Newport, Cal. 2016. Grand Central Publishing; New York, NY) describes why we need to set aside time away from distraction, and offers several ways to create extended periods of time to focus on a specific task. My objective in this article is to briefly explain some of these principles and relate how they might apply to improving your herd. That might sound like a stretch, but stay with me for at least a couple more paragraphs.

Before I read the book, I looked into the author's background to determine if there was anything about him that would indicate he could teach me something about focus and productivity. Dr. Newport earned a PhD in Computer Science from MIT, is "Provost's Distinguished Associate Professor" in Georgetown University's Department of Computer Science, teaches graduate and undergraduate courses, has published many journal articles in his academic discipline, and has written six books about the interactions of technology and society. Like many of you, I am not necessarily impressed with academic titles, but I am impressed by the level of productivity Dr. Newport has accomplished relatively early in his career – he is only 36 years old. To say the least, I was confident I could learn something from Dr. Newport because he does not simply talk about his methods, he has his own results to back it up.

A good definition of "deep work" for our purposes here is activity performed with distraction-free concentration that pushes you to the limit of your capabilities. The book is more specific about the definition, and it focuses more on mental capacity than physical capability. So, an example that relates to managing a cattle herd is setting aside a large block of time to focus on your annual production calendar; mapping out every detail of what you will do that year to accomplish your objectives. If you work "deep" enough, you will find yourself listing cattle and land management tasks you will complete on each day of the year, including alternate plans for when weather does not allow completion of the primary task. You might even need to start by developing objectives for your cow herd before you are able to create your annual production calendar.

What does deep work look like? Now that we have a basic definition and understanding of deep work, we should try to understand it a little better before discussing how to create it. The best way I can think of to describe it in more detail is to use the example of me writing this article to describe what deep work is not. When I sat down to start this article, I had my email open on a second computer screen.

I try to respond to emails as quickly as I can so they do not pile up and create more work later. Also, so people emailing me with questions will have the answer they need to move on with their work. Some of you that have emailed me before will laugh at that because, even though it is my objective, I fail at quickly replying to emails on a regular basis. Keeping my email open splits my attention and keeps me from being able to do deep work on this article. Further, trying to work on this article makes it difficult for me to provide a clear and concise response to emails as they come in. So, I end up providing a less than ideal result for both tasks. Coincidentally, *Deep Work* gives some great tips for managing email.

How does that relate to cattle management? As you are all too aware, the daily tasks involved with managing a cow herd can become overwhelming. Especially during specific times in the production cycle like breeding season, calving season, hay harvest, hay feeding, and the list keeps going. Add in the foremost priority of family along with demands from an off-farm job, and it can be extremely difficult to create time for deep work. However, not making time for deep work and focusing only on day to day tasks, although counterintuitive, is the very thing that lets most well-managed herds slip into poor management and keeps poorly managed herds from improving. Only accomplishing the day-to-day activities without setting aside time to know if and why they are important can blind us to obvious problems with the big picture.

How do I create periods of deep work for my herd? If you have made it this far in the article - thanks for sticking with me - and are interested in making time for deep work, I will use another example for how it can be created. This example also lets me talk about one of my heroes. John D. Smalling was a professor in the University of Tennessee Department of Animal Science when I was in school there. I worked for him for several years, and was able to experience his simple and effective method for creating periods of deep work for planning in seedstock production. I did not have that terminology in my vocabulary at the time but, looking back, realize it was a perfect implementation of deep work.

Almost every day, Dr. Smalling and I would have an early breakfast and take the time to discuss what we wanted to accomplish. Dr. Smalling was a list-maker. In fact, I gave him a hard time about having a list of lists he wanted to complete. I remember feeling anxious to get outside and start checking tasks off the list, and even got a little frustrated sometimes when he wanted to spend more time talking about why each listed task was important. With 20 more years of living and too many miles to count, I clearly see that a list of things to do was not the source of Dr. Smalling's success as a cattleman and teacher. Instead, his success came from the ability to step back from the list and think about – really focus on – if and why the tasks on the list were important.

Another habit I picked up from Dr. Smalling is the inability to be brief in writing. So, I will wrap up by encouraging you to focus on why you own cattle, what you want to accomplish with your herd, and the specific route you will take to get there. It might mean waking up early enough to get ahead of the daily distractions for an hour or so. If you already do that, it might mean being more intentional about using that time to focus on the big picture along with the daily tasks as you slice your tomato over a cathead biscuit. Whatever your version of deep work time looks like, making it routine will surely help you be a better cattle producer.