

Book Review - The One Thing

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The One Thing - book review

Introduction

Overwhelm. Distractions at work. Tasks piling up half completed. Missing catching up with friends. Trying to balance it all. These are common features we may experience in and out of work. Take a deep relaxing breath... this could be a book for you.

From an "Aha!" moment watching the movie "City Slickers", the author Gary Keller has put a concept into practice that he has encapsulated in one sentence that people can ask themselves at work and in their personal lives. This one sentence has changed his life and the lives of many others:

*What's **The ONE Thing** I can do, such that by doing it everything else will be easier or unnecessary? ([1])*

Throughout the book, Keller shares some of the actions he has applied when turning around his own and others' businesses. He dispels some common myths and misinformation about what success is, what it should be and what it looks like.

Keller got tired of "playing success" and removed himself from long work hours and an "overachiever lifestyle" by joining his local Overachievers Anonymous. He learnt that "success

isn't in all the things we do but in the handful of things we do well".

Many inspirational stories and research are shared with heartfelt dedication and passion throughout the book. Whether applied to work, relationships or physical health, this is a book about helping readers to find focus and ask the important questions for living on purpose.

Here is an overview.

The domino effect

Keller shares some of the various research that has been conducted over the decades on the power of the domino effect (i.e. consequence of cause and effect). A 1983 study found that a single domino is capable of bringing down another domino that is 50% larger ([2]).

Keller picks up on this, working with the analogy of the "domino effect" (also known as "the mechanical effect" and "the ripple effect") to describe the importance of identifying and focusing on the "one most important thing". Line up your priorities with the lead domino, your smallest focus for each day, and watch it unfold, action building on action, with success built sequentially (not simultaneously), one thing at a time. Start by doing the right thing, and then the next right thing. Over time it adds up and the "geometric potential of success is unleashed."

Keller explores the misinformation about success, sharing a list he calls "The 6 lies of success".

The lies of success

Everything matters equally	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This is not true. "The majority of what you want will come from the minority of what you do" • To do lists can weigh us down feeling obliged to get it done just because it is on our list. There is a difference between a to do list and a success list with prioritizing which is an essential part of your success list • "Focus on being productive not busy" • A small amount of causes creates most of the results (domino effect)
Multitasking	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Why try do something else at the same time as your most important thing? • Stanford University researchers gave 262 students a questionnaire to determine how often they multi tasked. Divided into high and low multi taskers, it was presumed the high multi taskers would perform better. They were outperformed on every measure and "lousy at everything" • The modern office can be a space of distraction and disturbance from staff and continuous streams of incoming emails. Keller shares that researchers estimate "workers are distracted every 11 minutes and spend a third of their day recovering from these distractions" dependent upon how complex or simple the task is. Multi-tasking can slow us down • A certain level of distraction is natural. Figure out what matters most in the moment and give it your undivided attention. Later in the book, Keller explores the concept of "time blocking"
A disciplined life	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reframe to "Doing the right thing, not doing everything right" • Use selected discipline, building one habit at a time • It takes 66 days to acquire a new habit
Willpower is always on call	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "Willpower isn't always on call, willpower has a limited battery life". It is a limited but renewable source, recharged by having some downtime. It is a personal resource that needs to be nurtured • The brain makes up 1/50th body mass but consumes 1/5th the calories we burn for energy. We literally need to feed our minds... that's "food for thought" • Make doing what matters most a priority when your willpower is the highest. Keller suggests doing your most important work, your ONE thing, early each day. "Be a maker in the morning and manager in the afternoon"
A balanced life	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A term coined in the 1980's, the "work-life" balance is a losing battle. They are 2 separate entities, not to be compartmentalised and traded off each other. Each has its own counterbalancing goals and approaches within it • Professional success: "to achieve an extraordinary result you must choose, do what matters most and give it the time it demands. This requires going out of balance in relation to other work issues with infrequent counterbalancing to address them". Focus is the essential ingredient • Your personal world: Awareness is the essential ingredient, of family, your health, your friends. You can't neglect any of them for long, they requires tight counterbalancing. "Acknowledge your personal life has multiple areas that each require minimum attention for you to feel you 'have a life'"
Big is bad	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This relates to the fear of success. "No one knows their ultimate ceiling for achievement so don't waste your time worrying about it". The natural outcome of doing the 'right things' with no limits attached is achievement and abundance. • Go after the "P" (Purpose) instead of the "E" (Entrepreneurial) - the former has no ceiling

The second part of the book explores purpose, priority and productivity with some tools to assist clearing the clutter and dialling down the stress.

Time blocking

Making sure that what is prioritised gets done.

1. Time block your time off each day for keeping yourself healthy, recharged and rewarded
2. Time block your ONE thing
3. Time block your planning time

Four thieves that can rob you of your productivity

1. Inability to say “No” Focusing is about saying “No”. You can’t please everyone. Leverage your “yeses” given the type of work you do. For example, if you are an online business, have a Frequently Asked Questions page.
2. Fear of chaos Accept that some chaos is inevitable.
3. Poor health habits Personal energy mismanagement leads to sacrificing your health. Keller suggests a daily energy plan that includes meditation and eating well. Manage your energy as “your body doesn’t come with a warranty”.
4. Your environment doesn’t support your goals Your environment is what you experience every day and who you see. Those around you are more important than you might be aware. “Attitude is contagious and it spreads quickly”.

Big picture questions for developing a vision for your life

“What’s my **ONE thing**?”

Small focus question for each day

“What’s my **ONE thing right now**?”. This keeps you attentive to your most important immediate needs for yourself and other important people in your life.

Examples of the ONE thing in practice

“What’s the **ONE thing** I can do (today, this week, this month, this year) such that by doing it everything else will be easier or unnecessary?”

- For my health
- For my personal life
- For my key relationships
- For my business/work

For more focused questions you can ask yourself:

- “What’s the one thing I can do (today, this week...) to ensure that I exercise?”
- “What’s the one thing I can do (today, this week)...to improve my skill at?”
- “What’s the one thing I can do (today, this week...) to further my career?”

'The ONE Thing' encourages you to think big, create a list, prioritise that list so a geometric progression can happen and then chip away on the first thing – the ONE thing that starts your domino run. It is an enjoyable and inspiring read, with practical applications for any aspect of your life.

Key takeaways

- “You are the first domino”
- Extraordinary results require you to get your focus as small as possible, simplify your thinking and crystallise what you must do. It begins with going small (not thinking small!).
Big picture, small focus
- “Your big ONE thing is your purpose and your small One thing is the priority you take action on to achieve it”
- “Argue for your limitations, you might get to keep them”
- Define your purpose; prioritise what you need to do to fulfil your purpose; and increase your productivity as a result

See [Wired to Grow book review](#) for more details on multi-tasking and forming new habits.

References

- 1 Keller, G & Papasan, J. *The One Thing*. First edition. 2014. John Murray publishers. Great Britain.
- 2 Whitehead, Lorne. "Domino Chain Reaction." *American Journal of Physics*, Vol. 51, Issue 2, 1983. p. 182