



Book Do More Great Work

Stop the busywork, and start the work that matters

Michael Bungay Stanier
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Recommendation

Business coach extraordinaire Michael Bungay Stanier shows you exactly how top-notch mentoring works. He provides 15 practical, easy-to-follow exercises, or “maps,” you can use to identify and pursue your best work – and your best attitude. While Stanier cannot look over your shoulder as you apply his approach, his helpful maps and friendly tone of voice make it seem as if he is right beside you, teaching you how to attain goals that make a difference. *BooksInShort* recommends Stanier’s systematic and supportive approach to making your work more substantive.

Take-Aways

- Because work occupies more than 50% of most employees’ lives, it should be purposeful and sustaining.
- Most people spend the majority of their time at work on dull, mediocre activities.
- While many employees do good work, few do meaningful, energizing, “great work.”
- “Bad work” is useless and boring; “good work” is fine but becomes routine.
- In contrast, great work invigorates you, and adds value to your life and your job.
- You can plan and achieve more great work by using a system of 15 step-by-step exercises called “maps.”
- The maps help you evaluate your current work and goals, identify role models, and set a fresh direction toward more significant achievements.
- Use the maps to help you decide which tasks are worthwhile, examine your work options, pick the best possibilities and test potential scenarios.
- Ask yourself if you are brave, committed and motivated. Identify the support you need and the next step you will take. Hold yourself accountable.
- Great work is a big change from the status quo, so it may make others uncomfortable.

Summary

Does Your Work Make You Happy?

The amount of time you spend at work is substantial: more than 50% of your life. For your own sake, make this time as productive, meaningful and enjoyable as possible. Try to do “great work,” because work that is just OK – or, especially, work that turns out badly – won’t sustain you or bring you joy. Since time and tasks now tend to push people mercilessly, doing great work isn’t easy. Nevertheless, you can do it if you follow some simple rules.

“You spend more than half your life at work. And you want your work to make an impact and have a purpose, to be more than just a salary. You want to make it count.”

First, clarify great work by contrasting it with its opposite, “bad work,” which is easier to spot. Bad work sits in a swamp of energy-draining bureaucracy, innumerable meetings, wasteful processes and numbing inefficiencies. Bad work has no purpose. In contrast, great work is inspirational; it makes a positive impact. It counts. It’s what everyone wants to do. But when you try to define what great work means, you will find six paradoxes:

- 1. **“You don’t need to save the world. You do need to make a difference”** – Great work doesn’t require you to change the planet, but it does make an important contribution.
- 2. **“Great work is private. Great work can be public”** – Whether people applaud you for your work is not important. Work that feels worthwhile to you is what’s important.
- 3. **“Great work is needed. Great work isn’t wanted”** – Many firms settle for good work. Since that’s the status quo, your attempts to do great work may even make people edgy.
- 4. **“Great work is easy. Great work is difficult”** – People love doing great work, but it can test your mettle.
- 5. **“Great work is about doing what’s meaningful. Great work isn’t about doing it well”** – Many people can do bad work in a superior fashion. Think of how many worthless, though well-produced, PowerPoint presentations you’ve endured. They look super, but they waste your time. In contrast, great work can make you stretch your abilities.
- 6. **“Great work can take a moment. Great work can take a lifetime”** – The great work you do can occur in an instant, or it can take a lifetime of concentrated effort.

“How do you do more of the work that makes a difference and makes you happy, and less of all that other stuff that somehow fills your working day?”

Great work requires motivation, so you need to understand your “unspoken commitments,” the subconscious imperatives that drive your behavior. For example, to do great work, you may need to speak up more often during meetings. However, your unspoken inner commitment orients you to be quiet at meetings. Subconsciously, you want people to see you as a team player and not a showboater. To revise your unspoken barriers, first you must identify and understand them.

Fifteen “Maps” for Doing Great Work

To “find and do more great work,” use the following maps. To take full advantage of them, ask yourself some directional questions: “Where am I?” “How did I get here?” “Where am I going?” “Is there a better route?” “Could there be a different destination?” These maps are listed in a specific order so that you can select the direction of your great work, seek opportunities, evaluate all your choices and then start. The maps will orient you and help you view your work in a new light and maybe hit the reset button. Commit yourself to great work, keep a journal as you progress to track your insights about how to make the maps work for you, and team up with a “buddy” who will bolster you or goad you if needed.

“Where are you now?”

You cannot reach a new destination if you don’t know where you are. The first map establishes this pivot point. To draw it, divide a circle into three segments: “bad work, good work and great work.” Make each segment proportional to the way you would sort your work. For most people, the breakdown is “10-40% bad work, 40-80% good work” and “0-25% great work.” Within each segment, list a couple of work examples. What is your perfect mix? You can see where you are by mapping things out. Then you can decide more accurately where you need to go. Mapping lets you reflect systematically.

“What’s great?”

What you’ve done in the past provides valuable clues about the great work that you can do in the future. Examine your best moments and ask what made them special. Each individual’s special moments will differ. Maybe it came when you figured out the answer to a tough problem or turned in a superb project. Your best times often emerge when you did great work. Think about your “peak moments.” Write them down. Plan to duplicate them.

“What are you like at your best?”

To answer this question, think in metaphors. For example, to brand a particular vodka’s taste – since vodkas generally all taste the same – you might use such descriptions as “expensive denim, not leather” or “the 1960s, not the 1990s.” Such metaphors provide a picture of a particular vodka-drinking experience. Use the same approach to describe your best work moments. Think along the lines of, “I am this...not that.” Recall a time when you operated at maximum efficiency. Think of 20 words that describe the way you were then and write them in an “I am this” column. Edit it down to the 10 most fitting words. Put contrasting terms in a “not that” column that describes you when you aren’t working well. Compare the columns. Can you move your behavior from one column to another? Post the words that describe your best self so that you see them every day. This exercise helps you to clarify how you feel when you are in a great work mode, and to emulate that enthusiasm and drive.

“Who’s great?”

Role models inspire people to do great work. Select eight “heroes,” either well-known individuals or everyday people you admire. Your role models don’t even have to be people. Your Ford truck or Apple computer can serve as your role model. The next time you are not sure how to proceed, say to yourself, “How would [your role model] behave right now?” You cannot model yourself after these exemplars if you forget about them, so put their pictures where you can always see them. This mapping exercise is designed to help you find a pattern for how you want “to show up in the world” and to enable you to determine who you most want to be.

“What’s calling you?”

To establish the great work you can do, create a map that depicts the many aspects of your life. It might show your community, colleagues, spouse, children, projects, self-mastery, relationships, money, choices, changes, and so on. Which subjects are most compelling to you? This map will help you develop a clearer picture of what matters in your life, and it may reveal opportunities for doing great work.

“What’s broken?”

Picture a series of concentric circles. Start in the center with the immediate elements in your life, and work your way out to the larger elements. The first circle is your desk. The next is your office. The next is your workload and then your team, followed by your division and your company. As the circles extend, add your neighborhood, country and the world. In each circle, isolate the annoyances that interfere with the accomplishment of your goals. The more you can reduce these irritations, the greater the work you can do.

“What’s required?”

Determine how many of your jobs, tasks and projects you really care about, how many you do just because others care about them, and how many you do that either don’t matter to you or don’t matter to your company. Where do you spend the majority of your time? Obviously, ideal tasks are the ones that you and your organization both see as significant. Try to delegate tasks that you and the firm see as unimportant. If the work you care about most doesn’t matter to your company, it is still an area where you can excel. However, you may need to handle it undercover – or you may need to do this work somewhere else.

“What’s the best choice?”

In maps five through seven, you developed some options for your next great work project. Now, narrow them down. List the criteria that will help you decide which ones are best and which ones to cut. Some typical standards are: “It excites me.” “I want to do it.” “It’s the most efficient use of resources.” Grade your options against these criteria, create a “short list” and choose the best project. Make sure it feels right to you. “Check in with your gut.” If you can’t decide between two great choices, toss a coin in the air and see which side you hope will face up when it falls.

“What’s possible?”

You need great ideas to do great work. Spend a few minutes generating some wonderful concepts. Do not discriminate: At this early stage, all ideas are viable. Relate your visions to potential great work by asking yourself some thought-provoking questions: “What’s the provocative thing to do?” “What’s the easiest thing?” You don’t need to implement all these ideas, but considering them may lead you to something new, like a great work project.

“What’s the right ending?”

Use storytelling to develop and test viable scenarios that showcase great work. Think of a great project. Place it into a storytelling format. Tell yourself three stories in as much detail as possible. In one story, everything goes exactly right. In the second, everything goes completely wrong. The third ends up somewhere in the middle. Telling stories this way positions you to anticipate what can go right or wrong with your next great work assignment.

“How courageous are you?”

People often are afraid to challenge themselves. The purpose of this map is to extend the boundaries of what you think you can possibly achieve. Look at your completed maps and pick out a solid idea. Think about the easiest aspect of that idea to implement. Then think about the hardest. Write about these issues. Now, ask yourself what you would do if you “had no fear.” What would you do – or not do – to move your project closer to its goals? Write out the answers you develop. Think about them. Learn from them.

“What will you do?”

Now, make a commitment to your next great work project. Ask yourself what you’d like to do, “what’s the easiest thing to do” and “what would have the most impact.” Write down the answers. By working – and thinking – through the previous maps, you finally will be ready to define what important, meaningful goal you will pursue as great work.

“What support do you need?”

Doing great work is not a solitary affair. It requires assistance. Find the help you need from “people who love you,” since your family and friends will always support you. Recruit “people with skills,” because you may need their expertise. For substantial aid, turn to from “people with influence” who can make your path easier. List the names of people who can help you, how they can help and how you will approach them. Look at your network. Is it strong? If not, what can you do to make it more robust?

“What’s the next step?”

Each journey begins with a single step. Which one will you take as you set out to accomplish your next great work project? Now that you know what it is, take that stride. One step will lead to another, and then another and another. Set timetables for yourself. Assign yourself accountability. Write what you will do, when you will do it, what first move you will make and how you will hold yourself responsible.

“Lost your great work mojo?”

Getting off track is easy. Beware if you hear yourself saying, “I’m too busy doing too much good work,” “I’m confused or disoriented,” “I’m not sure I’m the right person,” “I’m not sure this is the right project,” “People are giving me a hard time” or “I’ve gotten stuck.” Each problem has a solution. If you get stuck, step back and think about the action you must take. Return to some of your earlier maps for fresh inspiration. Write about the problems that affect you, and then draft some possible solutions so you can consider them and select the best ones. And, to give yourself some perspective, think about how much is going really well or, in fact, great.

“Know that you are a role model to others.”

As you proceed on your great work project, keep these axioms in mind:

- **“Things only get interesting when you take full responsibility for your choices”** – Don’t be a victim.
- **“To do more great work, you must both narrow and broaden your gaze”** – What moves you forward? What is your goal? What are your additional options?
- **“Decide what to say no to”** – Focus on great work, not subsidiary tasks.
- **“Stop making everyone happy”** – Great work requires you to put yourself first.
- **“Ask for help”** – Everyone needs it.

About the Author

Michael Bungay Stanier is the founder and senior partner of Box of Crayons, an innovation consultancy. A former Rhodes Scholar, he became Canada’s business Coach of the Year in 2006.
