We all have the same amount of time at our disposal. So how is it that some people manage to do more, achieve more, earn more, and have more?

The answer is, they get to the heart of things by keeping their focus very narrow.

“The best way to get the most out of your work, and your life, is to focus on as few things as possible,” writes Gary Keller. This means ignoring all the things you could do and focusing instead on what you should do. It’s realizing that extraordinary results flow directly from doing fewer things, not more things.

According to Keller, most people add more things to their to-do lists, when they should be subtracting. As the founder and executive chairman of Keller Williams Realty – the world’s largest real estate franchise - Keller has witnessed first-hand the disastrous effects that overloaded calendars and overflowing to-do lists can have on his employees and business partners. “When folks have too many balls in the air at once, success starts to feel out of reach, so they settle for less,” he says. “Unaware that breakthrough success comes when we do just a few things really well, people try to do too much, and in the end they accomplish too little.”

As a successful business executive, bestselling author and life coach, Gary Keller has helped countless people find success. In The ONE Thing, Keller and his co-author Jay Papasan aim to show us that the results we get are directly related to how we choose to work.

The ONE Thing is a big idea about success, wrapped in a disarmingly simple package. Explaining Keller’s idea is the easy part – we’ll get to that in just a moment when we talk about the “domino effect.” But buying into the idea can be hard because of all the so-called “myths and misinformation” that prevent many of us from integrating The ONE Thing into our lives. We’ll deal with those later on. But let’s start with an explanation of how The ONE Thing actually works.

The Domino Effect

November 13, 2009, on World Domino Day, Weijers Domino Productions won the
world record for domino falls by lining up more than 4,491,863 dominoes in the town square of Leeuwarden, The Netherlands.

On that fateful day, the good people at Weijers weren’t intimidated by the fact that 4,491,862 dominoes needed to be toppled by one single, solitary lead domino. They believed that one thing – provided it is the right thing at the right time in the right place – could topple a great many things. And they were right.

And that’s not all. In 1983, Lorne Whitehead observed in the American Journal of Physics that dominoes could not only topple many things, they could also topple bigger things. Dr. Whitehead described how a single domino is capable of bringing down another domino that’s actually 50 percent larger.

“Taken to its logical extreme,” says Keller, “the result of this experiment could defy the imagination.” The 10th domino in the sequence would be about as tall as NFL quarterback Peyton Manning. By the 18th, you’re looking at a domino that would match the Eiffel Tower. The 31st one would loom over Mount Everest. And so on and so forth.

“Getting extraordinary results is all about creating a similar domino effect in your life,” explains Keller. “Highly successful people know this. So every day they line up their priorities anew, find the lead domino in the sequence, and whack away at it until it falls.”

Keller goes on to explain that extraordinarily successful companies always have one product or service they’re most known for or that makes them the most money. That’s certainly true of Keller’s own real estate company. It’s also true of Kentucky Fried Chicken. Colonel Sanders started KFC with a single secret chicken recipe. They’ve since added other items to the menu, but the chicken is still at the heart of the business.

Examples of this abound. To this day, microprocessors still generate the vast majority of Intel’s net revenue. For Google, their ONE Thing is search. It’s search that makes all of Google’s advertising revenue possible. For Starbucks it’s ... well, you get the idea.

Now, you may not be KFC, Google or Starbucks. But if you own or manage a business, it’s imperative for you to figure out what your ONE Thing is. When you’re just starting out, the answer may not be immediately apparent, but that doesn’t make finding it any less important. Even if your company is already a well-established industry player, you still need to be able to point to that ONE Thing that’s at the heart of your business model. “If today your company doesn’t know what it’s ONE Thing is,” writes Keller, “then your company’s ONE Thing starting tomorrow is to figure it out!”

If you look behind the success story of any extraordinary company, or indeed any extraordinary individual, the ONE Thing is always there. “We all have particular passions and skills,” says Keller. “But you’ll find with extraordinarily successful
people that there’s one intense and often interconnected passion and ability that shines through, defining them and driving them more than anything else.” A great example of this is Bill Gates, whose childhood passion was computers, which led him to focus all of his talent and energy into ONE Thing: computer programming. Later on, Microsoft began its life to do ONE Thing – develop and sell great software, which eventually made Bill Gates the richest man in the world.

Like Bill Gates, applying the ONE Thing to our work – and our lives – is the simplest, smartest thing we can do to propel ourselves forward, says Keller. But in order to do that, we will first have to banish from our minds what Keller calls “the lies and myths” that derail us; starting with the patently untrue idea that “everything matters equally.”

**Myth #1: Everything Matters Equally**

Do you remember being told that the Spanish explorer Cortez burned his ships upon arriving at the Americas to motivate his men? Not true, says Keller.

How about this one: “Bet on the jockey, not the horse!” This expression has long been a rallying cry for putting your faith in a company’s leadership. However, according to empirical research, this nice-sounding maxim will put you on the fast track to the pauper’s house. The horse is usually a better bet.

“Over time, workplace myths get thrown around so often they eventually feel familiar and start to sound like the truth,” writes Keller. “Then we base important decisions on them. If we’re going to maximize our potential, we have to put these myths to bed.” This starts with dispelling the most insidious workplace myth of them all: everything matters equally.

Keller would be the first to admit that, when everything you do at work feels urgent and important, every task starts to seem pretty equal. The problem is, most of these activities are actually unrelated to productivity, and “busyness” rarely takes care of “business.” The fact is, not everything matters equally, and success isn’t a game won by whoever sends the most emails a day. Yet that is exactly how many of us act!

High achievers operate differently. They have an eye for the essential. When a new set of tasks comes their way, they pause long enough to decide which of them actually matter and then allow the important ones to drive their day. That’s why instead of a “to-do list” Keller recommends creating a “success list,” a short list that’s purposefully created around generating extraordinary results.

So how can you turn your regular, run-of-the-mill to-do list into a success list? With so many things you could do, how will you decide what matters most at any given moment on any given day? The answer is the Pareto Principle.

“The Pareto Principle is not just a theory,” writes Keller. “It’s as real as the law of gravity, and yet most people fail to see the gravity of it.” In his view, Pareto is one of the greatest productivity truths ever discovered. Richard Koch, in his book The 80/20
Rule, defined the Pareto Principle about as well as anyone: “The Pareto Principle (also known as the 80/20 Rule) asserts that a minority of causes, inputs, or units of effort usually lead to a majority of the results, outputs, or rewards.” In other words, in the world of success, all inputs are not created equal. Some inputs create most of the results.

To illustrate how this works in practice, Keller tells the story of how, on his 40th birthday, he started taking guitar lessons. After a couple of lessons, Keller quickly discovered he only had about 15 or 20 minutes a day to practice. This wasn’t much practice time, so he knew he had to spend it doing the most important things.

Keller asked his friend, who happens to be a very accomplished musician, for advice. His buddy said that if Keller could do only one thing, then he should practice his scales. So, Keller took the guy’s advice and chose the minor blues scale. What he soon discovered was that if he learned that scale well, he could play many of the solos of great classic rock guitarists from Eric Clapton to Billy Gibbons. That blues scale became Keller’s ONE Thing for the guitar, and it unlocked the world of music for him.

**Myth #2: Multitasking Works**

More than six million webpages offer advice on how to be a great multi-tasker, plenty of career websites list “multitasking” as an important skill for employers to target, and for prospective hires to list as a strength. The problem is, when you try to do two things at once, you either can’t or won’t do either of those things very well. Oh sure, says Keller, people can successfully do two or more things at once, such as walk and talk, or chew gum and read a map. But what we can’t do is focus on two things at once. Our attention bounces back and forth, and often our brains are slow to kick back into high gear. In fact, research shows that workers are interrupted every 11 minutes and then spend almost a third of their day recovering from these distractions.

Interestingly, chronic multi-taskers also tend to develop a distorted sense of how long it takes to do things. Multi-taskers believe tasks take longer to complete than is actually required (which probably happens because their brains aren’t working efficiently).

Research shows that chronic multi-taskers also make noticeably more mistakes than non-multitaskers. This is in part because they tend to favor new information over old (“Oh look, I got a new e-mail!”), even if the older information is more reliable or valuable.

In the wrong setting, multitasking can even be really dangerous. In the United States, distracted driving is responsible for 16 percent of all traffic fatalities and nearly half a million injuries annually. So, the bottom line is that if something is important enough to merit your attention, then give it your full attention.
Myth #3: Willpower Is Always Available

The old English proverb “Where there’s a will, there’s a way” has probably misled many people over the years. In reality, willpower isn’t always at our beck and call.

This isn’t to say that willpower isn’t critically important. The fundamental importance of willpower was borne out in a study undertaken during the early 1970s, when Stanford researcher Walter Mischel ran an experiment with over 500 four-year olds. The children were offered one of three treats: a pretzel, a cookie, or a marshmallow. The child was told that the researcher had to step out of the room, and if the tyke could wait a mere 15 minutes until the researcher returned, they’d be awarded a second treat.

Left alone with a marshmallow they couldn’t eat, the children engaged in all kinds of delay strategies, from closing their eyes to pulling their own hair. On average, kids held out less than three minutes. Only three out of ten managed to delay their gratification until the researcher returned. It was pretty apparent to Mischel that most kids struggled with delayed gratification. Their willpower was in short supply. But in actual fact, Mischel wasn’t interested in willpower in children. His concern was adults.

Starting in 1981, Mischel began systematically tracking down his original subjects. He requested high school transcripts, talked to parents, and interviewed teachers and coaches in an attempt to measure their relative academic and social progress. Mischel’s initial hunch was correct: willpower or the ability to delay gratification was a huge indicator of future success. Success in the marshmallow experiment predicted higher general academic achievement, SAT test scores that were on average 210 points higher, higher feelings of self-worth, and better stress management. On the other hand, “low delayers” were 30 percent more likely to be overweight and suffer higher rates of drug addiction. They were also far more likely to drop out of school.

“Willpower is so vitally important that using it effectively should be a high priority,” says Keller. But we don’t have an unlimited supply of it. He encourages his readers to think of willpower as they would the power bar on their iPhones. Every morning, the iPhone starts out with a full charge. But as the day goes on, the power gets used up. So as your green “willpower” bar shrinks, so does your resolve, and when it eventually goes red, you’re done. Willpower can be recharged with rest and downtime. But we tend to act as though our supply of willpower were endless. As a result, we don’t consider it a personal resource to be managed.

When it comes to willpower, timing is everything. So, if we want to get the most out of our day, Keller urges us to do our most important work – our ONE Thing – early in the day, before our willpower is too drawn down. Since our self-control will naturally be sapped throughout the day, let’s use it when it’s at full strength on what matters most. That way, there’ll actually be some “will” available when we really need to find a “way.”
Ask A Focusing Question

Once you’ve cast aside the myths of “everything matters equally,” and “multitasking equates to productivity,” and “willpower is available on demand,” then it’s time to buckle down and really focus on your ONE Thing. But wait. Which thing will you pick?

To figure out what your ONE Thing should be, Keller recommends you sit down in a quiet room and ask yourself a Focusing Question.

This may sound really simple, but surprisingly few people ever take the time to do it.

“Research shows that asking questions of ourselves improves our learning and performance by as much as 150 percent,” writes Keller. The Focusing Question forces us to do what is essential to success: make a decision. But not just any decision. It drives us to make the best decision we know how to make. It ignores what is doable at any given moment and drills down to what is necessary. It leads us to that first domino.

Anatomy Of The Question:

Your 3-part Focusing Question should be structured like this: “What’s the ONE Thing I can do /such that by doing it/ everything else will be easier or unnecessary?”

PART ONE: “WHAT’S THE ONE THING I CAN DO...”

The first part of the Focusing Question forces you to think about something very specific. It tells you right up front that you need to pick one thing and one thing only.

The bit about “can do” is also important. It’s encouraging you to think about actions that are realistic. People often want to change this bit to “should do,” but that phrasing misses the point. There are many things in life that we should do, but that we never do. An action we realistically “can do” beats empty intentions every time.

PART TWO: “...SUCH THAT BY DOING IT...”

This part of the Focusing Question is the bridge between just doing something and intentionally doing something for a specific purpose. “Such that by doing it” lets you know you’re going to have to dig deep, because when you do this ONE Thing, something big is going to happen.

PART THREE: “...EVERYTHING ELSE WILL BE EASIER OR UNNECESSARY?”

Archimedes said “Give me a lever long enough and I could move the world,” and that’s exactly what the last part of the Focusing Question has you look for.

“Everything else will be easier or unnecessary” is the ultimate leverage test. It tells you when you’ve zeroed in on that first domino. It says that when you do this ONE
Thing, everything else you must do to accomplish your end goal will now be either doable with much less effort, or possibly no longer even necessary.

“Most people struggle to comprehend how many things will no longer need to be done, if only they would just start by doing the right thing,” says Keller. For example, if you make it your ONE Thing to increase sales by ten percent this year, the extra revenue you generate would be enough to finally upgrade your core production equipment. So it would no longer be necessary for you to waste time and money maintaining the dilapidated old equipment.

Sample Focusing Questions:

The Focusing Question aims to de-clutter your life by asking you to put on blinders and think really hard about your ONE Thing. A great Focusing Question can direct you to your maximum point of leverage. Here are a few examples to help get your wheels turning:

- What’s the ONE Thing I can do this month to improve our customer experience?
- What’s the ONE Thing I can do this year to eliminate my credit card debt?
- What’s the ONE Thing I can do to improve my relationship with my spouse?
- What’s the ONE Thing I can do every morning to reach my weight loss goal?

Find A Great Answer

Of course, the challenge with asking a great Focusing Question is that, once you’ve asked it, you’re now confronted with the task of finding a really great answer.

According to Keller, answers to all of life’s important questions come in three basic categories: doable, stretch, and possibility.

If you land on a doable solution, you probably already know exactly what needs to be done so you may not have to make any fundamental changes to get there. This category of answers includes things that are very likely to be achieved.

The next level up is a “stretch” answer. While stretch answers are still very much within your reach, they can be at the farthest end of your range. Achieving success can be iffy since you’ll have to work extra hard and extend yourself to the very limits of your current abilities. Think of this category as potentially achievable, depending on your effort.

There’s nothing wrong with setting doable, or stretch goals. But high-achievers go even further. Unwilling to settle for ordinary results when extraordinary outcomes are possible, high-achievers ask themselves a Focusing Question and answer in a way that challenges them to the greatest degree.
“Highly successful people choose to live at the outer limits of achievement,” writes Keller. “They dream about, and deeply crave, what is beyond their natural grasp.”

A “possibility answer” is never in plain view. It’s a moon shot. It exists on the fringes of what’s already known and being done. There’s a high possibility of failure. But don’t let that stop you. There’s no shame in failure; it’s the best way to learn.

**Time Blocking**

In the end, putting together a life of extraordinary results comes down to getting the most out of the time you have. It’s about time management.

“Most people think there’s never enough time to be successful,” writes Keller. “But there is when you block it properly.” Time blocking is a very results-oriented way of viewing and using time. It’s a way of making sure that what has to be done gets done. If disproportionate results come from one activity, then you must give that one activity a disproportionate amount of your time. So, when you know your ONE Thing, make a daily or weekly appointment with yourself to tackle it.

Now, Keller recognizes that blocking time is harder than it sounds. He recalls coaching an executive assistant to block large chunks of time for a particular project. It was stressful for her at first. She was continually being interrupted. Email alerts pinged, colleagues dropped by, team members provided a steady stream of requests. These weren’t even distractions – they were her core job. In the beginning, she had to borrow a laptop and book a conference room to escape “drive-bys” and non-urgent requests. But within a week or two, everyone became accustomed to the fact that for regular periods of time she would not be accessible. Her colleagues lived went on just fine, and she experienced a huge leap in productivity.

Of course, sometimes when an urgent request comes in – say from the CEO’s office – it simply needs to be done right away, and you must drop what you’re doing. In this situation, Keller recommends you follow this rule: “If you erase, you must replace” and immediately reschedule your time block. Don’t let it slip away without a fight.

Lastly, it bears mentioning that focusing on your ONE Thing will have at least one guaranteed consequence: some things won’t get one. There will always be unfinished work and loose ends lying around to snare your focus. Don’t feel badly about that. Accept it instead of fighting it.

**Conclusion**

We only have so much time and energy, so when we spread ourselves out, we end up being spread too thinly. We all want to achieve more but that actually takes subtraction, not addition. Long to-do lists are a waste of time. Smaller is better. And when you go as small as you possibly can, you’ll be staring at just ONE Thing. And that’s the point. That’s when you’ll know you’ve succeeded.