

RICE Field Note RFN-052

Cultivate: Attention

Attention is the ability to recognize what deserves our energy, notice when that energy has been redirected, and intentionally return focus to what matters.



RICE FIELD NOTES

When Attention Leaves the Work

The hidden energy cost of feedback, defensiveness, and onboarding



CULTIVATE
Build trust and create the conditions for growth.



PLANT THE SEED
Communicate clearly, set expectations, and provide feedback that sticks.



CONTINUE TO GROW
Reinforce learning, recognize progress, and keep attention on what matters.

Good leadership is not about eliminating every distraction. It is about building the capacity to return attention to what matters.

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Cultivate: Attention

Attention is the ability to recognize what deserves our energy, notice when that energy has been redirected, and intentionally return focus to what matters.

Leadership requires constant decisions about attention.

Every day, competing priorities pull at our focus. Operational problems, employee concerns, emerging risks, performance issues, unexpected events, and organizational noise all demand some portion of a leader's time and energy.

Some of those demands are important.

Some only feel urgent.

The challenge is recognizing the difference.

I recently read a Harvard Business Review reflection about feedback that made me think differently about attention. The central idea was that feedback only leads to improvement when we effectively manage the emotions it creates.

When feedback creates defensiveness, fear, or frustration, attention can move away from the work.

Instead of asking:

What can I learn from this?

The internal question can become:

How do I protect myself?

Once attention moves, the conversation changes.

The feedback may still be clear. The expectations may still be reasonable. The opportunity for improvement may still exist.

But attention is somewhere else.

Anyone who has tried to recall a dog that has become intensely focused on something outside the fence understands the challenge.

The dog sees something.

It becomes alert.

It begins barking.

You call it back.

But its attention has already moved.

Repeating the command louder does not necessarily restore attention. The problem may no longer be whether the direction was understood. The problem is that something else has become more important in that moment.

Leadership can encounter the same challenge.

We can clarify expectations, provide feedback, explain decisions, and identify the path forward. But when attention becomes captured by frustration, blame, fear, or self-protection, simply repeating the message may not return the conversation to productive work.

The leadership challenge becomes understanding where attention went—and creating a path back.

This becomes particularly important when new employees enter an organization.

New employees have a limited amount of energy available for learning.

They are learning the work.

They are learning the systems.

They are learning relationships.

They are learning expectations.

They are learning the organization itself.

When they also encounter unresolved frustration, persistent negativity, or someone else's interpretation of the workplace, part of their attention can be redirected away from learning.

Instead of asking:

How do I become successful here?

They may begin asking:

What should I be worried about here?

Energy that could have been invested in learning, building relationships, and developing confidence is instead consumed by navigating conflict, personalities, and perceived threats.

Leadership then faces a different challenge.

We are no longer simply teaching the work.

We are helping people determine where to place their attention.

Leadership attention is also a limited resource. One of the responsibilities of leadership is ensuring that attention is invested—not simply consumed.

That raises another question:

What happens when attention itself becomes captured?

Investment [RFN-012] asks where we intentionally place our leadership energy.

Attention asks what is pulling that energy away.

The two are closely connected.

Attention determines where energy goes. Investment determines whether that energy creates value.

Strong leadership does not mean eliminating every distraction, disagreement, or emotional response.

It means developing the capacity—individually and organizationally—to recognize when attention has moved and intentionally return it to productive work.

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Plant the Seed

Pay attention to attention.

The next time a conversation becomes difficult, resist the instinct to simply repeat the message louder or explain it again.

Instead, consider where attention has gone.

Is the person focused on improving the work?

Are they trying to understand what happened?

Are they protecting themselves?

Are they assigning blame?

Has the original issue been replaced by a different concern?

Then ask a more important leadership question:

What will help return attention to productive action?

The goal is not to eliminate emotion.

The goal is to prevent emotion from permanently replacing the work.

Continue to Grow

This week, observe where attention is being invested across your team.

Notice which issues repeatedly consume leadership energy.

Notice which conversations create movement and which create more noise.

Notice whether new employees are spending their energy learning the organization—or navigating the organization's unresolved tensions.

And notice your own attention.

Are you investing it where it can develop people, strengthen systems, and advance the mission?

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Or is it continually being captured by the loudest issue in the room?

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