
Linchpin by Seth Godin – Summary & Notes



This post contains my rough notes for Seth Godin's book [*Linchpin: Are You Indispensable?*](#)

My Summary

- The linchpin is indispensable.

- Everyone's an artist now.
- Real artists ship.
- There is no map.
- Make choices.
- Never wait for someone to tell me what to do.
- Make my own map.
- Let my work be an art.
- Always give more than I take.
- Humans are made to give, not receive.
- Useful questions to ask yourself:
 - "What is my art?"
 - "What should I do next?"
 - "What am I resisting?"
 - "Why am I resisting?"
 - "What do I fear?"
 - "I can't ... or I don't want to?"
 - "What would make me impossibly good at my job?"
 - "How can I be more artistic, motivated, aware, and genuine?"
 - "Am I moving?"
 - "Am I exerting emotional labor?"

INTRODUCTION

You are a genius.

A genius looks at something that others are stuck on and gets the world unstuck.

Nobody is a genius all the time.

Einstein had trouble finding his house when he walked home from work every day.

Society drums the genius part out.

This book is about love and art and change and fear. It's about overcoming a multigenerational conspiracy designed to sap your creativity and restlessness. It's about leading and making a difference and it's about succeeding.

The current system is a mess.

This book answers the question: where does success come from?

You can train yourself to matter.

The first step: acknowledge that this is a skill, and like most skills, you can (and will) get better at it.

Every day, if you focus on the gifts, art, and connections that characterize the linchpin, you'll become a little more indispensable.

THE NEW WORLD OF WORK

The compliant masses don't help much when you don't know what to do next.

We need indispensable human beings.

Artists are people with a genius for finding a new answer, a new connection, or a new way of getting things done.

Why is work now how it is? The key leverage: follow these instructions and you won't have to think. Do your job and you don't have to be responsible for decisions.

We want to be told what to do because we're petrified of figuring it out for ourselves.

PERL (percentage of easily replaced laborers): In the factory era, the goal was to maximize PERL; if ppl are replaceable you can pay them less.

Don't be a fungible product. Like Hector, who stands on a street corner waiting to be picked up for minimum wage menial labor.

Those are the only two choices. Win by being more ordinary, more standard, and cheaper. Or win by being faster, more remarkable, and more human.

There are no longer any great jobs where someone else tells you precisely what to do.

In a stack of 400 quarters where each represents 250 years of human history, the very last quarter represents how many years our society has revolved around factories and jobs and the world as we see it. The other 399 stand for a very different view of commerce, economy, and culture the old normal was around for a very long time.

Having a factory job is not a natural state.

We were all hunters.

Then they invented farming, and we became farmers.

And we were all farmers.

Then they invented the factory, and we all became factory workers. Factory workers who followed instructions, supported the system, and got paid what they were worth.

Then the factory fell apart.

And what's left for us to work with? Art.

Now, success means being an artist.

Not knowing what I'm going to be doing all day means I'm creating my day, rather than following a set of instructions

job description + automation => doom

Revolutions are rare, which is why they take us by surprise.

For our entire lives, the push has been to produce, to conform, and to consume.

Management tries to get the most work for the least pay. Adam Smith thought this was great. Marx thought it

was awful. Is there a good third middle-ground?

Thornton May: We've reached the end of attendance-based compensation (ABC).

Today, \$3,000 (a laptop and an internet connection) buys a worker an entire factory.

You don't become indispensable merely because you are different. But the only way to be indispensable is to be different. That's because if you're the same, so are plenty of other people.

The only way to get what you're worth is to stand out, to exert emotional labor, to be seen as indispensable, and to produce interactions that organizations and people care deeply about.

THINKING ABOUT YOUR CHOICE

Can you become indispensable? YES.

In every case, the linchpins among us are not the ones born with a magical talent. No, they are people who have decided that a new kind of work is important, and trained themselves to do it.

If you want a job where it's okay to follow the rules, don't be surprised if you get a job where following the rules is all you get to do.

If you want a job where you get to do more than follow instructions, don't be surprised if you get asked to do things they never taught you in school.

Expand the pie (win-win), don't fight for your slice (win-lose).

Of course you can do something that matters. I guess I'm wondering if you want to.

“but I can't possibly do xyz”

I'd like to ask for a simple clarification. You can't—or you don't want to?

[If] you decide you don't want to, fine with me.

But can't?

I don't buy that for a second.

The new American Dream, [...] the one that markets around the world are embracing as fast as they can, is this:

Be remarkable

Be generous

Create art

Make judgement calls

Connect people and ideas

... and we have no choice but to reward you.

Answer: “What would make me impossibly good at my job?”

“Not My Job”

Three words can kill an entire organization.

In a factory, doing a job that’s not yours is dangerous. Now, if you’re a linchpin, doing a job that’s not getting done is essential.

You can’t have employees that are both obedient and artistic, motivated, connected, aware, passionate, and genuine.

The choice: choosing to be more artistic, motivated, aware, and genuine.

When you’re not a cog in the machine, an easily replaceable commodity, you’ll get paid what you’re worth. Which is more.

People crave connection and respect.

INDOCTRINATION: HOW WE GOT HERE

Factories: places people go to do what they’re told and receive a paycheck.

If you’re insecure, the obvious response to my call to become a linchpin is, “I’m not good enough at anything to be indispensable.”

linchpin = charm + talent + perseverance

Schools have ingrained the fear of not fitting in.

Here’s what we’re teaching kids to do (with various levels of success):

Fit in

Follow instructions

Use #2 pencils

Take good notes

Show up every day

Cram for tests and don’t miss deadlines

Have good handwriting

Punctuate

Buy the things the other kids are buying

Don’t ask questions

Don't challenge authority

Do the minimum amount required so you'll have time to work on another subject

Get into college

Have a good résumé

Don't fail

Don't say anything that might embarrass you

Be passably good at sports, or perhaps extremely good at being a quarterback

Participate in a large number of extracurricular activities

Be a generalist

Try not to have the other kids talk about you

Once you learn a topic, move on

Now, the key questions:

Which of these attributes are the keys to being indispensable?

Are we building the sort of people our society needs?

School measures whether you're good at school. This is a fine skill if you intend to do school forever.

What they should teach in school:

Only *two things*:

1. Solve interesting problems

2. Lead

Answering questions like "When was the War of 1812?" is a useless skill in an always-on Wikipedia world.

It's far more useful to be able to answer questions that Google can't help us with, such as "What should I do next?"

Leading is a skill, not a gift.

Great teachers are precious. Lousy teachers cause damage that lasts forever.

BECOMING THE LINCHPIN

Doesn't matter if you're always right. It matters if you're always moving.

The law of linchpin leverage: The more value you create in your job, the fewer clock minutes of

labor you actually spend creating that value. In other words, most of the time, you're not being brilliant. Most of the time, you do stuff that ordinary people could do.

People who tell you that "I could paint a painting like that" are missing the point. The craft of the painting, the craft of writing that e-mail, the craft of building that PowerPoint presentation—those are the easy parts. It's the art and the insight and the bravery of value creation that are rewarded.

Depth of knowledge combined with good judgement is worth a lot.

Depth of knowledge is rarely sufficient, all by itself, to turn someone into a linchpin.

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

Emotional labor: exhausting but valuable. **The hard work of making art, producing generosity, and exposing creativity.**

Working without a map involves both vision and the willingness to do something about what you see.

Emotional labor is what you get paid to do, and one of the most difficult types of emotional labor is staring into the abyss of choice and picking a path.

Your job is a platform for generosity, expression, and art.

Linchpins are able to embrace the lack of structure and find a new path, one that works.

Give Yourself a D: If you're going to get a D for challenging structure and expectation and the status quo, it's well-earned.

Krulak's Law: the closer you get to the front, the more power you have over a brand.

Ex. two kids who make a cruelty to pizza video did more damage to Dominoes than any executive could

If all you can do is the task and you're not in a league of your own at doing the task, you're not indispensable.

Fearless: does not mean "without fear"; what it means: "unafraid of things that one shouldn't be afraid of."

Ex. giving an important presentation to an important client.

Reckless: rushing into places that only a fool would go

Feckless: the worst of all; ineffective, indifferent, and lazy

"Where do you put the fear?" What separates a linchpin from an ordinary person is the answer to this question.

Linchpin: feels the fear, acknowledges it, then proceeds.

I can't tell you how to do this, but I can tell you that it's a prerequisite for success.

The opposite of being a cog is being able to stop the show, at will. What would it take for you to

stop the show?

Don't spend your entire day avoiding making mistakes.

The only way to prove (as opposed to assert) that you are an indispensable linchpin—someone worth recruiting, moving to the top of the pile, and hiring—is to show, not tell. Projects are the new résumé.

You are not your résumé, you are your work.

If the game is designed for you to lose, don't play that game. Play a different one.

Top ten factors, ranked in order, that motivated creative professionals to do their best at work (out of 38 factors; n = 20,000):

Challenge and responsibility

Flexibility

A stable work environment

Money

Professional development

Peer recognition

Stimulating colleagues and bosses

Exciting job content

Organizational culture

Location and community

All of these (except for #4), are things we do for ourselves or things that we value because of who we are.

Most of these “can go through the roof as a result of our behavior, contributions, attitude, and gifts.”

Be rewarded for being human, not a cog in a machine.

Remarkable people deserve remarkable jobs.

The linchpin says, “I don't want a job that a non-linchpin could get.”

IS IT POSSIBLE TO DO HARD WORK IN A CUBICLE?

Art is a personal gift that changes the recipient.

My fundamental argument here is simple: In everything you do, it's possible to be an artist, at least a little bit. Not on demand, not in the same way each time, and not for everyone. But if you're willing to suspend your selfish impulses, you can give a gift to your customer or boss or

coworker or a passerby. *And the gift is as much for you as it is for the recipient.*

Who's my audience?

Twitter grew because it broke the model, not followed it.

It's not an effort contest, it's an art contest.

work: "The easier it is to quantify, the less it's worth."

Your art is what you can do when no one can tell you exactly how to do it.

THE RESISTANCE

"Real artists ship."

The only purpose of starting is to finish, and while the projects we do are never really finished, they must ship.

Shipping something out the door, doing it regularly, without hassle, emergency, or fear—this is a rare skill, something that makes you indispensable.

Challenges to shipping:

Thrashing: tweaking, updating, revising, sometimes even major surgery; essential, but when to do it?

Amateur: all at the end. Pro: early.

Coordination: the more people you have, the harder coordination is.

The reason: **the resistance**.

The sections of your mind:

- the daemon: "genius", struggles to express itself, artists write down what the daemon says, has no control over your lizard brain
- the resistance: comes from Steven Pressfield's *The War of Art*; in the lizard brain; creates procrastination and rationalization; the oldest part of our brain; the amygdala.

Four major systems in your brain: brain stem, limbic system, cerebellum, cerebrum.

There are two, not one, voices in our head.

There's a reason that the number-one fear reported by most people is public speaking. Public speaking is one of the worst things the lizard brain can imagine.

The biological factors that drive job performance and innovation: social intelligence, fear response, perception.

You become a winner because you're good at losing.

One way to become creative is to discipline yourself to generate bad ideas. The worse the better. Do it a lot and magically you'll discover that some good ones slip through.

If I don't have any good ideas, ask myself, "do I have any bad ideas?"

If the answer is no, then start generating bad ideas!

We don't need more genius, we need less resistance.

We're all brainwashed to think we're not geniuses.

If you're a genius, after all, then you need to deliver genius-quality results.

Fear is the most important emotion we have. It kept our ancestors alive, after all. Fear dominates the other emotions, because without our ability to avoid death, the other ones don't matter very much.

Look for the fear.

The resistance tries to destroy what opposes it.

When you say it out loud (not think it, say it), the lizard brain retreats in shame.

Ex.:

- "I'm doing this because of the resistance."
- "My lizard brain is making me anxious."
- "I'm angry right now because being angry is keeping me from doing my work."

Classic quotes from the resistance:

- "I don't have any good ideas."
- "I don't know what to do."
- "*I didn't graduate from [insert brand of some prestigious educational institution here]*"
- "My boss won't let me."
- etc.

The Cult of Done Manifesto. Post this up somewhere!

Always head directly into the resistance.

The hard part is distinguishing between quitting because the resistance wants you to (bad idea) or because the resistance doesn't want you to (great idea).

You have to choose your art. Picasso painted because painting was available; he didn't market tofu.

The goal is to strip away anything that looks productive but doesn't involve shipping.

Anxiety is needless and imaginary. It's fear about fear, fear that means nothing.

No rewards for worriers.

shenpa: a Tibetan word; "scratching the itch":

I think of it as a spiral of pain, something that is triggered by a small event and immediately takes you totally off the ranch. A small itch gets scratched, which makes it itch more, so you

scratch more and more until you're literally in pain.

Anxiety: **embrace it**; don't scratch the itch!! Don't try to force it away. This not only makes us miserable, but ruins our interactions.

Sprinting: focusing on going as fast as we can; you don't worry about all the superfluous stuff.

Focus entirely on moving.

How Godin makes stuff:

- write down a due date
- write down every single note, plan, idea, sketch, and contact
- now the thrashing and dreaming begin
- go through the database and build a complete description of the project; take it to whoever sign's off on it (not the whole team) and ask for approval, and: "If I deliver what you approved, on budget and on time, will you ship it?" Don't proceed until you get a yes. Once you get a yes, go ahead and make your project; ship on time, b/c that's what a linchpin does.

What does success of your project look like?

THE POWERFUL CULTURE OF GIFTS

For 50,000 years our interactions were based on mutual support and generosity.

We're made to give, not receive.

The new form of marketing is leadership.

Becoming a linchpin is not an act of selfishness. I see it as an act of generosity, because it gives you a platform for expending emotional labor and giving gifts.

For the last five hundred years, the best way to succeed has been to treat everyone as a stranger you could do business with.

Am I giving gifts?

Really? truly?

Three ways people think about gifts:

1. Give me a gift!
2. Here's a gift; now you owe me, big time.
3. Here's a gift. I love you. → *the only valid option!*

The most successful givers aren't doing it because they're being told to. They do it because doing it is fun. It gives them joy.

You must be aware of where your skills are welcomed
great work is not created for everyone.

People who deliver gifts seek respect, not reciprocity.

How do I know what art to make? How do I know what gifts to give?

This is the crux of it. Once you commit to being an artist, the question is an obvious one. The answer is the secret to your success. You must make a map.

Not someone else. You.

THERE IS NO MAP

Don't wait for someone to tell me what to do!

The best ways to [become indispensable] are to be remarkable, insightful, an artist, someone bearing gifts. To lead. The worst way is to conform and become a cog in a giant system.

What does it take to lead?

The key distinction is the ability to forge your own path, to discover a route from one place to another that hasn't been paved, measured, and quantified. So many times we want someone to tell us exactly what to do, and so many times that's exactly the wrong approach.

Seek *prajna*: a life without attachment and stress gives you the freedom to see things as they are and call them as you see them.

I.e. knowing what's true is very valuable; the starting point for creating a map.

An acceptance of the world as it is.

Equanimity is easy when we're dealing with a random event. Stuff happens. We don't get angry at birds chirping or even a thunderstorm occurring during a play. But if a cell phone goes off, that's an entirely different story. We need to sit and seethe, as if that seething is magically sending horrible vibes to the offender and *he will never do it again*.

Being a linchpin means begin able to *just deal with it*.

Signs of attachments:

- trying to control other people's minds
- if bad news changes your emotional state or how you think of yourself

The alternative is to ask, "Isn't this interesting?" Learn what you can learn; then move on.

If you're able to look at what's happening in your world and say, "There's the pattern," or "Wow, that's interesting, I wonder why," then you're far more likely to respond productively than if your reaction is "How dare he!"

Two questions:

1. can you see it?
2. do you care?

You must be able to see the truth in order to tell it.

The linchpin has figured out that we get only a limited number of brain cycles to spend each day. Spending even one on a situation out of our control has a significant opportunity cost.

There is no map. No map to be a leader, no map to be an artist. I've read hundreds of books about art (in all its forms) and how to do it, and not one has a clue about the map, because there isn't one.

Here's the truth that you have to wrestle with: the reason that art (writing, engaging, leading, all of it) is valuable is precisely why I can't tell you how to do it. If there were a map, there'd be no art, because art is the act of navigating without a map.

Don't you hate that? I love that there's no map.

Art is valuable precisely because it has no map; if there were a map there's be no art; art is the act of navigating without a map.

MAKING THE CHOICE

Lean in and seek out projects where I can make a difference.

If your agenda is set by someone else and it doesn't lead you where you want to go, why is it your agenda?

Draw a map and lead.

Most of the time, we're doing non-linchpin work, doing someone else's work instead of our art. That's fine, as long as there's a balance, as long as you leave enough time for the work that matters.

People follow because they want to, not because you can order them to.

Conventional wisdom is that you should find a job that matches your passion. I think this is backwards.

“if only...”

- “I could see the situation more clearly if only ...”
- “I could lead this tribe if only ...”
- “I could find the bravery to do my art if only ...”

“If only” is an obligator, because once you get rid of that item, you've got no excuse left, only the obligation.

Answer the “if only” question and eliminate your excuses!

Don't hold on to a specific future, then you'll blind yourself to alternatives and better options.

Hoping is stressful.

Ishita Gupta wrote,

Every day is a new chance to choose.

Choose to change your perspective.

Choose to flip the switch in your mind. Turn on the light and stop fretting about with insecurity and doubt.

Choose to do your work and be free of distraction.

Choose to see the best in someone, or choose to bring out the worst in them.

Choose to be a laser beam, with focused intention or a scattered ray of light that doesn't do any good.

Every day is a new chance to choose.

Don't let your circumstance or habits rule your choices today. Become a master of yourself and use your willpower to choose.

Nothing about becoming indispensable is easy. If it's easy it's already been done and it's no longer valuable.

You will fail, and often.

How often do you beat yourself up? How often does the lizard brain set out to slow you down or wreck your career by highlighting the critics, the failures, the missteps? They get away with their cheap shots because you allow them to.

Open yourself to feedback!

Learning to discern feedback that helps and criticism that degrades will take some time and practice.

THE CULTURE OF CONNECTION

Linchpins can't succeed in isolation.

Five essential character traits (and also the signs of a linchpin!): Openness, Conscientiousness, Extraversion, Agreeableness, Emotional Stability

People desperately want attention from each other.

Gifts must be genuine; people can tell when they're not.

THE SEVEN ABILITIES OF A LINCHPIN

Linchpins do two things:

1. exert emotional labor
2. make a map

Things that make you indispensable:

1. Providing a unique interface between members of the organization; organizations are networks
2. Delivering unique creativity

- *creativity*: personal, original, unexpected, useful
- *unique creativity*: requires domain knowledge, a position of trust, the generosity to actually contribute; implies that the creativity is focused and insightful.
- *delivering unique creativity*: the hardest of all; you also need to be passionate enough to risk the rejection that delivering a solution can bring; you must ship!
- Managing a situation or organization of great complexity; “When a situation gets too complex it’s impossible to follow the manual, because there is no manual.” Mapmaking and clear judgement must be practiced.
- Leading customers. “[E]very person who interacts with a customer (or a business being sold to, or a donor to a nonprofit, or a voter) is doing marketing as leadership.”
- Inspiring staff: a team at rest tends to stay at rest; your job is to *make something happen*.
- Providing deep domain knowledge: deep domain knowledge is rarely enough to become indispensable; combine it with smart decisions and generous contributions, though, changes things
- Possessing a unique talent

When you meet someone, you need to have a superpower. If you don’t, you’re just another handshake. It’s not about touting yourself or coming on too strong. It’s about making the introduction meaningful. If I don’t know your superpower, then I don’t know how you can help me (or I can help you).

To be a linchpin, your power must be very difficult to replace.

Two choices:

1. Develop the other attributes that make you a linchpin
2. Get a lot better at your unique talent

The challenge, then, is to be the generous artist, but do it knowing that it just might not work. And that’s okay.

WHEN IT DOESN’T WORK

What to do when it doesn’t work; conversation doesn’t happen; product doesn’t sell; boss is unhappy?

MAKE MORE ART; give more gifts; learn from what you do and then do more.

Trying and failing is better than merely failing.

The only alternative: give up, become an old-school cog.

“My boss won’t let me.” 9 times /10 this just isn’t true, 1 time /10 get a new job.

If you set out to get a Pulitzer prize there’s no guarantee you’ll win.

The vivid truth is this: now that we have the freedom to create, we must embrace the fact that not all creations are equal, and some people aren’t going to win.

The challenge lies in knowing your market and your self well enough to see the truth.