



Clearer, Closer, Better

How Successful People See the World

By Emily Balcetis

15-minute read

Synopsis

Clearer, Closer, Better (2020) teaches us to view the world through the lens of high achievers. Drawing on vision science, motivational psychology, and case studies from all kinds of successful people, author Emily Balcetis shows us how to reframe our perceptions in order to overcome challenges and meet our goals.

Who is it for?

- Anyone with their sights set on a goal
- Those who can't see the forest for the trees
- Anyone curious about new ways of looking at the world

About the author

Emily Balcetis, PhD, is a social psychologist and an associate professor at New York University. She's authored more than 70 scientific publications and received numerous awards for her work.

What's in it for me? Harness the power of your eyes to confront challenges and achieve your goals.

We live our lives as if we see the world as it really is, but our eyes never tell the whole story. They form an imperfect impression, and our minds fill in all the missing pieces – often incorrectly. We're usually not even aware of our perceptual errors, and this leads to errors in our decision-making.

Here's the good news: this gap between visual perception and reality is actually quite powerful. If we understand how our eyes play tricks on us, we can reframe our perception and quite literally look at our obstacles differently, in ways that set us up for success.

High achievers often have this ability to have their eyes work in tandem with their brains, and these blinks share their perceptual habits. Discover how to take advantage of the gap between perception and reality, and to look at the world in creative and more effective ways.

In these blinks, you'll learn

- the four visualization strategies most successful people have in their perceptual toolbox;
- the connection between perception and motivation; and
- the importance of normalizing failure.

Narrowing the focus of your visual attention helps you reach your goals more effectively.

Running a marathon is no easy feat. Winning one is something very few individuals achieve. In 1984, Joan Benoit Samuelson became the first-ever female Olympic marathon champion. What helped her win? It wasn't so much about having the right shoes or eating the right breakfast. She attributes her success to maintaining a narrow focus.

When Samuelson runs, she doesn't dwell on the 26.2 miles ahead of her. She instead scans the runners ahead of her, picks one, then passes. And once she leaves that runner behind, she picks another runner to pass, and so on. By setting small, manageable goals, the Olympic gold became hers.

The key message here is: Narrowing the focus of your visual attention helps you reach your goals more effectively.

The first key visualization strategy, adopting a narrow focus, can help you improve the quality of not only physical exercise, but any long-term goal you set for yourself.

In one experiment, the author and her research team studied gym goers' perceptions about exercise, and found that how they looked at their surroundings produced significant results.

The team added weighted cuffs to the gym goers' ankles, which increased their body weight by 15 percent, and asked them to walk as quickly as possible to a finish line. One group was told to keep their eyes on the finish line and to avoid looking around. A second group was told to look around as they would normally. The group that focused solely on the finish line estimated that it was 30 percent closer than the other group. They also used 17 percent less effort in walking to the finish line and got there 23 percent quicker.

The benefits of a narrow focus translate into other aspects of life, such as financial planning. Take, for example, retirement savings. An experiment conducted by social psychologist Hal Hershfield suggests that visualizing your life as a retiree motivates you to start saving money for retirement at an earlier age. He found a way to introduce young people to their future selves. How? He took photos of people in his community and edited them into aged versions of themselves. Those faced with a visualization of themselves in 45 years' time planned to set aside 6.2 percent of their current salary for retirement. In contrast, those who saw photos of their current selves set aside only 4.4 percent.

Keeping your eyes on the prize is integral to achieving your goals – but this is just one visualization strategy that successful people implement.

Materialize the goals you want to achieve.

Imagine setting off on your summer holiday. Would you leave without making sure that you'd secured your visa as well as booked your flights and accommodation? Certainly not. Similarly, preparation is key when you set out on a journey to achieve a significant goal.

The key message here is: Materialize the goals you want to achieve.

The second visualization strategy, learning to materialize your goals, involves identifying the criteria or destination that would mean success. For example, triple Olympic swimming champion Gary Hall Sr found success by visualizing a concrete plan. His coach set targets for how fast he needed to swim and wrote these times on the kickboard he used to practice every day. During each practice, he was confronted with his targets and he could materialize clearly where he wanted to be.

What's also critical in materializing your goals is learning to visualize your course of action, as opposed to the outcome. This was demonstrated in a study conducted by UCLA psychologist Shelley E Taylor in the late 1990s among college students preparing for their first midterm exam. She found that students who spent some time every day visualizing the concrete steps they would take to prepare for the exam not only studied more but got better results. On the other hand, those who just imagined getting a high grade studied less and performed significantly worse than the class average.

Finally, you must embrace the fact that you may make mistakes along the way. Many corporate companies have come to realize this and have taken steps to normalize failure in their culture. For example, Tata Group, the Indian multinational conglomerate, has a Dare to Try Award that recognizes audacious attempts that fail. Over the first five years of the award's inception, applications from employees increased more than sevenfold. By doing this, corporations remove the shame of making mistakes, which gives employees the confidence to be innovative. When you accept that things may not always go according to plan, you're more likely to attempt things out of your comfort zone and anticipate potential obstacles with preparation.

Once you've materialized your goal, what is the best way to execute it? Find out in the next blink.

Keeping yourself accountable to your efforts ensures a greater likelihood of reaching your goals.

Ever heard the motto "No pain, no gain?" It became famous in the early 1980s when Jane Fonda, the actress-turned-fitness guru, encouraged her followers to keep working through the aches that come with exercising. Good results require effort. But how do you know that you're putting in the required amount of effort?

The key message here is: Keeping yourself accountable to your efforts ensures a greater likelihood of reaching your goals.

Part of materializing your goals involves reviewing your past progress via objective assessment. Yale economics graduate Mike Lee found this very useful when he wanted to lose some weight so he could look his best for his upcoming beach wedding. He hired a trainer who gave him a book listing the nutritional values of about 3,000 foods and a small pad of paper. Why? This was so that Lee could write down what he ate each day and track the number of calories he was consuming. This method is in harmony with a scientific study which found that those who keep daily records of how much food they eat lose twice as much weight as those who don't keep any records at all.

Lee, understandably, found the process tedious and impractical. Wouldn't you? So, he created a web application that allowed him to track his calories automatically online. This method clearly worked, because he decided to share it with the world and created MyFitnessPal, the popular calorie-counting app. It was so successful at helping people track their dieting efforts that it was bought by Under Armour for \$475 million.

Materializing your progress also makes you more aware of where you've fallen short. This can be seen in the experience of Carrie Smith Nicholson who, at the age of

25, was newly divorced and loaded with debts which amounted to a third of her salary. Remarkably, she paid off the entire \$14,000 debt in just 14 months.

This was made possible by using tools that materialized her expenditure. She used an online payment plan calculator that helps visualize past saving progress and future financial goals. This perspective gave Nicholson the push to do what so many people struggle to do.

When you make yourself accountable to your goal and visualize the steps that lead to it, you increase your odds of success.

Knowing where to direct your attention can help keep you focused on your goal.

Ever walked out of a supermarket with unhealthy treats you hadn't intended to buy? You're not alone! Supermarkets deliberately stack chocolate bars and other temptations at easily visible points at the check-out. That's because what falls within your line of sight is what you often deem as most important.

The key message here is: Knowing where to direct your attention can help keep you focused on your goal.

For example, what do you imagine is the biggest concern of US representatives and senators when they report to the Capitol on the first working day in January? Surprisingly, it's where they're going to sit in the chamber. The most in-demand seats are those in the line of sight of the presiding officer, who determines which senators get to speak.

As the longest-serving US senator, Orrin Hatch has earned the right to sit wherever he wants. His choice? A seat directly behind the majority leader, an aisle seat right in the middle of the action. "I'm closer to the aisle, which I've always tried to be so that you can get recognition," he said. "In a very serious situation, sometimes getting recognition is the difference between winning and losing."

What you see also does a good job of determining what you do. Think about seeing your phone light up as a text message arrives just as you're on the verge of falling asleep. Aren't you tempted to check the message, even though you might be trying to cut back on your mobile phone use?

American superstore Walmart harnessed this tendency to lucrative effect. Its executives found that when they kept their shelves overflowing with products, the profits rolled in. That's because customers bought items that they had no intention of purchasing. On the other hand, when they trialed a more slimmed-down visual experience, sales dipped.

How can you break this cycle? Simply by being aware of it, and taking steps to address it. For example, you can

deliberately structure your environment in a way that promotes good choices.

And it isn't just the objects in your line of sight that can affect your progress towards your goals. It can also be in the emotions you read in the faces of those around you. We'll dive into that in the next blink.

Learn to read the emotional expressions of others accurately, even when the message may not be wholly positive.

Would you agree that those having a positive view of themselves accomplish more than those who see themselves negatively? That is quite a common perception.

In fact, in a study of over 400 people in the United States, 95 percent of participants held that opinion. But according to scientists, that view is wrong. Think about it. Does having a positive regard for yourself improve the quality of your work? No! Similarly, promoting high self-esteem in children does not lead to better grades in school.

People think that being positive is the best way to stay motivated. But when your efforts do not merit positive feedback, receiving it can hinder rather than help. That's because you might think that there's no need for improvement.

The key message here is: Learn to read the emotional expressions of others accurately, even when the message may not be wholly positive.

Those who are more successful at reading the facial emotions of others are happier and more productive. But it isn't easy. In an experiment conducted by vision scientists, participants could recognize happiness 99 percent of the time, but struggled to discern other emotions. Fear was the hardest to read – it was recognized only half of the time. Often, it was confused with surprise, while anger was often mistaken for sadness or disgust.

So how can you read the emotions of others? The eyes are key to discerning the difference between a real smile and a staged one. With a real smile, you contract the muscles around the eyes. But when smiling on demand, you use your cheek muscles to pull your lips into the right shape. What about the difference between pleasant surprise and unwelcome fear? Both expressions share raised eyebrows and wide eyes. The difference is observed in the lips. A surprised mouth pulls down more than a fearful one.

You need to frame your visual surroundings in ways that promote a complete and true reflection of the world. Rather than fear negative feedback, you need to develop what Carol Dweck, the Stanford University psychologist, calls a "growth mindset." This will help

you to recognize your mistakes faster and see every new experience as an opportunity for improvement. This, in turn, will nurture within you a desire to learn.

Broadening your focus helps you make decisions that better align with your long-term objectives.

You may have heard the motto, YOLO – you only live once. It became popular among young people after the Canadian rapper Drake used it in his 2011 album, *Take Care*. That phrase urges a person to live in the moment and throw all caution to the wind. But is that really the best course when working towards a significant goal?

The key message here is: Broadening your focus helps you make decisions that better align with your long-term objectives.

The things that capture your attention can lead you to make decisions that seem ideal in the moment, but fit poorly with your long-range plans.

For example, the author and her students decided to keep track of their impulse purchases for two weeks. Before they started, they estimated that their total expenditure would be no more than \$1,600. In reality, they spent \$2,400. In the author's case, all of her unintended expenses went on food. Half the time, it was because she didn't make time to prepare lunch before leaving for work. Other times, she was tempted while walking past a pastry shop. The rest was spent on coffee despite having one most mornings before leaving home. She spent \$75.30 more than planned over two weeks – the equivalent of five hours of babysitting or four Zumba classes.

It might seem contradictory to have discussed the benefits of a narrow focus in the first blink, while now highlighting the benefits of the opposite. But in actual fact, it's not. You need a variety of tools to reach your goals. But you do need to know when it's appropriate to use each tool.

A narrow focus can inspire you toward the end of your journey. On the other hand, a broad focus may motivate you better at the start. For example, seasoned athletes competing in three different New York Road Runners races changed their strategies depending on where they were in the race. In the last half mile, 60 percent narrowed the focus of their attention more often than they expanded it. But at the beginning, over 80 percent widened their focus more than they narrowed it.

In short, both tactics are useful, and both are necessary to get the job done.

But knowing what kind of focus to apply isn't just applicable for achieving goals. It's also crucial in determining when to let go of a cherished dream.

A broad focus helps you know when to let go of accomplishing a goal you had set your heart on.

What was your dream job while growing up? Did you have to give it up? It may have been initially disappointing, but knowing when to move on opens you up to more achievable and realistic goals. The truth is, success does not have to look like what you imagined at the outset.

The key message here is: A broad focus helps you know when to let go of accomplishing a goal you had set your heart on.

For example, Steve Sims started his adult life as a bricklayer, but he really wanted to be a stockbroker. The dream came true, and six months into his new career, he talked his way into a transfer to Hong Kong. Unfortunately, he was fired three days after arriving. He shifted tracks again and got work as a nightclub doorman and soon became acquainted with Hong Kong's famous and elite. He eventually started organizing his own nightlife events.

But Sims hadn't given up on a career in finance, and he hoped that his bulging Hong Kong contacts book would boost his chances. Although the bank still refused to give him a job, they now wanted to finance his events. Sims' parties became more and more popular. Eventually, he had to limit how many people could attend.

It was only then that Sims moved on from his stockbroking dream. He launched Bluefish, an exclusive luxury concierge service. He now spends his time making billionaires' most outrageous dreams come true: from arranging deep-sea tours of the Titanic to turning a client into James Bond for the day.

Letting go of a long-held goal can provide the opportunity for redirection, reinvention, and rediscovery. Today Vera Wang is one of the most sought-after contemporary fashion designers. But did you know that her original goal was to become an Olympic figure skater? Wang retired after failing to qualify for the 1968 Olympics.

While studying at the Sorbonne in Paris, she realized that what she wanted in life didn't need to come from the rink. By widening the bracket of her lens, the passions that had inspired her in the field of figure skating found their application in the world of fashion.

Setbacks don't have to be viewed as failures – they can always be reframed as opportunities to progress on a new path.

Next, let's find out how having a broad focus can change your view of multitasking.

A broad focus can reduce the appeal of multitasking.

Multitasking is in high demand. In the first month of 2019 alone, Monster.com, the global leader in online recruiting, posted more than 300,000 job descriptions that sought someone who could effectively multitask. But actually, evidence shows that multitasking is damaging to your long-term goals and impairs your judgment.

The key message here is: A broad focus can reduce the appeal of multitasking.

This can be seen in a study conducted by psychologists at Swarthmore College and UCLA among dieters. They found that when dieters multitasked, they were more likely to make choices about what and how much to eat that they would later regret. In fact, they consumed 40 percent more calories while multitasking than when they focused on just one task.

Sometimes, it's possible to get so caught up in the present that you make decisions that seem great in the short term, but undermine your goals in the long term. How can you overcome this? By adopting a *wide-bracket mindset*. A wide-bracket mindset can broaden your focus and encourage you to look beyond the obvious. When you do this, you'll make decisions that'll promote your more important goals.

However, there are some occasions when low-level multitasking is beneficial. For example, Diwas KC, a professor of statistics, investigated the impact of multitasking on the productivity of emergency room doctors over a period of three years.

He found that multitasking with a small patient load was linked to faster rates of patient discharge. For example, ER physicians increased their pace of discharging patients by about 25 percent when their load went from three patients to four. What was the reason behind this? Increasing your workload when things are relatively easy improves performance because low levels of stress actually boost cognitive functioning.

But there's a limit to the benefits of multitasking. That's because, at some point, the mental cost of switching between tasks exceeds the benefits of low stress levels. When the patient load of the ER doctors grew to five and six, the strain of multitasking became counterproductive. In most cases, patients stayed longer in hospital than they would have done otherwise.

Never allow yourself to be so wrapped up in the present that you forgot to take a broader view.

Final summary

The key message in these blinks:

Remember that your visual perceptions are usually limited. So try to see the world the way successful people see it. Knowing when to narrow or broaden your focus, as well as learning to materialize your plans and progress, and controlling your frame of reference will help you see the world in a way that makes your goals more achievable.

Actionable advice:

Take time to recall not just your successes, but also your shortcomings.

Rather than trying to forget regrettable mistakes, calling them to mind can give you the impetus to do better in the future. When you're realistic about the choices you've made, it can give you a clearer view of what you need to do to achieve the major goals in your life.

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What to read next: *The 4 Day Week*, by Andrew Barnes, Stephanie Jones

You've just learned how seeing the world the way successful people do can make your goals more achievable. Would you like to learn more tips from those who've achieved success? Well, look no further than *The 4 Day Week*, by Andrew Barnes and Stephanie Jones. Andrew Barnes, the co-author, trialed a four-day working week at his New Zealand firm. It went so well that he decided to make the arrangement permanent.

These blinks show why the four-day week could be the answer to many of the problems in the modern workplace. You'll learn that the four-day week doesn't just offer benefits to organizations, but also our planet.