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Top CEO Shares 3 Ways to Focus and Become a Work/Life Master

Steve Sanduski: Bruce, welcome to the show.

Bruce Bowser: Thank you, Steve. Great to be here.

Steve Sanduski: Well, we are happy to have you here and looking forward to another great conversation. And what we want to talk about here today is this idea of performing at your peak. So we're going to talk about both personal mastery and work mastery. You've written a best-selling book on this topic, so we're definitely going to dig into that. So why don't we start with, how did you get on this path? This direction toward mastery? How did that start for you?

Bruce Bowser: It started as a young man, the whole notion of you wanting to be better. I was a hockey player and I can remember, at 18, getting into reading a lot about mindset. I've always been a huge fan of mindset as it relates to performance, like what are the things you can do to elevate your game. So for me it started at a very young age.

Steve Sanduski: And how would you define mastery? What does that mean to you?

Bruce Bowser: Well, I mean, we wrote a book, myself and my coauthor, Greg Wells, we wrote a book called Focus, and I really think that the word focus has a lot to do with the notion of mastery. I think a lot of us, we kind of live on autopilot and we're not very intentional. So for me focus embodies that whole notion of being intentional and really zooming in on what it is you need to do to be a high performer.

Steve Sanduski: And what would you say are some of those things that you need to do to be a high performer?

Bruce Bowser: I mean, focus for me is the absence of distraction. And so, for me, whether it's the work I'm doing, whether it's exercising, whether it's being with my children, focus is about being present. And I mean, I think that word gets overused a little bit, but for me, present is being in the moment with whatever you're doing.

Some great books that you and I've read that talk about high performing athletes, that they get into that zone and the zone is really about creating that space, or creating it for sure. But spending time in that zone where you know that you're performing at your peak, and the more we studied that and the more that I got into it, I realized, being in the zone is about being free of distraction and creating that space.

Steve Sanduski: And how do you get yourself in the zone? Do you have certain routines that you do during the day that help you get in that zone area?

Bruce Bowser: Yeah. I think that the simplest thing is that there's a lot of things you can do to create the atmosphere for the zone. But for me, it's about removing distractions. I'm a pilot. Flying for me was like Zen. I would get up there and I thought maybe it just had something to do with being a pilot, but really what it's about is creating that atmosphere where you don't have distractions.

When you're flying an airplane you need to be focused on what you're doing. You need to be looking for other planes. You need to be scanning your instruments. You need to be aware of what's going on. So you're not thinking about what's coming up next. You're not thinking about what's going on in other parts of your life. You're really dialed into what you're doing. I can remember the same playing hockey. There'd be times where we'd be in the middle of the game and it was like things slowed down. You really were in the moment. So, I think that's what it's about.

Steve Sanduski: And then, do you make a distinction between this idea of focus and then needing to have discipline to get rid of those distractions? Or, how do you play with this idea of focus versus discipline? How do you think about that?

Bruce Bowser: Yeah, I interchange the word discipline and intentional. So for me, it's about being intentional. I'll give you an example. People say, "Bruce, how do we create a good workspace?" And I think it's about things like turning off the notifications, right? I mean, I used to think years ago when computers first came out that I could be checking my social media feeds and my emails and looking at things all at the same time. And what we know to be a fact is you can't multitask. So I think it's about creating that space. So now when I'm working on something, even doing emails, by the way, I'll batch my emails.

I learned this from Tim Ferriss a number of years ago that I'll just set certain times of the day where I'll do emails. It could be at ten o'clock in the morning, I'll schedule it into my day, depending what my day looks like. But for a lot of people, they'll be working on trying to write something, trying to produce something, and every time there's a beep goes off, or a notification goes off, whether it's a text or an email, they go off to it. And you can't do that and be focused. So for me, it's about creating that space. Turning off everything else, staying focused on what I'm doing. We live in this world of constant distraction.

I mean, I like to call the iPhone a weapon of mass distraction, and I don't blame it all on the iPhone, but it's one of the most popular devices.

One of the things that we talk about in our book is to take this little challenge which I did myself a few years ago. And it was a good test. I decided to turn off all of my notifications for 30 days and see how it goes. So that meant, no little red spots on your phone telling you that you had a notification, and it's not as easy as it sounds because studies show that you get this little shot of dopamine every time you get a notification that you have a text or an email.

And so what I did was, I turned everything off. And by the way, they say that the average North American spends over 60 hours a year just looking to see if they have a notification. So that's not reading your messages, that's just... I think it works out to about eight-and-a-half minutes a day looking at your phone to see if you have a notification, which is such a huge waste of time. So I turned it off and what I found was, I went through this transition where instead of my phone or my devices controlling me, I was in control. So I would look at my emails and check them every two or three hours. By the way, when you do that, let your loved ones know, because I have two daughters that forever had constant access to me and they would text me. If I didn't text back within four or five minutes, they thought the world was coming to an end.

And so, I would have to tell them. I said, "Look, I'm going into a space where I'm going to do some work for like 90 minutes." And I love 90-minute blocks, by the way. You won't be able to reach me for those 90 minutes and everything's okay. If it's an emergency, you can get hold of me. But I really think it's about creating that mindset. And the same happens at the gym. I mean, I go to the gym and I see people on their phones working out. And it's a little pet peeve of mine. I'm like, "How can you work out and be texting all the time? You can't. You're not focused." I think there's a reason that professional sports teams, they tell their players, "Hey, when you come into the locker-room, phones off." They go into a basket, and they get focused.

Steve Sanduski:

I think the hard part though, is, I think conceptually, we can understand what you're saying there, but how do we have... I'm going to call it discipline. I know you're calling it intention. Maybe we're talking the same thing here, but how do we get over the urge to check those notifications? Like you said, when you tried to go cold turkey and turn off the notifications on your phone for 30 days, it was really hard because we get this dopamine hit. So as you think about the things that you want to be intentional about, are there any other things that we can put in place, whether it's environmental cues or environmental structures that we can put in place that make it easier for us to follow through on the intention that we have?

For example, one of the things that I do is I work out almost every day. And one of the ways that I do that is, I put my workout clothes out the night before, and my wife gets upset because I put them out in one of our main rooms. So when I

get up and get out of the bedroom and walk into the main room, my workout clothes are there. So she doesn't like that, but I'm like, "This is a way for me to make it easy for me to work out." So are there any other things along those lines that you may do or suggest that helps us to follow through on our intentions?

Bruce Bowser:

Sure. I think what you do and what a lot of high-performing people do falls into that category of a checklist. So, I like to operate off the checklist and I think that, as a pilot, we're most proud to tell you that you live by a checklist. Things don't happen by accident. Yes, I know how to do the walk around the plane and check the instruments almost instinctively because I've been doing it for 25 years, but I never do it without a checklist. And it's the same thing with how we live our daily lives. You get up and you put your gym clothes out in front of you so you know that's on your checklist to do.

For me, I find building a checklist, so, for things like workouts, for things I love to read. I know that if I don't book the time into my calendar to read, it doesn't happen. So I build a checklist of things that are important to do and then I schedule those into my calendar. So, last night, I would schedule what my day looks like today, and in my day I have time for reading. I have time for doing work and schedule it so it doesn't happen by accident.

Steve Sanduski:

And you're the CEO of a fast growing company. When you think about your calendar, you think about your schedule, do you think of your work life and your personal life as essentially one and the same? Or do you keep a very separate, this is my work, this is my personal, I try not to mix the two. I'm either on or off on one of those two things. Or how do you think about the life versus the work situation?

Bruce Bowser:

The term work-life balance has been coined and used quite a bit over... Certainly in recent years and we even talk about it in our book. But for me, work-life balance is about that. It's about balancing the two of them. I don't think you can completely separate the two, and quite frankly, I love what I do. I mean, and I'd like people to love the work, but I think it's about going back to that notion of being present when you're working. You're present when you work, when you go home, being able to turn off that work.

One of my pet peeves, Steve, is, I have a granddaughter. I love spending time with her, and I'll take her to the park and I'll see parents with their kids playing with the kids, and they're texting or checking messages at the same time. Or I'll be in a meeting and other colleagues in this meeting will be on their phones and texting, and it's about being present and giving people who you are when you're there, so whether it's work. But working life is the same thing to me. Whether it's work or personal, I think it's about being present.

Steve Sanduski:

Yeah. I've seen that as well. I've seen couples that are walking, trying to get some exercise, and while they're walking, they're both texting. When we were writing the book we went through this exercise of looking at pictures from the

early '90s and the pictures from the 2000s. And I mean, when you look at pictures of streets today, or shopping centers today, or airports today, you see people walking with their heads down, texting. And again, that's one of my pet peeves. By the way, when I went through that exercise of turning off my notifications for 30 days, I decided that I would try walking to work. So when I was working in downtown Toronto I had an eight-minute walk from my condo to the office. And what a challenge it was to walk eight minutes without checking my emails or messages, initially.

And full transparency, I would pull over to the side of the walkway and check my messages for the first little while just to get over the addiction. It is an addiction, by the way. So I think for so many people, we're so addicted to distraction that we don't even notice that when we're with loved ones, when we're with our children, when we're with our colleagues, that we're on our phones. I try to make it real simple for people when I talk about it. I say, "When you're on your phone, whether you're with your children, your spouse, your partner, people at work, when you're on your phone while you're with somebody else, what you're really saying, and this hurts, but it's the truth. What you're really saying is that whatever is on my phone right now is more important than you." And I don't think any of us want our children to hear that message or our spouses to hear that message, but that's really the hard reality of it.

Steve Sanduski: I know. That phone is an attraction device. What else do you have in your book that you think would be helpful for our listeners to know?

Bruce Bowser: We talk in the book a lot about, both in personal mastery and in work mastery, about being intentional, about creating that space where you're going to do things. So whether it's, like I say, exercising, being with your family, but it's about being intentional about the way you live your life, the work that you do, is so important. One of my great friends is a Canadian Olympian. As a matter of fact, he holds a record as most Olympics ever attended by an athlete. So he's competed in 10 Olympics. His name's Ian Millar. He's captain of the Canadian equestrian team, and think about that, 44 years of Olympics that he's competed at that level. And one of Ian's favorite sayings is that, "Hope is not a plan." And I think for so many of us, we just get up and go through life on autopilot without a plan, without being intentional, without having that checklist of what it is we're going to do. And that's not a good plan.

So I think a lot of what we talk about in our book is just being intentional, having a plan, look at what successful people do from a... You asked me earlier, what were some of the things I did as a young person to be successful or try to be successful. And it was emulating what successful people did. I remember reading in a book when I was 17 or 18, that if you want to be successful, spend time around successful people. If you want to be a great athlete, spend time around great athletes. And I've really tried to live that mantra throughout my life.

Steve Sanduski: And anything else as it relates to a mantra that you try to embody?

Bruce Bowser: I love the saying, "Live the life that you'd want to live again." And that really has become my mantra over the course of my life is, we don't get to do this twice. We don't get to live other people's lives. I get sad when I hear people talk about, "I'm going to do that when I retire. I'm going to do that when the kids grow up. I'm going to do that when work slows down." So many people live their life for the future that they miss today. So, yeah, I really try to live my life. And in fact, I have this tag onto my mantra of, "Live the life you'd like to live again." It's like, I want to come back as me and that's how you should live your life. I consider myself to be one of the luckiest people in the world. I'm a happy guy and I think that's because I've tried to live my life intentionally.

Steve Sanduski: Excellent. How about any mistakes that you've seen leaders make when they're not performing at their peak? What have you come across there?

Bruce Bowser: Yeah. Look, I think it does boil down to that notion of just not being intentional. I think a lot of leaders, they get caught up in the busyness of the day-to-day and they work in their business and not on their business. And that's one of the lessons that I've learned as a leader, that you need to take that time, carve that time out, whether it's to be reading, to going to courses, to belonging to associations, to having a great coach where you're working on yourself so that you can be a better leader. And I think a lot of leaders, they just don't give it that time. They get into that spot of leadership and they stop feeding themselves.

Steve Sanduski: And do you take time completely away from the business? Meaning, you go away for a week or two weeks and you don't check email, you don't call the office, the office doesn't call you? Do you get that unplugged at any point during the year?

Bruce Bowser: I wish I could say yes to that. I don't. I mean, I try to unplug when I'm doing special things. So, when I'm on holidays, for example, I try to limit the times that I'll check emails. So even when I was working, I would tell the staff, "Look, I'm going to check emails this weekend. I'm going to check emails Tuesday afternoon between one and three, and Thursday mornings." I would give them some times where that's when I would check if they needed to get hold of me outside of that. But we started this in our company two or three years ago where...

And I was one of the culprits years ago where I'd be traveling and I'd get on an airplane and because there was no distractions, I used to think, by the way, because I was a pilot, I would get super focused and productive and I would really bang off 60, 70 emails on a flight. And then when I landed, it didn't matter what time zone I was in, as soon as I connected with the WiFi at the hotel, these emails would go out and pollute the entire system. So our manager in the East Coast would get an email from me. She might be out having dinner with her

husband, and her phone vibrates. She'd see this message from the president, and I didn't mean to interrupt their supper. And so I realized that we were, certainly in our company, I think a lot of companies, we were 24/7 and there's no need for that.

So we started this policy where we said, no emails before 6:00 a.m., after 6:00 p.m., or on the weekends. And put that as a tag in our emails and set it up on the server so that you couldn't send or receive emails before 6:00 a.m., after 6:00 p.m., or on the weekends. And people thought I was out of my mind. They're saying, "You're going to go out of business." Like, folks, we're not saving lives. We're in the moving transportation logistics business. We have 24/7 customer service lines. We don't all need to be on call. And I think what happens, Steve, is people lose that sense of being able to shut it down. So when you talk about that notion of work-life balance, when you're on 24/7 and you're not enjoying the weekends, and you're not enjoying the evenings because there's no distinction between the two, it burns you out.

I tell people that it wasn't that long ago when I was a young banker, in the late '80s, and a busy guy, if I was working on a project and I wanted to speak to you, Steve, in the evenings, I had to call you at your home because we didn't have the email. We didn't have text. The only way I could reach you is actually call you at home. And for me to do that, I would think about what you might be doing. So, if it was supper time I wouldn't call, whereas today I think we live in a world where, if we think it, we type it, we text it, we email it, kind of that instant gratification. And that's not good for us.

Steve Sanduski: Bruce, we'll go ahead and wrap up here with just a few rapid-fire questions. So, the first one I want to start with here is, what is a new skill that you are trying to develop?

Bruce Bowser: Okay. You've got to promise not to tell anybody, but this summer, because of COVID lockdown, I found myself out on my country property and I've never gardened. And there's this garden in the back of my property that the former owners had. And so I decided that I would learn how to garden this summer and successfully grew kale, cucumbers, tomatoes and green beans. But you can't tell anybody.

Steve Sanduski: Well, only the millions of people that listen to this podcast on a daily basis are going to hear that. Well, you've grown some pretty healthy things there.

Bruce Bowser: Thank you. And my daughters were like, "No, you didn't really do that." And I'm like, "I did."

Steve Sanduski: Excellent. All right. How about a daily behavior that you think will help a leader grow?

Bruce Bowser: For me it's always been that notion of curiosity. I think so many leaders, they get to their position of leadership and they forget that they need to keep learning. And so, I've always tried to maintain and develop and nurture a sense of curiosity, whether it's reading a book, attending... I try to attend one or two conferences a year on topics that I don't already know, so I'm always learning.

Steve Sanduski: And then, a final question here. Do you have a strange daily habit?

Bruce Bowser: I have a lot of strange daily habits, but one in particular that I like to say I enjoy, but I've been doing it forever and I don't, and that is, I have a cold shower every morning. So I get in the shower and turn it on, and it's cold, as cold as I can get it. I find it so invigorating. It's good for your body, boosts your immune system, reduces your blood pressure. But, yeah, that's my strange daily habit.

Steve Sanduski: I suppose that's one way to force you to take quick showers then, huh?

Bruce Bowser: I actually try to stay in for three minutes of cold shower, so it feels like a lifetime some mornings.

Steve Sanduski: Well, thank you, Bruce. I think we'll go ahead and wrap it up there. Appreciate you being on the show and wish you all the great success here as a coach here at CEO COACHING International.

Bruce Bowser: Thank you, Steve. I'm really looking forward to it.

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