

1 The Quiet Eye

Every significant decision in professional life has a moment just before it begins. A meeting that will determine a project's future. A conversation that could shift a relationship. A presentation that could open or close a door. In that fraction of time, before the words begin, where does attention go?

Most leaders never examine this question seriously, because the professional world does not prompt them to. Calendars are built back-to-back. Meetings begin before the previous conversation has properly ended. The space between demands is filled by the next demand. In that context, the quality of attention arriving at any given moment is treated as fixed, a function of mood and circumstance rather than something that can be deliberately shaped.

The evidence suggests otherwise. What researchers have found by studying the world's best performers under pressure challenges almost every instinct that a high-stakes moment produces. And the findings apply as directly to the leader walking into a board meeting as they do to the athlete standing over a penalty. The mechanism is the same. The consequences are the same. What separates the best from the very good, in both cases, is not what most people would expect.

The Moment Before the Moment

Watch a professional golfer preparing to putt. The walk to the ball is purposeful. The practice strokes are deliberate. The caddie has already stepped back. And then, just before the club is drawn back, something happens that most spectators do not consciously notice. The golfer's gaze settles. Not scanning the line one final time. Not checking the hole again. Settling on a fixed point just behind the ball, for a fraction of a second longer than anything that came before it. Then the stroke. Then the result.