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Five Ways to Hold the Right Kind of Attention

By [John Hagel](#) and [John Seely Brown](#) April 05, 2011

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No matter how talented or accomplished you are, you cannot always count on attracting and retaining the attention of others. Too many options compete for everyone's attention, and they multiply with each passing day. It will be more and more challenging to rise above the noise and hold onto the attention of those who matter to you.

Attention provides leverage. The more people we can attract and motivate to join us on a challenging quest or initiative, the more impact we are likely to achieve. So, what are effective ways to attract and retain the kind of attention that helps us to address the challenges we face? Here are five steps that build on each other.

1. Embrace mystery - Frame really gnarly problems that are relevant to you and need to be solved. Help people to understand why these are such significant problems and why so many people have stumbled in trying to solve these problems. It probably will not attract the people looking for easy answers or silver bullets, but it can attract those who are naturally curious and looking for stimulating challenges.
2. Focus inquiry - Don't try to suggest answers. Frame interesting questions instead. Help people gain a foothold by posing questions that intrigue and motivate them to start investigating the mysteries that lie ahead.
3. Excite the imagination - Provide some "what if?" scenarios to illustrate the possibilities that await those who manage to come up with creative answers. Paint the pictures but make it clear these are only pictures. Stimulate people to pursue the questions with a lot of energy and creativity.
4. Limit availability - Lots of people will seek you out if you are successful in exciting the imagination. If you try to connect with everyone, the conversations can spread you way too thin. Be more selective in your availability - you will often provide even greater incentive to tackle the problems, rather than simply engaging in conversations.
5. Be authentic - If you try to game this, you will be found out and the backlash will be significant. So, here is the catch—if you are not genuinely engaged in addressing these problems yourself, you will not be able to sustain the attention and effort of others to come up with creative solutions. On the other hand, if you are on a quest yourself, leading by example, you could have a contagious effect and the encounters you have can help both sides to learn from each other.

Do these techniques actually work? Well, think of how Martin Luther King excited and mobilized a broad group of people to tackle some very challenging social problems. On a completely different level, one

leading tech company in Silicon Valley regularly attracts the attention of the venture capital community by sharing its most difficult technology problems and suggesting that they would buy the start-ups that come up with creative solutions to these problems. Or look at the way professional astronomers have mobilized a global network of passionately engaged amateurs to learn more about the vast universe beyond this one planet.

This kind of attention is priceless and powerful. We will all need to find ways to generate it and harness it. This is not just an opportunity, but increasingly an imperative. We are all experiencing increasing economic pressure as individuals and institutions. In this kind of environment, we not only need leverage, we also need to more rapidly improve our performance. We all get better faster by working with others. To do this, we first need to attract the attention of others. If we fail to attract that attention, we will not get better faster in an increasingly competitive global economy, and we could be marginalized. That is why attention is becoming more valuable at the same time that it is becoming scarcer.

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John Hagel and John Seely Brown are co-chairman and independent co-chairman, respectively, of Deloitte LLP's Center for Edge Innovation. John Hagel writes a blog at [Edge Perspectives](#). Their monthly column, Innovation on the Edge, explores what executives can learn from innovation emerging on various forms of edges, including the edges of institutions, markets, geographies and generations. Sign up [here](#) for an RSS feed.

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