DIG Coaching is the leading coaching practice for adults and children looking to manage attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) symptoms and attention deficit disorder (ADD) symptoms. We focus on managing symptoms of attention deficit disorder, adults with ADD, or adults who have children with ADHD. DIG Coaching, led by attention coach Jeff Copper, helps adults and children (particularly those diagnosed with or impacted by attention deficit disorder or its symptoms) in life or business who are stuck, overwhelmed, or frustrated. DIG Coaching helps adults and children get unstuck and moving forward by helping to open their minds and pay attention to what works.
What Is Attention and Why Should I Pay Attention to It?
By Jeff Copper, Manager & Head Coach, DIG Coaching Practice LLC

As an attention coach, I write a lot about attention. Recently, I was asked to explain attention and why it is such a big deal; hence, the inspiration for this newsletter. Before I proceed, let me start with a basic explanation of the nature of attention. Attention is the cognitive process of selectively concentrating on one aspect of the environment while ignoring other things. It is about choice....choosing what to focus on and what to ignore.

Consider this....at present, you are paying attention to this article and what is in front of you. Now, pause and turn around. Pay attention to what is behind you and ignore what is in front of you. If you pause long enough to observe what is behind you, it is likely you will realize things that never occurred to you. A perfect example of this is the water stain that I just noticed in the corner of my office that is seemingly coming from a leak in my window. I never noticed it before because I wasn’t paying attention to it.

You may recall the following statement, which I use quite frequently: “What is obvious depends on what you pay attention to.” I use it often because it encapsulates the nature of attention. Let me illustrate further with a true story. Years ago, I was on a business call that ended with detailed driving instructions designed to get me from where I was to my appointment. I was told to turn right when I passed the bank. I followed the detailed instructions to the letter, finding myself in a remote area with no bank in sight. Lost, I called for help. Turns out I was exactly where I was supposed to be. I was lost because I was looking for a bank (the kind you put money in) when I should have been looking for a bank as in a hill. Thus, I was selectively concentrating on a bank that you put money in, ignoring the other definitions of a “bank,” which is why I was stuck.

Let me share another example. What color is the following word? **Green.** Did you say green or red? In other words, did you pay attention to the word “green” or to the color “red”? Put differently, were you instinctively or selectively paying attention to reading the word or focusing on the color? You see, what you pay attention to really is a choice.

Now that you have a better sense for what attention is, let me ask you this: Why should we pay attention to it? Because it’s important! As an attention coach, I’ve found that being “stuck” is the telltale sign (i.e., a symptom) that you are not paying attention to the right thing. Just like in my directions example. I was stuck because I wasn’t paying attention to the right definition of a bank. In the color example, if you didn’t say red, then you were paying attention to the wrong thing. Same goes for curing cancer. Assuming cancer is curable, we have not done it yet because we have not figured out exactly what to pay attention to.

In my work as a coach, I’d say ninety-five percent of the time the reason people get stuck is that they are simply paying attention to the wrong thing. Interestingly enough, ninety-five percent of those who come to coaching would swear they are paying attention to the right thing....thinking they just need to try harder. Kind of like when I was looking for my appointment. I swore there was no bank in sight.

So, how do you figure out what to pay attention to? For me, it starts by paying attention to what you are paying attention to. Had I realized I was paying attention to the kind of bank that has a safe, I might have had the insight to realize there are other kinds of banks, such as one that resembles a hill, and then gotten unstuck. The same goes for the color of the word “green.” If you pay attention to the fact you are reading the word, it opens the opportunity for you to have the insight to look at the color of the font. The point here is this...once you isolate what you are paying attention to, it is easier to pay attention to alternatives.

In coaching, I’ve found a common obstacle for many people is that they are paying attention to how others do something, never realizing how they themselves do it. To understand, consider this. Imagine you are left-handed living in a right-handed world. The obvious solution when it is time for a kindergartner to cut and
paste is to give the child a pair of right-handed scissors. When the child struggles, it is a sign that maybe we are paying attention to the wrong thing (i.e., that the child is right-handed). Once we realize this, it opens us up to the insight that the child might be left-handed and needs a pair of left-handed scissors.

I like the scissors example because it is how I see adults who have attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). You see, what determines if a person is right-handed or left-handed is the brain's wiring. The same is true for those with ADHD. Their brain wiring is different, yet most of them are paying attention to such things as Franklin Covey’s organizational solutions, which work for some people, but not for them (just like right-handed scissors). It is in the moment when a person with ADHD pays attention to the fact that he is looking at how others “do it” that he can gain insight as to how “he does it” and then become open to new solutions (like looking for a hill, not a bank with a safe).

In summary, attention is a cognitive process of selectively concentrating on one aspect of the environment while ignoring other things. It is about choice. If you understand the nature of attention, you will realize that, if you are stuck, chances are you are paying attention to the wrong thing. If you pay attention to what you are paying attention to, it opens your mind, enabling you to have an insight that gives you a different way of looking at the situation that many times will lead to an obvious solution, which may be as simple as turning right after a hill.