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Linchpin

Are You Indispensable?

THE SUMMARY IN BRIEF

There used to be two teams in every workplace: management and labor. Now there's a third team, "the linchpins." These people invent, lead (regardless of title), connect others, make things happen and create order out of chaos. They love their work, pour their best selves into it and turn each day into a kind of art.

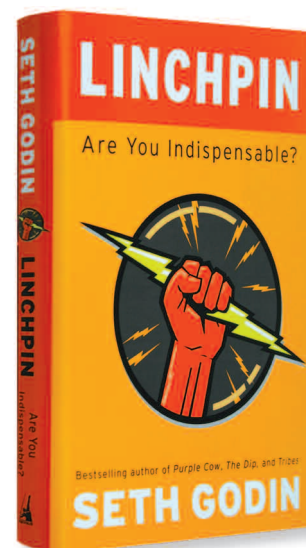
Author Seth Godin, CEO of Squidoo.com, explains that linchpins are the essential building blocks of great organizations. Like the small piece of hardware that keeps a wheel from falling off its axle, they may not be famous, but they're indispensable. And in today's world, they get the best jobs and the most freedom.

Have you ever found a shortcut that others missed? Seen a new way to resolve a conflict? Then you have what it takes to become indispensable, by overcoming the resistance that holds people back.

The world has changed (again) and the stakes are higher than ever. Now we're facing a full-fledged revolution — a hypercompetitive world involving arts and gifts and fear and the ability for you (or anyone) to make an indispensable contribution to something you care about. If you're not indispensable (yet) it's because you haven't made that choice. *Linchpin* will help you see that the choice is yours.

IN THIS SUMMARY, YOU WILL LEARN:

- How to focus on the things that really matter.
- How to get your dream job without a resume.
- How to see every customer interaction as a chance to give a gift.
- How to become a linchpin in your organization.



by Seth Godin

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THE COMPLETE SUMMARY: LINCHPIN

by Seth Godin

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Introduction

Where does average come from?

It comes from two places:

1. You have been brainwashed by school and by the system into believing that your job is to do your job and follow instructions. It's not — not anymore.
2. Everyone has a little voice inside his or her head that's angry and afraid. That voice is the resistance — your lizard brain — and it wants you to be average (and safe).

If you're not doing as well as you had hoped, perhaps it's because the rules of the game were changed and no one told you.

The rules were written just over 200 years ago; they worked for a long time, but no longer.

Developing Indispensability

You weren't born to be a cog in the giant industrial machine. You were *trained* to become a cog.

There's an alternative available to you. Becoming a linchpin is a step-wise process, a path in which you develop the attributes that make you indispensable. You can train yourself to matter. The first step is the most difficult, the step where you acknowledge that this is a skill, and like all 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 first chapter of Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations* makes it clear that the way for businesses to win is to

break the production of goods into tiny tasks, tasks that can be undertaken by low-paid people following simple instructions. Smith writes about how incredibly efficient a pin-making factory is compared to a few pin artisans making pins by hand. Why hire a super-talented pin maker when 10 barely trained pin-making factory workers using a machine and working together can produce a *thousand* times more pins, more quickly, than one talented person working alone can?

For nearly 300 years, that was the way work worked. What factory owners want is compliant, low-paid, replaceable cogs to run their efficient machines.

Our society is struggling because during times of change the very last people you need on your team are well-paid bureaucrats, note takers, literalists, manual readers, TGIF laborers, map followers and fearful employees. The compliant masses don't help so much when you don't know what to do next.

We Need Artists

What we want, what we need, what we must have are indispensable human beings. We need original thinkers, provocateurs and people who care. We need marketers who can lead, salespeople able to risk making a human connection, passionate change makers willing to be shunned if it is necessary for them to make a point. Every organization needs a linchpin — the one person who can bring it together and make a difference. We need artists.

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

That would be you.



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Published by Soundview Executive Book Summaries (ISSN 0747-2196), P.O. Box 1053, Concordville, PA 19331 USA, a division of Concentrated Knowledge Corp. Published monthly. Subscriptions starting at \$99 per year.
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Average Is Over

Our world no longer fairly compensates people who are cogs in a giant machine.

It turns out that what we need are gifts and connections and humanity — and the artists who create them.

Leaders don't get a map or a set of rules. Living life without a map requires a different attitude. It requires you to be a linchpin.

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, you can.

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 they're training themselves to do it.

It's not about what you're born with, it's about what you do.

Teaching Remarkable

A great school experience won't keep you from being remarkable, but it's usually not sufficient to guarantee that you will become so. There's something else at work here.

Great schools might work; lousy schools definitely stack the deck against you. Why is society working so hard to kill our natural-born artists? When we try to drill and practice someone into subservient obedience, we're stamping out the artist that lives within.

Why are you working so hard to bury your natural-born instincts? Everyone has art in them, though it's buried sometimes. Markets are crying out. We need you to stand up and be remarkable. Be human. Contribute. Interact. Take the risk that you might make someone upset with your initiative, innovation and insight — it turns out that you'll probably delight that person instead.

Consumers say that all they want are cheap commodities. Given the choice, though, most of us, most of the time, seek out art. We seek out experiences and products that deliver more value, more connection and more experience, and those that change us for the better. You can learn how to do this if you want to.

The New American Dream

Do you remember the old American Dream? It struck

The Skill of Leading

Leading is a skill, not a gift. You're not born with it, you learn how. And schools can teach leadership as easily as they figured out how to teach compliance. Schools can teach us to be socially smart, to be open to connection, to understand the elements that build a tribe. While schools provide outlets for natural-born leaders, they don't teach it. And leadership is now worth far more than compliance is.

a chord with millions of people (in the United States and in the rest of the world too). Here's how it goes:

Keep your head down.

Follow instructions.

Show up on time.

Work hard.

Suck it up.

... And you will be rewarded.

As we've seen, that dream is over.

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

Be remarkable.

Be generous.

Create art.

Make judgment calls.

Connect people and ideas.

... And we have no choice but to reward you. ●

Indoctrination: How We Got Here

We've been taught to be a replaceable cog in a giant machine.

We've been taught to consume as a shortcut to happiness.

We've been taught not to care about our jobs or our customers.

And we've been taught to fit in.

None of these things helps you get what you deserve.

Mediocre Obedience

It seems "natural" to live the life so many of us live, but in fact, it's quite recent and totally manmade. We exist in a corporate manufacturing mindset, one so complete that anyone off the grid seems like an oddity. In the past few years, though, it's become clear that people

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who reject the worst of the current system are actually *more* likely to succeed.

Evolutionary biologist Stephen Jay Gould wrote, “Violence, sexism and general nastiness are biological since they represent one subset of a possible range of behaviors. But peacefulness, equality and kindness are just as biological — and we may see their influence increase if we can create social structures that permit them to flourish.”

Mediocre obedience is certainly something we’re capable of, but if we take initiative and add a little bravery, artistic leadership is something that’s equally (or more) possible and productive. We’ve been trained to believe that mediocre obedience is a genetic fact for most of the population, but it’s interesting to note that this trait doesn’t show up until after a few years of schooling.

In Search of Great Teachers

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

We need to reorganize our schools to free the great teachers from tests and reports and busywork, and to expel the lousy teachers. When schools were organized to produce laborers, lousy teachers were exactly what we needed. Now, lousy teachers are dangerous.

Don’t blame the teachers. Blame the corporate system that is still training compliant workers who test well. ●

Becoming the Linchpin

A linchpin is an unassuming piece of hardware, something you can buy for 69 cents at the local hardware store. It’s not glamorous, but it’s essential. It holds the wheel onto the wagon.

Every successful organization has at least one linchpin; some have dozens or even thousands. The linchpin is the essential element, the person who holds part of the operation together. Without the linchpin, the thing falls apart.

Is there anyone in an organization who is absolutely irreplaceable? Probably not. But the most essential people are so difficult to replace, so risky to lose and so valuable that they might as well be irreplaceable. Entire corporations are built around a linchpin or, more likely, a scattering of them, essential individuals who are worth holding on to.

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

2. You are capable of becoming a linchpin. And if you do become one, you’ll discover that it’s worth the effort.

The easiest linchpin examples are CEOs and entrepreneurs, because they’re the ones who get all the press. Steve Jobs at Apple or Jeff Bezos at Amazon or Ben Zander at the Boston Philharmonic or Anne Jackson at flowerdust.net. We look at these leaders and say, “Of course they’re the linchpin. The organization wouldn’t be the same without them.”

Create a Magical Experience

What about the way you feel when you walk into an Anthropologie store, unwrap a piece of Lake Champlain chocolate or send a package using FedEx’s website? The experience could have been merely ordinary, merely another bit of good enough. But it’s not. It’s magical. It was created by someone who cared, who contributed, who did more than he or she was told. A linchpin.

Anthropologie has a buyer, Keith Johnson, who spends six months a year traveling the world, visiting flea markets and garage sales, looking for extraordinary things. Not to sell, perhaps, but to beautify a store. It’s not easy to hire a Keith Johnson, which is precisely why his work is so essential to the company’s success.

If your organization would get out of the way, and if you would step up, there’d be a slot like that available. For anyone. ●

Is It Possible to Do Hard Work in a Cubicle?

Emotional labor is the task of doing important work, even when it isn’t easy.

It turns out that digging into the difficult work of emotional labor is exactly what we’re expected (and needed) to do. Work is nothing but a platform for art and the emotional labor that goes with it.

The Gift of Emotional Labor

When you do emotional labor, you benefit.

Not just the company, not just your boss, but you.

The act of giving someone a smile, of connecting to a human, of taking initiative, of being surprising, of being creative, of putting on a show — these are things that we do for free all our lives. And then we get to work and we expect to merely do what we’re told and get paid for it.

This gulf creates tension. If you reserve your emotional labor for when you are off duty but you work all the

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time, you are deprived of the joy you get when you do this labor. Now, you're not giving gifts on duty, but you're not off duty much at all. Spend eight or 10 or 12 hours a day at work (not only in the office but online or on the phone or in your dreams) and there's not a lot of time left for the very human acts that make you who you are and who you want to be.

So bring that gift to work.

And what do you get in return? There are companies that now value this sort of labor and encourage it. More organizations are embracing this idea and hiring for it and rewarding for it.

In most cases, though, you get little in return. At least, little in terms of formal entries in your permanent file or bonuses in your year-end pay. But you do benefit.

First, you benefit from the making and the giving. The act of the gift is in itself a reward. And second, you benefit from the response of those around you. When you develop the habit of contributing this gift, your co-workers become more open, your boss becomes more flexible and your customers become more loyal. ●

The Resistance

Your mind, the thing that drives you crazy and makes you special, has two distinct sections: the “daemon” and the resistance.

The daemon is the source of great ideas, groundbreaking insights, generosity, love, connection and kindness.

The resistance spends all its time insulating the world from our daemon. The resistance lives inside the lizard brain.

Daemon is a Greek term (the Romans called it a “genius”). The Greeks believed that the daemon was a separate being inside each of us. The genius living inside of us would struggle to express itself in art or writing or some other endeavor. When the genius felt like showing up, great stuff happened. If not, you were sort of out of luck.

Every time you find yourself following the manual instead of writing the manual, you're avoiding the anguish and giving in to the resistance.

How the Resistance Evolved

The first part of our brain, the part that shows up first in the womb, the part that was there a million years ago — that's our lizard brain. The lizard brain is in charge of fight or flight, of anger and of survival. That's all we used to need, and even now, when there's an emergency, the lizard brain is still in charge.

There are several small parts of your brain near the end of your spinal cord responsible for survival and other wild-animal traits. The whole thing is called the basal ganglia, and there are two almond-shaped bits in everyone's brain. Scientists call these the amygdala, and this mini-brain apparently takes over when you are angry, afraid, aroused, hungry or in search of revenge.

It's only recently that our brains evolved to allow big thoughts, generosity, speech, consciousness and, yes, art. When you look at a picture of the brain, the new part is what you see: the neocortex. That's the wrinkly gray part on the outside. It's big, but it's weak. In the face of screaming resistance from the amygdala, the rest of your brain is helpless. It freezes and surrenders. The lizard brain takes over and tries to protect itself.

The challenge is to create an environment where the lizard brain snoozes. You can't beat it, so you must seduce it. One part of your brain worries about survival and anger and lust. The rest of it creates civilization.

The lizard brain is here to keep you alive; the rest of your brain merely makes you a happy, successful, connected member of society.

So the two parts duke it out. And when you're put on alert, the lizard brain wins every time unless you've established new habits and better patterns — patterns that keep the lizard brain at bay. ●

The Powerful Culture of Gifts

In the beginning, there was the culture of potlatch and gifts. Caveman culture has a long tradition of reciprocity, and as Marcel Mauss has written, this reciprocity was used to build relationships and power. In the Pacific Northwest, Native American tribe leaders established their power by giving *everything* away. They could afford to give everyone a gift because they were so powerful and the gifts were a symbol of that power. Any leader who hoarded saw his power quickly diminish.

Then, quite suddenly, this ancient tradition changed. Money and structured society flipped the system, and now you get, you don't give. Power used to be about giving, not getting.

In the linchpin economy, the winners are once again the artists who give gifts. Giving a gift makes you indispensable. Inventing a gift, creating art — these are what the market seeks out, and the givers are the ones who earn our respect and attention.

Giving, Receiving, Giving

Part of the reason for this flip is the digital nature of our new gift system. The Internet makes it possible for a

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gift to spread everywhere, quite quickly, at no cost. Digital gifts, ideas that spread — these allow the artist to be far more generous than he could ever be in an analog world.

Thomas Hawk is the most successful digital photographer in the world. He has taken tens of thousands of pictures on his way to his goal of taking a million in his lifetime. The remarkable thing about Hawk's rise is that his pictures are licensed under the Creative Commons license and are freely shared with anyone, with no permission required for personal use. Hawk is both an artist and a giver of gifts. The result is that he leads a tribe, he has plenty of paid work and he is known for his talents. In short, he is indispensable. ●

There Is No Map

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.

Diamond cutters have an intrinsic understanding of the stone in their hands. They can touch and see exactly where the best lines are; they *know*.

The greatest artists do just that. They see and understand the challenges before them, without carrying the baggage of expectations or attachment. The diamond cutter doesn't imagine the diamond he wants. Instead, he sees the diamond that is possible.

Seeing, Discernment and Prajna

You can't make a map unless you can see the world as it is. You have to know where you are and know where you're going before you can figure out how to go about getting there.

No one has a transparent view of the world. In fact, we all carry around a personal worldview — the biases and experiences and expectations that color the way we perceive the world.

The loyal employee has a worldview shaped by experience. She wants a stable place to work and she believes in you. So when you show her your plan, her worldview changes her feelings and her analysis of your plan.

And the lawyer and the competitor and the skeptic and the mother-in-law each have their own worldviews, biases and expectations. None of us knows the absolute truth, of course, but the goal is to approach a situation with the least possible bias.

So the manager and the investor seek out an employee with discernment, the ability to see things as they truly are. A Buddhist might call this “prajna.”

A life without attachment and stress can give you the freedom to see things as they are and call them as you see them. If you had this skill, what an asset you would be to any organization. ●

Making the Choice

You can either fit in or stand out. Not both.

You are either defending the status quo or challenging it: playing defense and trying to keep everything “all right” or leading and provoking and striving to make everything better.

Either you are embracing the drama of your everyday life or seeing the world as it is. These are all choices; you can't have it both ways.

Heads, You Win

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

There's no doubt that environment still plays a huge role. The right teacher or the right family support or the accidents of race or birth location are still significant factors. But the new rules mean that even if you've got all the right background, you won't make it unless you choose to.

These are internal choices, not external factors. How we respond to the opportunities and challenges of the outside world now determines how much the outside world values us.

How Does a Linchpin Work?

In a world with only a few indispensable people, the linchpin has two elegant choices:

- 1. Hire plenty of factory workers.** Scale like crazy. Take advantage of the facts that most people want a map, most people are willing to work cheaply, most people want to be the factory. You win because you extract the value of their labor the labor they're surrendering too cheaply.
- 2. Find a boss who can't live without a linchpin.** Find a boss who adequately values your scarcity and your contribution, who will reward you with freedom and respect. Do the work. Make a difference.

If you are not currently doing either of these, refuse to settle. You deserve better. ●

The Culture of Connection

Most psychologists agree that there are five traits that are essential in how people look at us: openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness and emotional stability.

Here's the thing: These are *also* the signs of the linchpin. Work — great work — has been transformed in just 100 years from doing things that involve heavy lifting to leveraging and enhancing your personality. If you hope to succeed because you are able to connect and work with other people, then that will require you to improve your personality in each of these five elements.

Do you know someone who is more open to new ideas or more agreeable than you are? More stable or extroverted? More conscientious? If so, then you better get moving. It's so easy to fall into the trap of focusing on using a spreadsheet or a time clock to measure your progress, but in fact, it's the investment you make in your interactions that will pay off.

Creating a Culture of Connection

Think about business-to-business sales. The key point of distinction between vendors calling on a company is rarely price. It's the perceived connection between the prospect and the organization.

Now, consider job satisfaction. The key point of distinction between places to work is rarely the work you'll be asking the employee to do. It's the perceived connection between the employee and the people he or she works with.

Thus, the individual in the organization who collects, connects and nurtures relationships is indispensable. This isn't about recording the information in a database somewhere. This is about holding the relationships as sacred as they deserve to be. ●

The Seven Abilities of the Linchpin

Linchpins do two things for the organization. They exert emotional labor and they make a map. Those contributions take many forms. Here is one way to think about the list of what makes you indispensable:

1. **Providing a unique interface between members of the organization.** A linchpin helps lead and connects people in the organization, actively and with finesse. This takes emotional labor, and it can't be done by following the instructions in a manual.

2. **Delivering unique creativity.** *Creativity* is personal, original, unexpected and useful. *Unique creativity* requires domain knowledge, a position of trust and generosity to actually contribute. "Unique" implies that the creativity is focused and insightful.
3. **Managing a situation or organization of great complexity.** When the situation gets too complex, it's impossible to follow the manual, because there is no manual. Linchpins make their own maps and thus allow the organization to navigate more quickly than it ever could if it had to wait for the paralyzed crowd to figure out what to do next.
4. **Leading customers.** The new model of commerce is interactive, fluid and decentralized. That means that organizations need more than a tiny team. It means that every person who interacts with a consumer (or a business being sold to, or a donor to a nonprofit, or a voter) is doing marketing as leadership. There's no script for leadership.
5. **Inspiring staff.** You can't say, "Get more excited and insightful or you're fired." Actually, you can, but it won't work. The front-desk worker at a hotel who runs out in the middle of the night to buy gym shorts for a guest isn't doing it out of fear of being reprimanded. He does it because he was inspired to do so by a leader who wasn't even in the hotel when the clerk decided to contribute.
6. **Providing deep domain knowledge.** Having deep domain knowledge by itself is rarely sufficient to becoming indispensable. Combining that knowledge with smart decisions and generous contributions, though, changes things.
7. **Possessing a unique talent.** If you want to be a linchpin, the power you bring to the table has to be very difficult to replace. Be bolder and think bigger. If you're not the best in the world (the customer's world) at your unique talent, you have only two choices: Develop the other attributes that make you a linchpin or get a lot better at your unique talent. ●

When It Doesn't Work

What happens when the conversation doesn't happen, the product doesn't sell, the consumer is not delighted, your boss is not happy and the people aren't moved?

- Make more art.
- Give more gifts.

Learn from what you did and then do more.

The only alternative is to give up and to become an old-school cog. Which means failing. Trying and failing is better than merely failing, because trying makes you an artist and gives you the right to try again.

Pulitzer Prize Fighting: You Might Not Be Good Enough

There's no guarantee that anyone who sets out to win a Pulitzer is going to win it. There's no guarantee that merely because you're passionate about Web design, your site is actually going to be popular.

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.

That doesn't mean you're a loser. It might mean that you're making the wrong art, drawing the wrong map. If you're not winning as a stockbroker, perhaps your art lies somewhere else.

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

Two Tactics That Can Help You

The system we work in is changing, but it's an evolutionary change, not a revolutionary one. Organizations rarely give linchpins all the support and encouragement they deserve. Which means that your efforts won't always get what they need to succeed.

There are two tactics that can help you:

1. Understand that there's a difference between the right answer and the answer you can sell.

Too often, heretical ideas in organizations are shot down. They're not refused because they're wrong; they're refused because the person doing the selling doesn't have the stature or track record to sell them. Your boss has a worldview too. When you propose something that triggers his resistance, what do you expect will happen?

2. Focus on making changes that work down, not up.

Interacting with customers and employees is often easier than influencing bosses and investors. Over time, as you create an environment where your insight and generosity pay off, the people above you will notice and you'll get more freedom and authority.

Don't ask your boss to run interference, cover for you or take the blame. Instead, create moments where your boss can happily take credit. Once that cycle begins, you can be sure it will continue. ●

Summary

Every successful organization is built around people. Humans who do art. People who interact with other people. Men and women who don't merely shuffle money but interact, give gifts and connect.

All these interactions are art. Art isn't only a painting; it's anything that changes someone for the better, a non-anonymous interaction that leads to a human (not simply a commercial) conclusion.

Art can't be bought and sold. It must contain an element that's a gift, something that brings the artist closer to the viewer, not something that insulates one from the other. So, we need to remember how to be artists.

Artists, at least the great ones, see the world more clearly than the rest of us. They have prajna, a sense of what actually is, not simply the artist's take on it. That honest sight allows them to see the future over the cloudy horizon. As our world changes faster and faster, it is these honest artists who will describe our future and lead us there.

Last Word

The only thing keeping you from being one of these artists is the resistance: the loud voice of the lizard brain telling you that you can't possibly do it, that you don't deserve it, that people will laugh at you. Anyone who makes the choice to overcome the resistance and has the insight to make the right map can become a successful linchpin.

You can't fake it, though, because human beings are too talented at sensing when a gift is not a gift, when we're being played or manipulated. And sometimes, our art isn't enough. It's not enough to get us a sale or even make us a living. But we persist because making art is what we do.

The result of this art, these risks, the gifts and the humanity coming together is both wonderful and ironic. The result of getting back in touch with our pre-commercial selves will actually create a post-commercial world that feeds us, enriches us and gives us the stability we've been seeking for so long. ●

RECOMMENDED READING LIST

If you liked *Linchpin*, you'll also like:

1. ***Be a Shortcut* by Scott G. Halford.** Shortcuts are individuals and companies that function like lifelines to the people and organizations that most depend on them. Halford explains how to become indispensable to employers.
2. ***Meatball Sundae* by Seth Godin.** Godin offers a definitive guide to get your products, marketing messages and internal systems in sync.
3. ***Tribes* by Seth Godin.** Godin offers the perspective that lasting and substantive change can be best effected by a tribe: a group of people connected to each other, to a leader and to an idea.