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# THE ONE THING

**The Surprisingly Simple Truth Behind Extraordinary Results**

By Gary Keller and Jay Papasan

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We live and work in an age of abundance. While this abundance opens the doors to opportunity, business leaders and employees can buckle under the pressure of its side effects: distraction, burnout, and declining productivity. Why, when we have more resources at our disposal than ever, do we feel like we accomplish so little?

In his new book, Gary Keller, co-founder and chairman of Keller Williams Realty International, argues that we try to do too much. The key to success is ignoring everything we *could* do, and focusing on the ONE thing we *should* do. In **THE ONE THING: The Surprisingly Simple Truth Behind Extraordinary Results** (Bard Press; hardcover; April 1, 2013), Keller, along with co-author Jay Papasan, unpacks the work habit that he has used to grow his business and coach others to remarkable success – from entrepreneurs to top sales professionals, from college students to rock stars.

What's the ONE Thing? It's the one priority which, when tackled with intense focus, makes everything else we have to do either easier or no longer necessary. Our daily to-do list will always have a handful of things that matter more than the rest. And of those, there will always be one thing that matters most. If a salesperson intensely focuses on their ONE Thing every day – lead generation – they will not only hit their sales goal, but they will spend less time. If a journalist focuses on cultivating relationships with sources, he or she will be ready when an important news story breaks. By focusing on less – your top priority – you actually achieve more over the long-term.

How do we find our ONE Thing? It starts with answering the focusing question: “*What's the ONE THING I can do such that by doing it everything else will be easier or unnecessary?*” That same salesperson might ask herself, “What's the ONE Thing I can do to double sales in six months such that by doing it everything else will be easier or unnecessary?” The idea is akin to the domino effect. When the ONE Thing – the right thing – is set in motion, it can topple many

things. And just as a single domino is capable of bringing down another domino that is actually 50 percent larger, knocking down your ONE Thing, day after day, can create an extraordinary ripple effect that produces outsized results. The focusing question forces us to identify what matters most – it helps us find the lead domino.

What comes next is critical: planning our day to make sure the ONE Thing has time to get done, protecting that time from interruption, and maximizing it to its full potential. In **THE ONE THING**, Keller and Papasan offer a step-by-step guide for overcoming these challenges, including:

- Dismantling the six lies about success, and buying into the ONE Thing habit
- How to identify your ONE Thing – the lead domino – today, this week, this month, and this year
- A plan for “time blocking” – a daily, four-hour appointment with yourself dedicated to your ONE Thing
- Tips on how to protect this time block from colleagues, bosses, clients, and our own sabotaging behaviors
- The three commitments that will make this time block as purposeful and productive as possible
- The four thieves that, without our mindful awareness, will rob us of our productivity (see attached)

It may sound impossible to practice or just too good to be true, but for Keller, the proof is in the pudding. He has practiced the time-blocking method since he was in his 20s and just starting out in the real estate business. Not yet a CEO with the privilege of setting his own schedule, Keller developed the habit of working uninterrupted for hours at a time, keeping colleagues and bosses at bay when necessary. A challenging proposition for a rank-and-file employee, perhaps – but according to Keller, his work habit produced spectacular results. And when you deliver on the one thing that matters most, people stop caring about everything else. Keller now credits his professional success, personal health, and overall happiness with his dogged commitment to practicing his ONE Thing every day.

For the overbooked and overworked, **THE ONE THING** presents an incredible challenge – to go small, narrow our focus, say no, and hold our ground when distractions threaten our new way of working. Those of us who accept the challenge will find that success is more attainable than we ever thought possible. By doing less, we can achieve and produce more.

### **THE ONE THING: The Surprisingly Simple Truth Behind Extraordinary Results**

**By Gary Keller and Jay Papasan**

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## **About the Authors**

### **GARY KELLER**

Professionally, Gary's ONE Thing is teaching. He excelled as a real estate salesperson by teaching clients how to make great buying and selling decisions. As a real estate sales manager, he recruited agents through training and helped them build careers the same way. As co-founder and chairman of the board, he built Keller Williams Realty International from a single office in Austin, Texas, to the #1 position as the largest real estate company in the United States by using his skills as a teacher, trainer, and coach. Gary defines leadership as "teaching people how to think the way they need to think so they can do what they need to do when they need to do it, so they can get what they want when they want it."

An Ernst & Young Entrepreneur of the Year and finalist for *Inc. Magazine's* Entrepreneur of the Year, Gary is recognized as one of the most influential leaders in the real estate industry. He has also helped many small business owners and entrepreneurs find success through his bestselling books *The Millionaire Real Estate Agent*, *The Millionaire Real Estate Investor*, and *SHIFT: How Top Real Estate Agents Tackle Tough Times*. A book, after all, is just another way to teach, but one with an infinitely large classroom. As a business coach and national trainer, Gary has helped countless others realize extraordinary results by focusing on their ONE Thing.

### **JAY PAPASAN**

Jay is the Executive Editor and Vice President of Publishing at Keller Williams Realty International and President of Rellek Publishing. Professionally, Jay's ONE Thing is writing. He attempted to write his first book on an electric typewriter in junior high. At least one high school teacher thought his short stories had promise and circulated one to the entire school. Jay paid the bills in college by working in a bookstore. He got his undergraduate degree in writing and later, his master's. After graduation, Jay took a job in publishing. During his years at HarperCollins in New York, he worked on bestselling titles like *Body-for-Life* by Bill Phillips and *Go for the Goal* by Mia Hamm. More recently, in the ten years he's worked with Gary, Jay has coauthored ten award-winning or bestselling titles, including the Millionaire Real Estate series.

Outside of work, Jay co-owns a successful real estate investment business and sales team with his wife, Wendy. They enjoy life in Austin, Texas, with their children, Gus and Veronica.

## **The Four Thieves of Productivity**

Our best intentions can easily be undone. No one else is standing by to protect you and your productivity, so it's up to you to stop these four thieves in their tracks.

### **1. Inability to Say No**

Peers will ask for your advice and help. Co-workers will want you on their team. Friends will request your assistance. Strangers will seek you out. Invitations and interruptions will come at you from everywhere imaginable. How you handle all of this determines the time you're able to devote to your ONE Thing and the results you're ultimately able to produce. It is critical to understand that your time, talent and abilities are limited resources. This means that when you say "yes" to someone or something, you are saying "no" to your ONE Thing. So unless you figure out how to say no a lot, you'll never truly be able to say yes to achieving your ONE Thing.

### **2. Fear of Chaos**

Focusing on ONE Thing has a guaranteed consequence: other things don't get done. There will always be people and projects that simply aren't part of your biggest single priority but still matter. So, what do you do? First, accept that chaos is a byproduct of the pursuit of success. Second, figure out a way to work your time block, even if you have to beg and barter for help, or find an unconventional time. Just don't be a victim of your circumstances and sacrifice your priority on the altar of "I just can't make it work."

### **3. Poor Health Habits**

When we keep borrowing against our future by poorly protecting our energy, there is a predictable outcome: you slowly run out of gas or prematurely crash and burn. Follow this daily energy plan for high productivity:

- Meditate and pray for spiritual energy
- Eat right, exercise and sleep sufficiently for physical energy
- Hug, kiss and laugh with loved ones for emotional energy
- Set goals, plan, and calendar for mental energy
- Time block your ONE Thing for business energy

### **4. Environment Doesn't Support Your Goals**

The people and things around you will either aim you toward your time block or pull you away. This starts from the time you wake up and continues until you get to your time-block bunker. While attitude thieves will rob you of energy, effort, and resolve, supportive people will do what they can to encourage or assist you. Pick your company carefully. When it comes to your physical environment, do a trial run of the path you'll take on the way to your bunker, and eradicate all the distractions you find.

## **An interview with Gary Keller, author of THE ONE THING**

**Q: Why did you write this book?**

**A:** I struggled as a young leader to find the kind of life I wanted – one that included not only great business success, but a rich personal life as well. In working to do this, I found myself talking with dozens of others, while at the same time working myself harder and harder at the expense of my health. What I finally discovered was that success comes from learning to focus, not from doing it all. “One Step at a time” may sound trite, but it’s still true. No matter the objective, no matter the destination, the journey to anything you want always starts with a single step. That step is what I call the ONE Thing, and when it is in line with your purpose and sits atop your priorities, it will be the most productive thing you can do to launch you toward the best you can be.

**Q: Nearly everyone in today’s workforce faces a seemingly never-ending to-do list and overwhelming demand for their time and attention. How, in the face of such abundance, can focusing on just ONE Thing truly move *everything* forward?**

**A:** This is a big idea, based on research and real-life experience, wrapped in a disarmingly simple package. It demands that you turn away from that to-do list, ignore that email pile first thing in the morning, and set your own agenda. What do you want out of today? Out of this month or this year? You start by asking yourself what I call focusing questions, which help you break down complex tasks into small manageable ones, and then decide which is your ONE Thing – the one thing you can do such that by doing it everything else will be easier or unnecessary. There will always be just a few things that matter more than the rest, and out of those, one will matter the most. And that’s the key – when you focus on that ONE Thing, it moves everything else forward, which is the true key to productivity.

**Q: The concept of focusing on just ONE Thing flies in the face of everything we’ve been told about productivity and success. What are the top myths we’ve been conned into believing?**

**A:** There are six big myths that prevent us from diving into the ONE Thing to exclusion of others. Let me talk about just one of them – the myth that everything matters equally. This has long been pounded into us – finish everything on your plate, do all of your homework. We’re virtually programmed to click down any to-do list put before us. But in the world of achievement, everything *doesn’t* matter equally. In truth, everything is discretionary and we choose when to tackle each task put before us. Complicating matters is the fact that more and more “simply must get done” in our complex lives. Overbooked, overextended and overcommitted, we spend far too much time “in the weeds” wondering how in the world we got here and how to get out. Instead, we need to change the way we make decisions and discard our to-do lists for a success list – a list that is purposefully created around extraordinary results. In

making the list, consider the Pareto Principle: 80% of your success comes from just 20% of your efforts. It's a good principle to consider when landing on your ONE thing for today, tomorrow, this month, and this year.

**Q: You write that there are both short-term and long-term ONE Things. Can you explain the difference between the two, and how they also work together?**

**A:** The crux of the ONE Thing principle is a method of deciding what matters most. To get down to these essential truths, I suggest you ask yourself a focusing question. It comes in two forms: Big Picture and Small Focus. Big picture questions are the long-term goals, those that will develop a vision and direction for your life, your career or company. These long term things are helpful when considering what you want to master, what you want to give to others and your community and how you want to be remembered. It keeps your relationships with colleagues, clients, friends, and family in perspective and your daily actions on track. The Small Focus questions will be more short term: what is my ONE Thing right now? Ask yourself this question when you wake up in the morning, and keep asking it throughout the day. The answer will keep you focused on your most important work and prepare you for the most productive workweek possible. Week after week, and month after month of focusing on those shorter-term ONE Things will move you toward your long-term or big picture ONE Thing in life.

**Q: How can people who don't have as much control over their workload and schedule – entry-level employees, Executive Assistants, the “rank-and-file,” if you will – practice the ONE Thing? Any tips to share?**

**A:** The toughest part for this particular group is navigating a high level request. How do you say no to anyone important – your boss, clients, your mom, or even a family member with an urgent request – without being unduly difficult or seemingly uncooperative? One way is to so say yes, and then ask, “If I have that done by (a specific time in the future), will that work? Most often, these requests are more about an immediate need to hand a task off than a need for it to be done immediately, so the requester usually just wants to know it *will* get done. Sometimes the request is real, needs to be done now, and you must drop what you're doing and do it. In this situation, follow the rule “If you erase, you must replace” and immediately reschedule your time block. One of our team member's ONE Thing is to develop her skills as a book editor. At first, she was had a hard time balancing her goals with her administrative responsibilities. Then she embraced the principles of the ONE Thing and created a work environment that allowed her to play a pivotal role in publishing a *Wall Street Journal* bestseller.

**Q: Speaking of which, you recommend that people “time-block” their schedule in order to tackle their ONE Thing. What are the elements of a successful time block?**

**A:** Start every day by blocking off the time you need to accomplish your ONE Thing. If it's a one-time ONE Thing, block off the appropriate hours and day. If it's a regular thing, block off the appropriate time every day so it becomes a habit. Everything else – other projects,

paperwork, e-mails, calls, meetings and all the other stuff – must wait. When you do this, you are creating the most productive day possible in a way that’s repeatable every day for the rest of your life. Time blocking works on the premise that a calendar records appointments but doesn’t care who they are with. So when you know your ONE Thing, make an appointment with yourself to tackle it. Follow these rules: time block your time off, time block your planning time, and time block your ONE Thing.

**Q: Even if we successfully block out time to work on our ONE Thing, you say there are “thieves” who will try to steal away our productivity. What are they, and which one is the most threatening?**

**A:** There are four “thieves” that will completely hijack your productivity if you allow them to: the inability to say no; fear of chaos; poor health habits; and an environment that doesn’t support your goals. People often have the most difficulty with the first, and I understand why – it’s very, very hard to say no to the people in our lives. But here’s the thing. When you say yes to something, it’s imperative that you understand what you’re saying no to. Peers will ask for your advice and help. Co-workers will want you on their team. Friends will request your assistance. Strangers will seek you out. Invitations and interruptions will come at you from everywhere imaginable. How you handle all of this determines the time you’re able to devote to your ONE Thing and the results you’re ultimately able to produce. Someone once told me that one “yes” must be defended over time by 1,000 “nos.” Early in my career I didn’t understand this at all. Today, I think it’s an understatement. Remember that saying yes to your ONE Thing is your top priority, because if you do it well, everything else you are being asked to do will become either easier or unnecessary. As long as you can keep this in perspective, saying no to anything that keeps you from keeping your time block should become something you can accept.

**Q: How did you come to develop the ONE Thing philosophy?**

**A:** In less than ten years, I had built a successful company with national and international ambitions. But all of a sudden, I hit a wall. For all the dedication and hard work, my life was in turmoil, and it felt as if everything was crumbling around me. I sought help and found it in the form of a coach. I walked him through my situation, personal and professional, discussed my goals and the trajectory I wanted in life, and he set out in search of answers. He came back and pointed to an organizational chart of the company on the wall and showed me 14 positions that needed new faces. I was certain we needed more. He insisted he was right. I took the leap, fired myself as CEO and concentrated on ONE Thing: hiring the right 14 people. Within three years, we began a period of sustained growth that averaged 40 percent year over year for almost a decade. We grew from a regional player to an international contender. And I can trace it all back to my decision focus all my efforts on just ONE Thing – hiring 14 people, and doing whatever it took to make sure they were the *right* 14 people. Today, I spend my time teaching the concept of the ONE Thing to everyone from small-business owners to famous musicians – anyone who wants to lead a more powerful, purposeful life.