

May 2020

## Leave the cult of focus Embrace your curiosity

By Nancy Ellen Miller



Photo by ERIKA CRISTINA

**W**ithout focus, life would be a blur, right? Focus enables you to finish your tax returns, avoid accidents on the 401, and win a game of chess.

Google “laser focus,” and you’ll generate dozens of articles that remind you of its value. “When you focus all your energy on one thing, like a laser that produces a single light,” writes one entrepreneur for *LifeHack*, “you will master the art of consistently generating quality outcomes.”

It might just be me, but whenever I hear the term “laser-focused,” I see a man in a suit with laser beams for eyes. He’s hovering over a desk or delivering a PowerPoint to a roundtable of execs. He’s the master of productivity. He’s a few surgeries away from the Bionic Man. Sometimes all he has to do is look at things and they get done. He’s like Midas,

but instead using touch to turn objects to gold, he uses vision to get results.

Sometimes I wish I were that man. But it turns out experts on the brain have found that laser-like focus 24/7 leads to burnout. It dampens creativity and restricts the kind of inquiry that leads to innovation. The trick is not to maintain focus, but to switch between states of focus and “unfocus” to optimally unlock the brain’s potential.

In *Tinker, Doodle, Dabble, Try*, Harvard Professor of Psychiatry Srini Pillay identifies

several modes of the “unfocused” mind. He writes that each offers rewards and benefits. Stay awake, he writes, to the eureka moments in the shower; to those times of reverie or in conversation without censoring our thoughts; to the imagination that asks, “what if?”; to the daydreamer who fantasizes about a new

**“It is above all by the imagination that we achieve perception and compassion and hope.”**

—Ursula K. Le Guin

possibility; to the body that delights in hiking, dancing or creative physical play.

Pillay encourages his readers to “leave the cult of focus.” “Dabble,” he writes, like Einstein dabbled, as Picasso dabbled. Dabbling helps you stay present in the world and wards off dementia later in life. “There is something terribly self-limiting,” Pillay writes, “about whittling yourself down” to only those activities that earn income or that you’re intent on mastering.

When you dabble, you tinker with possibility. When you stay curious, you open to new perspectives and make new connections. Curiosity activates your cognitive rhythm.

In 2012, the cognitive psychologist Marieke Jepma led research into what happens to blood flow in the brain when you get curious. Blood flows first to the regions of the brain that process arousal and conflict. When you satiate your curiosity, blood flows to the ventral striatum, an intrinsic reward centre. Those short-term rewards motivate you and give you energy.

When the lockdown began two months ago, many of us indies felt the pressure to increase our productivity. We live in an “always-on” work culture. Get in shape, learn a language, build a company website, write the next *King Lear*.

But instead of getting laser-focused and more productive, why not adopt a new approach, one that offers healthier benefits for your brain? Dim the lights once in a while. Dabble. Doodle. Try. Sing in the shower. Don’t be the guy with laser beams for eyes.



Nancy Miller is director of [Red Thread](#), a consultancy that researches the future of learning, drives growth for education technology companies and coaches groups and individuals through times of change.

## PIC PERSONALITY:

# Meet Cyrus Mavalwala, ABC, MC

By Sue Horner



**CYRUS MAVALWALA, ABC, MC**, is founding partner of **Advantis Communications**, which helps companies build digital communication and marketing capacity. A strategic approach to content strategy, creation and activation delivers business results for municipalities, associations and companies across North America. Learn more on the [Advantis website](#), connect with [Cyrus on LinkedIn](#) and [Twitter \(@CyrusMavalwala\)](#) connect with [Advantis on LinkedIn](#) and [Twitter \(@AdvantisComm\)](#), send an [email](#) or call 416-848-1885.

## When did you launch your independent business and how did it come about?

I had been in the PR agency world but always planned to start my own business after about five years. In big agencies, the senior people pitch the business but juniors do the work. I wanted senior people doing both. With that in mind, I launched Advantis in 2002 – with the agency I left as my first client – and incorporated in 2003.

**Ernesta Rossi** came on as a partner in 2007. Her background is marketing, sales and analytics, which complements my own PR/external focus. We started with strategic communications and marketing, specializing in digital communications like video and social media strategy and audits as we went along. Our clients appreciate that we call on a team of proven Advantis associates to ensure their needs are met by experts and not just who we have on staff.

## What do you enjoy most about being an indie?

I thrive on the challenging work of solving clients' toughest communication problems. Sometimes clients come to us for something that's not actually the real problem; we help uncover and solve the real issue. It's in our DNA to always learn and share what we've learned, aiming to be at the cutting edge so we can help guide clients through their challenges.

I also enjoy being able to spend my time however I want. Flexibility lets me run and grow a real estate investment business that gives me a different stream of income to generate money for today, tomorrow and eventual retirement.

## What don't you like about being an indie?

You're always on! You're always thinking about how to make things better, how to

solve a client's problem, what to do better, what to learn next. It would be nice to say, "I have five weeks' paid vacation" and have the whole ship run without me, but that doesn't happen.

## What advice would you give someone new to independent life?

Most people get into this because they love their trade, but you quickly realize that's not enough. You need to understand how to build a business and enjoy the art of selling to generate revenue.

*"Most people get into this because they love their trade, but you quickly realize that's not enough. You need to understand how to build a business and enjoy the art of selling to generate revenue."*

If you're not comfortable or confident about selling, think twice about entering the indie life. Better yet, join our team!

Think about all the pieces that have to come together to make your business run smoothly, and get people to help, like a bookkeeper, accountant and IT support.

Give back and participate. When you talk to people, things just magically happen.

Have a positive frame of mind and balance your life in the areas of business, home,

spirituality and friendship. If you aren't happy and strong, you're the weakest link in your own business. You might be able to do 15-hour days for a while, but you won't be able to do it week in, week out.

## How long have you been an IABC and PIC member and what value do you get from your membership?

I joined IABC in 1995 when I volunteered for the World Conference in Toronto. It opened my eyes to this huge international world of smart people, many of whom helped me out or gave advice. Now it's my turn to do the same. I've been on the IABC/Toronto board and the Canada East Region board, volunteered on various committees and judged local, national, regional and international awards. I was also chair on PIC's first formal executive in 2004-2005.

It's a great feeling to give back and it's so energizing to meet like-minded people who are passionate about what they do and want to advance the profession.



*PIC Personality randomly profiles our members, who offer a range of talent, from coaching and media relations to video production and writing. Sue is a writer, principal of [Get It Write](#) and Co-Director of [Communications for PIC](#).*

# June 10: The branding journey

Your brand is the foundation of your communications business, framing and supporting all aspects of your operations. The right brand can open doors to more clients, projects and partners; the wrong one can seriously hamper your momentum.

In this one-hour webinar, [Nathalie Noël](#), Strategy and Brand Coach, and [Sharon Aschalek](#), principal of [Higher Ed Communications](#), will share how they collaborated to refine and develop Sharon's rebranded communications business. Covering Sharon's brand journey from start to finish, they'll

reveal how they created an original and distinct brand identity that best reflects her expertise and connects with her prospective clients.

Through Nathalie's expertise on the strategic process and Sharon's first-hand experience with strategically redeveloping her company's brand, you'll learn the why and how of defining your purpose, clients and unique value, and bringing your brand to life.

*Note: This is a Zoom meeting. A link will be sent to all registrants the morning of the event.*

[REGISTER NOW](#)

## Fees:

Free to IABC/Toronto members

\$15: Non-member rate (\$16.95 with HST)

This seminar counts towards professional development credits to maintain the IABC Communications Management Professionals (CMP) or Strategic Communications Management Professionals (SCMP) certification.

[Learn more about these certifications.](#)

IABC/TORONTO'S PROFESSIONAL INDEPENDENT COMMUNICATORS PRESENTS:

# The branding journey

June 10, 2020  
5 pm – 6 pm EDT  
Zoom online webinar

A case study for independent communicators

**Nathalie Noël**  
Strategy and Brand Coach

**Sharon Aschalek**  
Principal at Higher Ed Communications

**PIC**  
PROFESSIONAL INDEPENDENT COMMUNICATORS

## Is your name on the PIC member list?

We're reminding IABC/Toronto members they can turn to PIC members for help during the pandemic with an ad, which we're running in the bi-weekly chapter e-Lert and posting online. Since we're directing people to the [PIC member list](#), make sure your name is on it.

Send your updates to PIC's director of membership, [Kathy Lim](#). Normally we're allowed quarterly updates, but we've requested more frequent updates during the pandemic.

For new profiles, send your name, company name, city, email address, telephone number, website and LinkedIn URLs and a brief (about 40 words) description of your business. Existing members, does your listing include your LinkedIn profile?

## See you on social media

Build and strengthen your connections with other PIC members, advance your communications business, discuss business issues and network with PIC on social media: on Twitter at [@pictoronto](#); LinkedIn, [IABC Toronto Professional Independent Communicators](#); Facebook, [Professional Independent Communicators \(PIC\), part of IABC/Toronto](#).

Recent posts include advice on navigating the COVID-19 pandemic, a reminder of IABC's financial relief options and how to sidestep imposter syndrome.

## THE INDEPENDENT VIEW

## Take off your COVID-coloured glasses

By Nkiru Asika

When you're in the midst of a global pandemic, it's easy to see your entire life through the lens of the current crisis.

Everything you think or do becomes about COVID-19. Sometimes it feels as if we are all holding our breaths waiting for the virus to give us permission to resume our lives.

Life now seems unpredictable and scary.

News flash: This was true before COVID-19.

Life is also beautiful.

That hasn't changed because of COVID-19. We may see less evidence of it on a daily basis. It is certainly reported less. But it remains true.

In short, COVID has changed everything. Covid has changed nothing.

Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose.

Don't let all the talk about "unprecedented times" throw you off balance.

Yes, we live in unprecedented times, but the challenges that have emerged have precedents. I have met them many of them before. I bet you have too.

Uncertainty? Check.

Loss of business? Check.

Fear? Check.

Illness? Check.  
Loss of income? Check.  
Starting all over? Check.  
Feeling blindsided? Check.  
Not sure what the heck you're doing? Check.

Been there. Done that. Bought the t-shirt.

But here's the important part:  
Coming out the other side? Check.  
Still standing? Check.

So, when you read all the stories about how "we've never seen anything like this before" or how the economic fallout "is on a scale never experienced in our

**Coming out the other side? Check.**

**Still standing? Check.**

lifetimes," remember how much you've already overcome. Resist the temptation to catastrophize.

Take a deep breath and keep moving forward with the confidence that any challenge you face, you have likely faced before. It may be wrapped up in an ugly new package called a global pandemic, but you've seen it. You've done it. You've beat it.

One way to help you stay in fighting form is to connect with your peers. By the time this issue comes out, we will have held our first PIC virtual social, and I hope you were able to join us. I also hope you sign up for the PD event in June, not only to level-up your skills but to touch base with your fellow indies. In addition to the scheduled events, perhaps you can make some time for virtual coffees. Browse through the PIC directory and reach out to someone new. Connection and community matter more than ever.

Stay well and stay focused.

As always, if you have any ideas for professional development topics, possible speakers (including yourself) or any questions, concerns or ideas about PIC, please don't hesitate to reach me at [toronto-sig@iabc.toronto](mailto:toronto-sig@iabc.toronto).

Onwards and upwards,

Nkiru Asika



[Professional Independent Communicators](#) (PIC) is a special interest group of [IABC/Toronto](#). PIC's mission is to support independent IABC/Toronto communicators through professional development, networking and marketing. [IABC](#) connects communicators from around the world with the insights, resources and people they need to drive their careers and the profession forward.

**THE BUZZ** *The Buzz* informs members about upcoming events, shares professional development tips from past meetings and keeps us connected. Editor this issue: [Nancy Miller](#) | Graphic design: [Deana De Ciccio](#).

**Want to recap a meeting or do other writing for *The Buzz*?** Contact [Sue Horner](#) or [Nancy Miller](#).

## Quick links

- [PIC on the web](#)
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- [@PICToronto](#) on Twitter
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## PIC executive

Contact any of us with questions, comments and ideas for speakers or topics:

Chair: [Nkiru Asika](#)

Past Chair: [Sharon Aschaiek](#)

Communications: [Sue Horner](#), [Nancy Miller](#)

Membership: [Kathy Lim](#)

Programming: [Judy Irwin](#), [Sharon McMillan](#)

Social Media: (*vacant; let us know if you can help!*)

Design: [Deana De Ciccio](#)

