

PLAYBOOK

# The Science of High-Performing Leadership: Unleashing Your Potential in the *AI Era*

THE WORK INNOVATION LAB

BY  asana

**WELLS**  
**PERFORMANCE**



# Introduction

Imagine a high-performing leader. What comes to mind? A charismatic visionary with an uncanny knack for making the right decisions? A tireless workaholic who seems to have more hours in the day than the rest of us? Or perhaps a natural-born leader, blessed with traits that destine them for success?

But what if we told you that the secret to high performance isn't a secret at all? It's not about innate talent—it's about working smarter (not harder), and it's grounded in science.

**The Work Innovation Lab** by Asana, in collaboration with Greg Wells, Ph.D., founder and CEO of **Wells Performance**, embarked on a comprehensive study of 6,000 high-performing executives and leaders from the world's top companies including Deloitte, Royal Bank of Canada, and Bank of Montreal.

The goal was to uncover the science-backed strategies that can turn anyone into a high-performing leader.

What we found was that high-performing leaders do three things differently:

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- 01 **They guard their attention fiercely.**

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  - 02 **They structure their work methodically.**

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  - 03 **They prioritize mental fitness.**

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# 1 *The science of focusing your attention*

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In a world that's constantly demanding more of us, the secret to high performance is actually to do less. It's about focusing your attention on one task at a time, and doing it well.

Our study found a strong correlation between leaders who could focus effectively on one task before moving on to the next and those who met or exceeded their performance expectations (corr = 0.68,  $p=2.11E-288$ ).

#### LEARN TO SINGLE TASK

Our research shows that the highest-performing leaders in the workplace recognize the **fallacy of multitasking** and focus instead on completing tasks sequentially in order of priority. This ability to shut down multitasking is a characteristic of high-performance athletes and members of special forces units in the military. As pressure mounts, their focus and attention must narrow.

Think of your brain as the host of an exclusive party. You've got a limited supply of gourmet hors d'oeuvres (that's your brain's blood flow) to serve to your VIP guests (the tasks at hand). Now, if you try to entertain too many guests at once, you'll spread the delicacies so thin, no one gets to truly savor the flavor.

They'll leave the party unsatisfied and you'll feel like a bad host. Not the outcome you want, right? But if you invite a select few, one at a time, you can give them the five-star treatment they deserve. They get to feast on the gourmet bites, leaving satiated and impressed.

And you? You feel like the ultimate host because you've nailed it. That's what focusing on one task at a time feels like—acing one guest (task) at a time. Now, that's a party everyone wants an invite to!

AI can also help you with single tasking. As a leader, harnessing the power of AI for low cognition and high-energy tasks can not only save you time and energy but also increase overall productivity and efficiency. For example, as a Marketing leader, AI can analyze customer behavior and preferences to predict trends, create personalized experiences, and guide marketing and sales strategies.

#### LEARN TO BLOCK OUT DISTRACTIONS

One of the biggest enemies of single-tasking is distractions. Our research found a **strong correlation between leaders who could block out distractions and those who could maintain their attention effectively on one task before moving on to the next** (corr=0.75,  $p<0.001$ ).

To effectively block off distractions, you can easily implement two key strategies →

01 TURN OFF DEVICE NOTIFICATIONS DURING MEETINGS

Turning off device notifications during meetings is more than just a courtesy—it's a strategy for success. According to a study by the University of California Irvine, distractions can be costly, taking an average of **23 minutes and 15 seconds** to recover from. By silencing notifications, you're not just avoiding an interruption—you can be saving nearly half an hour of recovery time.

Every ping and buzz on your smartphone has the potential to chip away at your mental resources, making it harder to focus and contribute to the meeting. **Research** has found that even the mere presence of a smartphone can adversely affect cognitive capacity! By turning off notifications, you're preserving your cognitive capacity, keeping your mind sharp and ready to engage.

AI tools can intelligently mute or prioritize notifications during important meetings, ensuring that your attention remains undivided and you can think clearly. Our research found that **thinking clearly is a significant contributor to overall high performance** (corr=0.67, p=3.01E-129).

02 DELEGATE TASKS TO AI SO YOU CAN FOCUS ON HIGHER-IMPACT WORK

Effective leaders understand the importance of delegation in driving success. With AI, leaders can delegate at scale, using AI and automation to automate routine tasks.

The more effective leaders delegate. According to **research**, CEOs who excel in delegating generate 33 percent higher revenue. These executives know they can't accomplish everything alone. Instead, they position their team to tackle tasks they're confident they'll achieve—in turn empowering employees, boosting morale, and increasing productivity. In the process, executives can focus on activities that will yield the highest returns and grow the company.

By harnessing the capabilities of AI tools, leaders can seamlessly offload routine and mundane tasks to smart systems, freeing up their precious time and energy. The advent of AI-powered assistants allows leaders to entrust repetitive responsibilities to these digital helpers, allowing them to concentrate on strategic decision-making and activities that yield the highest returns.

One striking example of AI's assistive role can be observed in the healthcare sector. **Research** demonstrates how AI acts as an invaluable ally for doctors, facilitating better person-centered doctor-patient relationships. With AI taking on administrative burdens and automating time-consuming tasks like taking notes for chart records, doctors can redirect their focus toward building deeper connections with patients and delivering personalized care. This transformative shift not only enhances the quality of healthcare but also exemplifies how AI empowers leaders in their delegation endeavors.

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*The power of  
structure*

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High-performing leaders don't leave success to chance. They're methodical, with built-in routines, structures, and processes. This isn't just about being organized—it's about taking control.

Clear structures reduce the likelihood of decision-fatigue in your workflow—which commonly afflicts leaders. Why do astronauts have checklists? So they don't need to make a decision during a countdown. Why do athletes have routines? So they don't need to make a decision during a critical moment in a game. They're controlling for the moments when they're less likely to make good decisions—during times of high pressure or increased exhaustion—by removing choices through structured preparation and planning.

Our ability to focus is affected by our “**locus of control**”—how much agency and control we feel over our life and work. When a person feels they have little control over what happens to them, their ability to focus wanes. This aligns with research on **learned helplessness**—when people believe they can't change their circumstances, they are less likely to try to do so.

Our research found that a **lack of control can lead to stress** (corr = 0.78, p = 3.29E-199), **exhaustion** (corr = 0.66, p = 3.95E-292), and **irritability, impatience, anxiousness** (corr = 0.72, p < 0.001). But by clearly communicating goals, breaking down tasks, and using AI tools to manage and visualize progress, leaders can regain control and set their teams up for success.

*locus of control (n.)*

How much agency and control we feel we have over our life and work. The more control we feel we have over our circumstances, the higher our ability to focus becomes.

So, how do you gain control as a leader?

#### SLOW DOWN TO SPEED UP

One tempting tactic for gaining control might be to move faster and with more vigor. But that's not what high-performing leaders do. Instead, they recognize the importance of slowing down.

Decreasing mental activation by 25 to 50%—known as an alpha brainwave state—is critical for absorbing new information and strategizing effectively. This “slowing down” happens by taking strategic breaks to recharge.

Instead of consistently working at 65-85% intensity, try alternating between periods of working at 100% and 30%. This 100% is focused work alternated with deep rest and recovery. Working in this way increases strategic thinking, problem-solving, and reflection.

#### ESTABLISH GOAL HIERARCHIES

When a professional athlete is training for an event or a game, they don't start with their training in mind. They begin by visualizing the moment when they cross that finish line or score that winning goal. Then, they work backwards, building a plan to support that dream. The end goal is their inspiration, so that even when they're exhausted from a 12-hour training day, they are able to rest, wake up, and do it all again.

This is the power of a well-structured goal hierarchy. It provides a clear vision of success and a roadmap to achieve it, keeping teams focused and motivated even in the face of challenges. In our research, we found a strong relationship between leaders' ability to focus effectively and their ability to meet or exceed their performance expectation (corr=0.68, p<0.001).

#### FIND YOUR ULTRADIAN RHYTHM

Optimizing your performance isn't just about managing tasks and priorities. It's also about aligning them with your natural energy patterns known as ultradian rhythms. These rhythms determine the duration of your peak alertness and productivity during specific periods.

By being aware of your ultradian rhythms, you can strategically schedule and tackle important tasks during your high-energy periods while taking well-deserved breaks during others.

To learn about your ultradian rhythms, track your energy levels during the day. Note times when you are energized, focused, and alert, and how long those periods last. Then strategically align your highest priority tasks with times when you are effortlessly energized.





#### ULTRADIAN RHYTHMS IN PRACTICE

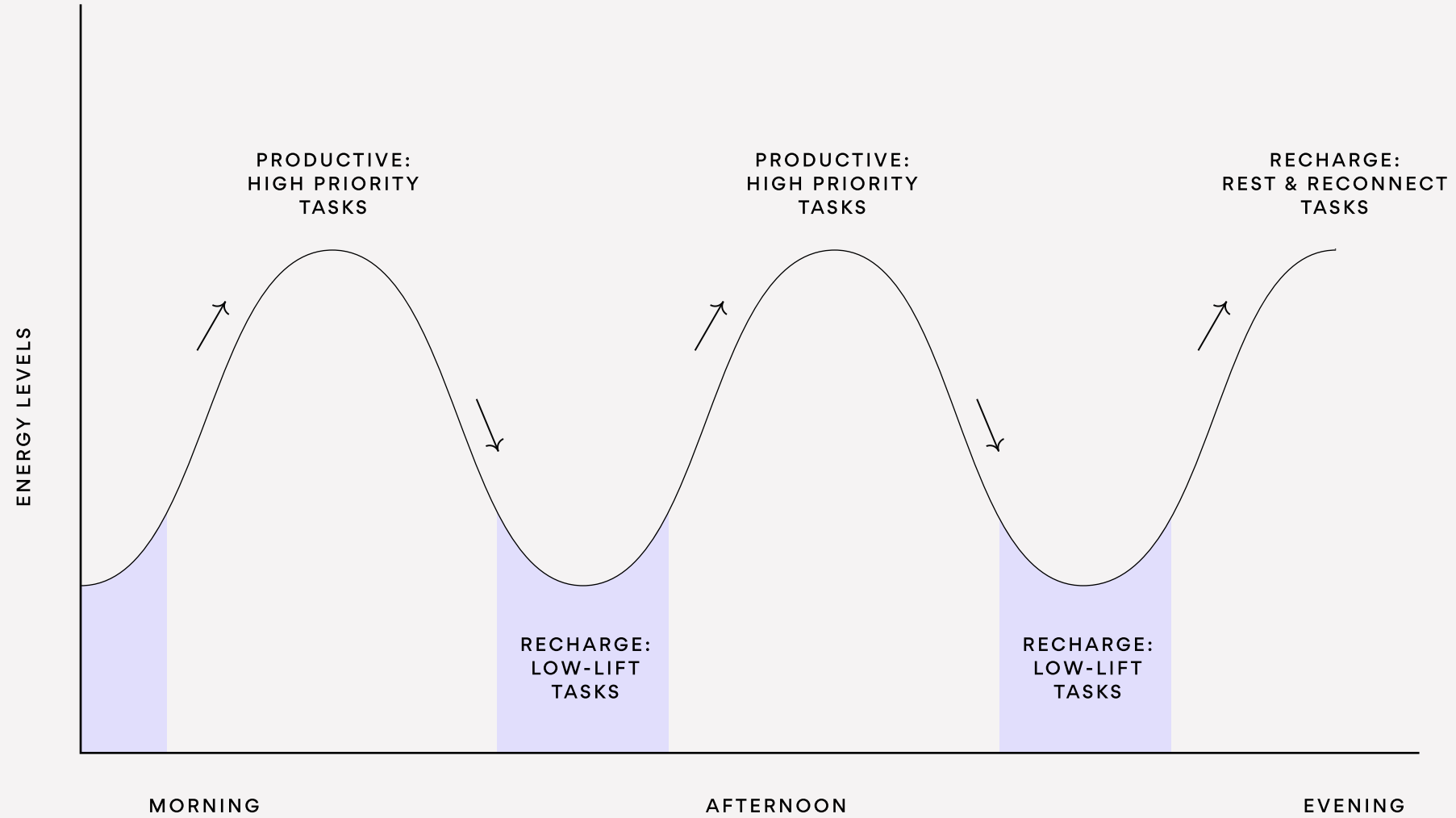
Let's say you're a Chief Marketing Officer overseeing a critical marketing campaign. By aligning your ultradian rhythms with your energy levels, you can enhance your productivity and achieve better results.

Leverage your peak energy and mental clarity in the morning to tackle tasks that require deep concentration and creative thinking.

This might include developing innovative marketing strategies, brainstorming campaign ideas, and analyzing data to make informed decisions.

As your energy dips in the early afternoon, plan for a break or engage in less mentally demanding activities like attending meetings or addressing emails. After recharging, utilize your rising energy levels to focus on executing tasks such as content creation, visual design, and coordinating with your team members to bring the campaign to life.

AI-powered tools can assist by analyzing your energy patterns, providing personalized task reminders, and offering insights on structuring your workday to align with your ultradian rhythms.



# 3

*The importance  
of mental health  
and fitness*

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High-performing leaders understand the importance of mental health and fitness. Our research found that improved mental health was highly correlated to leaders' ability to focus (corr=0.80, p=1.69E-217). What's more, our research suggests that it's a two-way street: If leaders improve their ability to focus, their mental health was also reported to be better.

No matter which direction you approach good mental health—as a driver for improving attention or a result of extended concentration—mental health is vital for effective leadership. **We found that mental health plays a significant role in leaders' ability to meet or exceed performance expectations** (corr = 0.80, p = 1.69E-217).

There are a number of research-backed strategies you can implement to build your mental fitness and wellbeing →

### *Meditate*

Control your attention and learn to live in the moment. Regular practice of mindfulness meditation has been shown to significantly enhance our ability to move between beta, alpha, and theta brainwave activity (the brainwaves that are associated with focus, strategizing and creativity respectively), leading to improved cognitive performance and mental wellbeing.

### *Exercise*

Exercise stimulates the production of brain derived neurotrophic factor (BDNF) that sparks new neuron growth that facilitates memory and learning. Regular physical activity can help you elevate your mental wellbeing and enhance your cognitive performance.

In our research we've found a strong correlation between consistent exercise and high performance at work (corr=0.67; p=1.62E-128).

### *Cold exposure*

Cold water can increase levels of beta-endorphins, which produce feelings of euphoria, regulate the reward systems in the brain, and help to diminish brain activity related to stress. Thirty seconds of cold water at the end of your morning shower can help sharpen your brain function and set you up for your day. This also enhances your immune system to keep you healthy.

# Conclusion

The path to becoming a high-performing leader is not a secret. It's a science, backed by data and research.

By defending your focus, strategically protecting your time, and adopting the right mindset, you —with some help from AI—can unlock your potential and lead your team to unparalleled success in an era of uncertainty and rapid change.

ATTRIBUTES COMPARED	CORRELATION COEFFICIENT	P
Focus and Concentrate Effectively on One Task Before Moving on To The Next   Meet or Exceed Personal Expectations	0.68	2.11 <sup>-288</sup>
Block Out Distractions   Focus and Concentrate Effectively on One Task Before Moving on To The Next	0.75	<0.001
Thinking Clearly   High Performance	0.67	3.01 <sup>-129</sup>
Lack of control   Stress	0.78	3.29 <sup>-199</sup>
Lack of control   Exhaustion	0.66	3.95 <sup>-292</sup>
Lack of control   Irritability, impatience, anxiousness	0.72	<0.001
Mental health   Ability to Focus	0.80	1.69 <sup>-217</sup>
Mental health   Meet or Exceed Performance Expectations	0.80	1.69 <sup>-217</sup>
Physical activity   High performance	0.67	1.62 <sup>-128</sup>