



Linchpin

Are You Indispensable?

by Seth Godin

From LINCHPIN by Seth Godin

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Take-Aways

- Human beings' biological survival instincts and modern sociological conditioning have combined to create a workforce of rule followers and negative thinkers.
- You have a choice: You can merely perform your basic mundane duties at work day after day, or you can become a "linchpin."
- A linchpin is an artist "who uses bravery, insight, creativity and boldness to challenge the status quo."
- Linchpins are indispensable people others turn to for help or advice.
- They are not always brilliant, but they see opportunities and seize them.
- The "lizard brain" is risk averse. Its powerful negative instinct, called "the resistance," prevents you from embracing change that it perceives as a threat.
- Motivate your brain's creative force, your "daemon," to oppose this barrier.
- Linchpins overcome fear and anxiety, and leap into the unknown.
- Linchpins try to view the world from other people's perspectives. They understand they cannot control everything, and they are generous with their time, money and talents.
- They make a conscious decision to approach life differently.

Rating (10 is best)

Overall

8

Applicability

9

Innovation

7

Style

8

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Relevance

What You Will Learn

In this Abstract, you will learn: 1) How to break the cycle of mediocrity, 2) What a “linchpin” is and 3) How you can become an indispensable employee at your firm.

Recommendation

Warning: If you absorb all business blogger Seth Godin’s advice, you could end up overworked and underappreciated. Godin’s antidote to mediocrity and conformity is so effective and convincing that it may have the unintended consequence of making you the go-to person for your whole organization. Godin stipulates that everyone faces a choice: An individual can choose to live day after day, year after year, languidly going through the motions, doing work that is devoid of excitement and imagination. Or, he or she can choose a path that promotes uniqueness and ingenuity by becoming a “linchpin,” an invaluable, indispensable employee, the center of all a company’s activities. Godin declares that if you believe in yourself and your potential for greatness, kindle the creative spark within, embrace risk and seek the good in others, you can become an influential linchpin. Although Godin writes in his signature rambling style, which some readers may find distracting, *getAbstract* applauds this unique, absorbing business book, whose reach extends far beyond the conference room. The author has done his part; your path is up to you. Proceed with caution – even being a linchpin has its hazards.

Abstract

You Have a Choice

The majority of workers are average, uninspired employees. It’s not their fault: Biological survival instincts plus sociological training and conditioning have created a workforce of rule followers and negative thinkers. The illusion of job security has turned millions of workers into timid tagalongs, afraid of self-expression, innovation and risk. For around 100 years, a tacit agreement existed between employer and employee: Companies promised decent wages, solid benefits and job stability in exchange for obedient workers who punched the time clock, met expectations and followed the rules. But that contract is no longer valid. Vast economic and technological changes have undermined an insecure workforce victimized by globalization, downsizing and layoffs. The unemployment figures are ugly, pensions have disappeared and the prospects are grim. You are working just as the generations before you did, but you are reaping few of the benefits they received.

The employer-employee system that worked so well for 100 years has irreparably broken into millions of replaceable parts. Unmotivated employees resigned to their lot are a dime a dozen. They are convinced they can’t make a difference and so they have stopped trying. Even white-collar workers in nice, tidy offices who believe they are a step above the masses still perform numbingly repetitive tasks devoid of creativity. Essentially, you have one of two choices: Bemoan your fate and adopt an attitude of hopelessness, or climb out of the rubble and recognize the opportunity to create a bright new future.

Go Against the Grain

In many regards, society discourages creativity and artistry. For many centuries, individuals were compelled to conform to one of two roles: bourgeoisie or proletariat,

“We’ve been culturally brainwashed to believe that accepting the hierarchy and lack of responsibility that comes with a factory job is the one way, the only way and the best way.”

“Management wins when it can get the most work for the least pay, and the more controlled the output, the better.”

“The linchpin is an individual who can walk into chaos and create order, someone who can invent, connect, create and make things happen.”

“Your business needs more linchpins. It’s scary to rely on a particular employee, but in a postindustrial economy, you have no choice.”

“An organization of indispensable people doing important work is remarkable, profitable and indispensable in and of itself.”

“Organizations that can bring humanity and flexibility to their interactions with other human beings will thrive.”

manager or laborer, leader or follower. “The gulf was distinct.” The “old American Dream” went something like this: Stay out of trouble, obey instructions, work diligently and you will receive your just deserts. Today the rules are different. The “new American Dream” says that you must stand out, be “remarkable,” create something new and innovative, and connect with “people and ideas” to succeed. Thus, it is time to shrug off mediocrity. Become a “linchpin,” an invaluable, indispensable employee who elevates everyone in the company and makes an impact. Be unique, inventive, dynamic and distinctive. Project a winning attitude, even when surrounded by party-poopers and naysayers. Support your co-workers, even those who may resent your enthusiasm. Banish the words “not my job” from your vocabulary. Be the person to whom others turn. When your colleagues depend on you, your firm has to treat you well and pay you accordingly. In an economic downturn, you will not be among the first to suffer a layoff; you will be the last.

Linchpins are not brilliant all the time. Generally they perform the same work as their similarly trained colleagues. Their ability to recognize opportunity and seize it distinguishes linchpins. They generate momentum. Linchpins take pride in their work. They surpass all others by combining “depth of knowledge” with crucial “good judgment.” A linchpin is the busy CEO who takes the time to respond to a customer’s email complaint. A linchpin is the custodian who toils in anonymity every evening, making your office spotless.

Linchpins are willing to do “emotional labor,” even though it’s tough. Although dutifully obeying orders – the path most people choose – is much easier, emotional labor is intrinsically more rewarding. It involves helping someone, flashing a smile or lending a sympathetic ear. Every interaction with your colleagues or clients is an opportunity to act as a linchpin in some way. Often you’ll receive no gratitude or acknowledgment in return. In fact, engaging in emotional labor only for a payoff is misguided. Consider it a bonus if you get something back. Musicians, painters and dancers create art because they feel compelled to share their gifts. Few are motivated solely by financial reward or acclaim. “An artist is someone who uses bravery, insight, creativity and boldness to challenge the status quo.” Therefore, being a linchpin means becoming an artist.

The Lizard Speaks Loudly

Every creature has a “lizard brain,” the part of the brain that is wired for survival. The lizard brain rules all animals. It tells them to hunt, find shelter, stake out territory and fight off invaders. It is afraid of risk. It generates “the resistance,” a strong force in the human mind. The “daemon,” a force from a higher level in the brain, opposes the resistance. It represents the creative, loving, determined, selfless and insightful part of the mind. The resistance always wants to play it safe and forcefully battles the daemon’s attempts to be different, to confront conformity and to express artistry. The lizard brain creates self-doubt and mistrust. It evolved earlier and, thus, has more power than the creative part of the brain. Therefore, the resistance will always govern your instincts and your perception of risk, unless you train yourself to ignore it. Optimistic, successful individuals tune out their lizard brains. They don’t take failure personally. They don’t think of themselves as losers. They learn from their mistakes and take different approaches. They are strengthened, not weakened, by setbacks.

Better the Devil You Know than the Devil You Don’t?

Fear is an essential emotion that warns of danger and ensures survival of the species. The power of fear is often paralyzing. When people’s phobias control them, they remain in

“Art is unique, new and challenging to the status quo. It’s not decoration; it’s something that causes change.”

“A day’s work is your chance to do art, to create a gift, to do something that matters.”

“Emotional labor is the hard work of making art, producing generosity and exposing creativity.”

“Artists shake things up. They invent as they go; they respond to inputs and create surprising new outputs.”

dead-end jobs because they feel safe. They don’t take risks, so they don’t have to worry about failure. They find change unsettling, even frightening. The status quo may be quite miserable, but it’s far more comfortable than the unknown. Trying something new and different, or breaking old patterns, means exposing yourself to criticism, maybe even ridicule. For many, pondering that scenario creates sufficient anxiety to short-circuit any optimistic notions.

Recognizing the resistance is actually the first step in defeating it. Ignore tasks that enhance procrastination. As you get closer to a breakthrough, chances are that the resistance will fight harder. Distraction is the resistance’s best friend. Mindlessly surfing the internet or compulsively checking your email is much more pleasant than being creative and initiating change. Updating your Facebook page is easier than buckling down to work. Most people simply aren’t willing to commit to self-discipline, even though it’s the key to productivity.

“Anxiety Is Practicing Failure in Advance”

Anxiety is arguably the most useless human emotion. Unlike fear, which often alerts you to a legitimate threat, anxiety is manufactured. Anxiety typically springs from imaginary worst-case scenarios that you construct in your mind. It inhibits your creativity and your ability to produce art. Feeling stressed out about something that hasn’t happened yet isn’t logical, but that doesn’t prevent you from fretting over a 4 p.m. meeting at 10 a.m.

You can resolve anxiety two ways. Say you’re in bed and you think you forgot to leave a light on to deter burglars, what do you do? You have two choices: You can get up and check to reassure yourself rather than lying there in a panic. However, in many cases, reassurance often aggravates anxiety rather than alleviating it. You may end up in an unhealthy loop where you constantly need to reassure yourself. The second option is to acknowledge your anxiety; don’t try to escape it. Strive to become accustomed to anxiety and eventually it will dissipate. With practice, you can break the anxiety cycle by learning to recognize its early signs. Deal with it rather than allowing the feelings to overwhelm you. Remember, the resistance doesn’t like controversy, confrontation or insecurity. It wants you to run. Ignore it. Move forward. The resistance is a powerful foe. It can wriggle through a tiny chink in your armor. You cannot truly embrace change until you decide that nothing is going to stand in your way. No amount of self-doubt or outside negativity is going to derail you. March ahead fearlessly.

Giving Is Better Than Taking

Generous, committed people understand the power of giving. They recognize the value of supporting others – with their time, money or talent – and being part of something much larger than themselves. Unfortunately, altruism ranks relatively low on the public’s list of most admired traits. For many years now, society has emphasized consolidating power, accumulating possessions and soliciting praise. Still, some people do share their bounty with the world and ask nothing in return. For example, Thomas Hawk, a talented, prolific digital photographer known worldwide, offers his photos to the public from his website free of charge. You don’t need his permission to use them. His generosity and talent makes him indispensable. Keller Williams is an extraordinary guitarist who creates an unforgettable concert experience by playing multiple guitars simultaneously, while manipulating the sound electronically. You can download his music from the internet for free. Both artists have chosen to give rather than receive. They are examples of linchpins practicing selflessness, not selfishness.

“Organizations will always strive to replace replaceable elements with cheaper substitutes. But generous artists aren’t easily replaceable.”

“You must become indispensable to thrive in the new economy.”

“You can either fit in or stand out. Not both. You are either defending the status quo or challenging it.”

“Perhaps the biggest change the economy brings is self-determination. Access to capital and appropriate connections aren’t nearly as essential as they were. Linchpins are made, not born.”

You defeat the purpose of giving a gift when you do it for money, personal gain or reciprocity. In fact, giving fortifies the bonds between individuals and, by extension, makes the community stronger. Fulfilling a contractual agreement in business may be satisfying because it was profitable. But it doesn’t compare with the feelings you get from reaching out to someone who really needs assistance. Alcoholics Anonymous has no dues; the meetings are free. People are there to receive help and to give help to others – a philosophy that makes AA a powerful close-knit community.

Some people mistakenly believe that they can’t practice generosity until after they’re successful. Once they make a little money, they plan to share some with the community. Ironically, many of the world’s most successful individuals never made money their primary goal, but it flowed in because their priorities were in order. Thomas Hawk and Keller Williams create art for art’s sake, yet both are financially successful. It’s funny how that works. As a linchpin, consider the ways you can give away your art to others.

The Linchpin Perspective

The way you react to events in your life is an essential component of being a linchpin. Develop the right perspective and see things the way they really are. For example, try to read a business proposal from all views: that of the consumer, the investor and the entrepreneur. Or imagine a job interview, not from the candidate’s or the interviewer’s outlook, but from the point of view of a third-party observer. “Abandoning your worldview” and trying someone else’s on for size is the first step to seeing clearly.

Linchpins understand that life offers many challenges they cannot control. If you go into a business meeting having already anticipated the outcome, you are setting yourself up for disappointment. You are emotionally invested in a situation with too many variables, so predicting the result is impossible. Yet this type of thinking is rampant in the workplace and in life. Linchpins can accept the things they cannot change and move forward.

Becoming a linchpin requires a conscious decision to make yourself so creative, inspiring and productive that your organization can’t imagine life without you. Linchpins try to figure out how to do their jobs differently, to take a fresh approach and to make a difference every day. Consider history’s greatest inventions and the visionaries who made them possible. Think about the risks involved in creating something different, or listening to the voice inside that dares you to be great.

Although the right environment – or the right mentor – plays a huge role in how you will embrace your career, ultimately the choice is up to you: You can settle for mediocrity, because change is intimidating and even frightening, and remain an anonymous cog in a giant wheel. You can choose to view your work life as a cardboard box from which you can’t escape. Or you can stand out and defy the status quo. You may not be able to draw a stick figure or play “Chopsticks” on the piano, but you can still be an artist – someone who can see beyond the horizon. Artists’ actions make things better. They improve the world and strengthen relationships. Most importantly, they persevere and ignore the insistent messages from their lizard brain that foster self-doubt and insecurity. They create a force field that deflects negativity. Linchpins don’t allow the resistance to win.

About the Author

Seth Godin is the author of *Tribes*, *Purple Cow* and *All Marketers Are Liars*. The CEO of the Squidoo publishing platform, he is one of the world’s most-read business bloggers.