

SUMMARY

LINCHPIN

SETH GODIN



Summary of “Linchpin” by Seth Godin

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Introduction

A genius is defined as someone with exceptional abilities, someone with the insight to find the not so obvious solution to a problem. If this is the case, then a genius is simply someone that looks at something that others can't understand and makes the world understand. Have you ever done anything like this? Perhaps you've found a shortcut that others didn't, or solved a problem that your family couldn't, or even seen a way to make something work that wasn't working before. Has this happened at least once? It's impossible to be a genius *all the time*, but all of us are geniuses *sometimes*. Unfortunately, society has us trained to engage in a life where we trade our genius and artistry for apparent stability. It's time to change the way you live and think. For too long you've grown up in a system that teaches you to comply, to go to school, get a good-paying job, and live a life of comfort and stability. You've been brainwashed to believe that if you fit in, follow instructions, and exchange a day's work for a day's pay, that everything will be alright. Well, this era of thinking has come to an end.

In today's world, people are no longer being taken care of in the way they used to be. Pensions are gone, 401 (k)s have been cut in half, and it's hard to see what the future holds. And you, the obedient worker, the educated and hardworking employee are no longer getting what you deserve. You are simply a cog in the machine, someone that is easily replaceable. It's time to discover the alternative - it's time to become a linchpin.

The Rule of Ordinary People

The Rule of Ordinary People. Have you heard of it? Well, one of the most popular books ever written on building a business is called *The E-Myth Revisited* written by Michael E. Gerber. In it, he coins the “Rule of Ordinary People,” and creates a business model operated by people with the lowest possible level of skill. That’s right, the *lowest*. But why? Gerber went on to state that if your business model relies on highly skilled people, then it is going to be impossible to replicate. Additionally, those people are expensive and will raise the price you must charge for your product or service.

What Gerber failed to realize, however, is that if you make your business possible to replicate, you’re subjecting your business to becoming replicated by *others*. “If you build a business filled with rules and procedures that are designed to allow you to hire cheap people, you will have to produce a product without humanity or personalization or connection. Which means that you’ll have to lower your prices to compete. Which leads to a race to the bottom. Indispensable businesses race to the top instead.”

This business model was created after the Industrial Revolution highlighted the fact that highly skilled people aren’t necessary to manufacture complicated products. Instead, a production process can be split into tiny tasks that almost any unskilled worker can do. Take a look at Hector, for example. He has it rough. Every morning, Hector stands on a street corner in Queens next to six others, waiting for work. Slowly, a pickup truck pulls up, the contractor behind the wheel is looking for day laborers, and he knows each morning there will be eager laborers waiting on this exact corner. To the contractor, all the workers are the same, nothing makes them different. In other words, Hector must be lucky to get chosen.

The contractor simply sees Hector and the other laborers as cogs in a machine. You might be a cog yourself, and the problem is that you are not working for what you deserve. Even worse, you are easily replaceable. After all, consider the manufacturing jobs in the West that are being outsourced

to China and India, where people can also follow simple instructions but for a fraction of the cost. And it's not just manufacturing jobs that are under threat, white-collar jobs are being threatened as stockbrokers, travel agents, and other professionals are becoming outsourced. Ultimately, jobs that involve simple instructions can be done anywhere, by anyone.

To Be Indispensable, You Must Become a Linchpin

So can you become indispensable? Yes, you can. Think about it. Other people have survived the corporate school system, they survived their first job and survived their parents telling them what to do. Despite these challenges, they still did the challenging work, which means you can do it too. Even more importantly, these people that made the transition to becoming indispensable are no different than you. To be a linchpin, you don't need to be born with magical talent. Sure, being tall helps you make it into the NBA, but how many of us have a shot at playing in the NBA? In the end, it's not about what you're born with, it's about what you do.

Unfortunately, many companies are set up with a hierarchy where people at the top know more. The goal, then, is to hire as many cheap but talented people as possible, give them a rule book, and have them follow instructions to the letter. For example, let's say you go to McDonald's and order a Big Mac and a chocolate milkshake. You sit down and eat half of the Big Mac and drink half of the milkshake. Then, you put the Big Mac in the milkshake and walk up to counter and say "I can't drink this milkshake... there's a Big Mac in it." The person at the counter will more than likely give you a refund. But why?

Well, it's easier for the employee to follow her rule than for the manager to hire people with good judgment. When you multiply this by millions of jobs at millions of organizations, you'll end up with systems everywhere with manuals, rules, and little innovation. Furthermore, the machine comes along and we replicate the process. Similar to the McDonald's employee, the machine is taught how to complete an action and follow specific rules. But then GM completed something fascinating. As it turns out, GM saves \$1.5 million a year by letting the robot arms think for themselves! Organizations have something to learn from these machines. Letting people in organizations use their best judgment turns out to be faster and cheaper - but only if they have the right attitude. The attitude of a linchpin.

Linchpins are artists, they pour their energy, heart, and soul into their work. They use their creativity and don't need detailed instructions from managers; instead, they find their own way to solve problems. Additionally, they do their job with such passion that they stand out - people notice them. While the drones complete mindless work assigned to them, linchpins are adding value to their work and becoming indispensable. Companies don't want to lose their linchpins, it would be foolish to let them leave. Therefore, linchpins typically get the best jobs because they have the best reputations.

Real Artists Ship

Steve Jobs once said “Real Artists Ship.” He said this in response to an engineer who wasn’t ready to let go of some code. But what exactly does this three-word mantra mean? It means that real artists produce and get things done. For example, how many Picasso paintings can you name? One? Two? Three? Well, did you know that Picasso painted over 1,000 paintings? That’s because that is what artists do - they produce art. They “ship.”

For instance, Andy Hertzfeld was one of the fathers of the Mac and contributed to a diary about the original Mac, also known as the computer that changed everything. He remembers him and Donn Denman working all night long to make sure everything was ready for the product launch. While everyone else went home, he and Donn stuck around and sat on a couch in the lobby in a daze. They weren’t sure if they were finished or not, they weren’t sure the product was perfect yet, but they were done. And at that moment, Andy was an artist. He had shipped.

You see, shipping isn’t about producing a masterpiece. After all, author Seth Godin has produced more than a hundred books, most of which didn’t sell well, but if he hadn’t, he never would have written the successful ones. The problem is that shipping often feels like a compromise. After all, you’re an artist that is setting out to make a huge difference, to create something that matters, right? So when you feel as if you haven’t produced your best, you might think that you are selling yourself short. You might even start to question, “Is shipping that important?”

The answer is yes. “The discipline of shipping is essential in the long-term path to becoming indispensable.” Just take a look at *Saturday Night Live*, which goes on each week, ready or not. The show is live on Saturday. No screwing around on shipping, no do-overs, no stalls, no delays. Sometimes the show suffers, but overall, it’s the shipping, the live acts, that actually make the show work. So what might shipping mean for you? It might mean

hitting the *publish* button on your blog, showing a presentation to the sales team, answering the phone, selling the muffins, sending out your references. But why is shipping so difficult?

Our Lizard Brain Creates Resistance

Many challenges come along with shipping, but one of the biggest obstacles we must overcome is called *the resistance*. You see, becoming a linchpin takes courage. It requires you to stand out; however, many of us find ourselves experiencing crippling anxiety when it comes to standing out. But why is this? Well, the human brain develops in stages, and it's our primitive lizard brain that generates emotions like fear, hunger, and anger. It only wants to eat and be safe, and it will fight to the death if it has to, but it would rather run away. Even more importantly, the lizard brain cares what everyone else thinks because status in tribes was essential to survival for our ancestors.

The lizard brain sits on top of your spine, constantly fighting for your survival. It's the reason you are afraid. It's the resistance that prevents you from following your dreams and fills you with fear. It has only been recently, however, that our brains have evolved to allow big thoughts, generosity, speech, consciousness, and art. If you look at a picture of the brain, you'll see a new part called the neocortex. This is the wrinkly gray part on the outside, and while it may be big in size, it is weak. In the face of resistance, the neocortex freezes and surrenders, allowing the amygdala and your lizard brain to take over.

The challenge, then, becomes to create an environment where the lizard snoozes. To do this, you must establish new habits and better patterns to keep the lizard at bay. For instance, why is it that people suffering from lung cancer still succumb to smoking? Why does someone suffering from obesity struggle to control their eating? Why is it that some managers hide behind office doors and avoid looking people in the eye? Why is it that some struggle to deliver projects by the agreed deadline? The answer to these questions is all the same, in the face of fear and resistance, the amygdala takes over and causes people to surrender to what feels good in the moment.

To take back control and quiet your lizard brain, you must begin by thinking about failure differently. The reason the resistance persists and prevents you from putting your heart and soul into your work is simple: *you might fail*. Some people will view that failure as a slap, a cut deep into their soul, a sign that they should back off and stop trying. But linchpins don't do this. They learn from their failures and understand that each failure is a lesson along their journey to success. After all, winners only become winners because they're good at losing.

Lastly, you must seek out discomfort. While the resistance seeks comfort, it is essential to find uncomfortable situations to grow and thrive. Discomfort, however, brings engagement and change. It means that you are doing something that others were too scared to do because they are hiding out in their comfort zone. And "When your uncomfortable actions lead to success, the organization rewards you and brings you back for more.

Pour Emotional Labor Into Your Art

When it comes to creating art, it doesn't mean that you are painting, sculpting, or even composing. It simply means that you are using emotional labor to produce generosity, expose creativity, and make art. You work without a map and have a vision and a willingness to do something about what you see. And while your job is certainly to work and do something of value, your job is also a platform for generosity, expression, and art - a place where you pour your emotional labor into.

Take Marissa Mayer, for example, who has created billions of dollars' worth of value in her time at Google. But what can she do that you can't? Marissa is a linchpin, she may not be the key brain in the programming department or even be responsible for finance or public relations; instead, she uses her artistic judgment and emotional labor to lead people who get things done. You see, Google works well because the results from your query have a unique clarity and vision that people prefer over other search engines, like Yahoo or Microsoft. This interface is more valuable than their search technology; furthermore, Marissa led the way in forcing Google's start page to be as spare as it is.

Marissa solved problems at Google that Google didn't even know were problems. Even more, Marissa wasn't assigned to do either of those jobs, she simply did them. Her duties can't be written up in a manual, and if they could be, you would no longer need her. The key to Marissa's status as a linchpin is that she solves problems that people haven't predicted, she sees things people haven't seen, and she connects people who need to be connected. She uses emotional labor and invests her emotions into her creativity and generosity. Emotional labor is just that... labor. This is why people often avoid using it, but it is the work most of us are best suited to do. It may be exhausting, but it's valuable.

Genuine Gifts are the Key to Success

When salespeople interact with customers from a script, it seldom works. But why? Because you're not telling the truth, you're not being human, and you're not being transparent. You're simply parroting the words from a book, a seminar, or a training you underwent. Every smart person you encounter knows that you're using a script, making the encounter feel artificial and manipulative. The linchpin, however, comes from a place of generosity and is there to give a gift. If your intent is generosity and gift-giving, the words won't matter. This is why telemarketing has a ridiculously low conversion rate, and why corporate blogs are "lame." People have a special sense of finding *honest signals*.

Researcher and professor at MIT, Sandy Pentland, wrote a book named *Honest Signals*, which he named after the term for information that flows back and forth between people. Research shows that we can easily distinguish between hundreds, even thousands, of micro-gestures. And we know that talking is more than simple words and communicating is more than a speech. After all, if you watch a movie with no sound, you can still understand precisely what is happening. We can read between the lines and understand when someone is lying or disrespecting us, regardless if words are being used.

Therefore, the only way to live in a world of honest signals is to give the genuine gift. In today's world, we have everything we need, so consumers are no longer buying products - they are buying relationships, stories, and magic. In the linchpin economy, the winners are the artists who *give* gifts. Take Thomas Hawk, one of the most successful digital photographers in the world. He has taken tens of thousands of pictures, and the remarkable thing about him is that he shares his pictures freely to anyone, with no permission required for personal use. You may be thinking, "What a waste!" But this tactic has led to a tribe of followers who give him plenty of paid work. He is indispensable.

As is the case with Thomas Hawk, true gifts are talked about and the givers are rewarded. He is a true artist who gives his art away without demanding or even expecting anything in return. He simply wants to produce it and give it away. Other true artists like Thomas are often so unique that people will pay whatever it takes to keep them around. If they don't, someone else will. After all, these artists are linchpins, and they are truly indispensable.

Final Summary

Being a linchpin doesn't mean that you should go out and quit your job tomorrow or even mean you have to become an entrepreneur to change the world. Instead, author Seth Godin only wishes that you discover your inner artist to make a difference. Recognize the respect and security you deserve and recognize the gift you have to give to the world. Of course, the scary part is going forward and taking action. And the only thing keeping you from being an artist is the resistance. The loud voice of the lizard brain telling you that you can't, that you don't deserve it, and that people will laugh. But anyone who makes the choice to overcome the resistance has the insight to create a map towards becoming a successful linchpin.



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