

The One Thing



Based on *The One Thing: The Surprisingly Simple Truth Behind Extraordinary Results* by **Gary KELLER** and **Jay PAPANAN** (Bard Press, April 2013).

Do you feel like you fight against a constant onslaught of workplace distractions to get your work done? If so, you're not alone. Studies show that office workers are interrupted on average every three minutes¹ and spend almost a third of their day recovering from those interruptions. In the current "age of distraction," we could all benefit from a lesson in the art of focus!

WHAT *ONE THING* DESERVES YOUR FOCUS?

Mark Twain said, "The secret of getting ahead is getting started. The secret to getting started is breaking your complex overwhelming tasks into small manageable tasks and then starting on the first one."

Author Gary Keller co-founded Keller Williams Realty in 1983, growing the company from a single office in Austin, Texas, into the largest real estate company in North America. He attributes his success to his ability to focus on what's most important to the exclusion of all else. But it's not always so easy to focus on "the right thing," especially given the many distractions of today's workplaces, such as always-on communication devices, nearly unlimited access to media content and information, and open-space office designs that provide little protection from the chatter of colleagues. Studies indicate that distraction in the workplace cost companies \$1 trillion in lost productivity in 2010 alone. But you don't have to be helpless in the face of distraction. According to Gary Keller, you can consciously strengthen your ability to focus.

■ Identify your **ONE Thing**

To identify what deserves your focus more than anything else, Gary Keller suggests asking yourself the following question: "What's the ONE Thing I can do such that by doing it everything else will be easier or unnecessary?" He first asked himself this question in 1991, when he felt like he had a hit a wall both professionally and personally. "In less than a decade we'd built a successful company with national and international ambitions, but all of a sudden things weren't working out. For all the dedication and hard work, my life was in turmoil and it felt as if everything was crumbling around me." He decided the ONE Thing that could turn things around was to fill 14

MEMO

- **What's your ONE Thing?** Whatever will have the biggest impact deserves your single-minded focus.
- **The desire to do everything and trying to multitask** undermine your ability to focus.
- **To focus in even the most distracting settings**, block periods of time for your most important priorities.

key positions in the company with the right talent. He put everything else aside — even stepping down as CEO — in order to make finding those 14 key people his one focus. “Within three years (of filling those positions), we began a period of sustained growth that averaged 40% year-over-year for almost a decade,” he says. “We grew from a regional player to an international contender.” The focusing question as articulated by Keller is designed to help you identify what’s important both in the big picture and the immediate present. “Your big ONE Thing is your purpose and your small ONE Thing is the priority you take action on to achieve it,” he explains.

■ Break your big ONE Thing down into incremental steps

How can you identify your first small priority on your way to a big goal? “First set the future big goal and then methodically drill down to what you should be doing right now,” explains Keller, who calls this method “goal setting to the now” (see *diagram overleaf*).

MISCONCEPTIONS THAT UNDERMINE FOCUS

According to Gary Keller, “the ONE Thing sits at the heart of success.” While explaining this idea is simple, he notes, many myths and misinformation keep people from actually focusing on their ONE Thing.

■ Focus and balance are incompatible

“Balance is a lie,” writes Keller. “Extraordinary results require focused attention and time. Time on one thing means time away from another. This makes balance impossible.” In other words, when you when you focus single-mindedly on ONE Thing, you necessarily leave other things undone. He suggests spending the bulk of your time and energy (about four hours a day) on your ONE top priority and then using any remaining time to address all other work issues as best you can, calling this approach counterbalance. “The idea of counterbalance is that you never go so far that you can’t find your way back or stay so long that there is nothing waiting for you when you return,” he writes, using the example of a ballerina to illustrate this approach: “When the ballerina poses en pointe, she can

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appear weightless, floating on air, the very idea of balance and grace. A closer look would reveal her toe shoes vibrating rapidly, making minute adjustments.”

■ Multitasking is bad for focus

“In an ever-more saturated media environment, media multitasking—a person’s consumption of more than one stream of content at the same time—is becoming an increasingly prevalent phenomenon, especially among the young,” write researchers in the pioneering Stanford University study “Cognitive control in media multitaskers” (*PNAS*, July 2009). The researchers found that heavy multitasking carries two disturbing side effects: decreased ability “to filter out irrelevant information” and decreased capacity of working memory.² Significantly, studies indicate that side effects are not limited to media consumption, rather it’s multitasking in general that undermines the brain’s ability to focus. According to Gary Keller, *multitasking* is a misnomer: what we’re actually doing is task *switching*, and every switch lengthens the time it takes to complete tasks by 25% to 100%, depending on their complexity. “Researchers estimate that we lose 28% of an average workday to multitasking ineffectiveness.” Training our brains to switch frequently from one task to another makes it harder to maintain focus when required. “Our brains are plastic, but they’re not elastic,” notes Stanford University professor Clifford Nass, one of the study’s primary researchers. “They don’t just snap back into shape.”³

Two psychological obstacles to maintaining focus

- 1. Inability to say no:** It can be hard to say no when colleagues, managers, and customers — upon whose good opinion your career depends — ask you to do something. But, as Gary Keller writes, “If you can’t say no a lot, you’ll never truly be able to say yes to achieving your ONE Thing. Literally, it’s one or the other—and you get to decide.”
- 2. Fear of chaos:** “Messy are inevitable when you focus on just one thing,” writes Gary Keller. “...One of the greatest thieves of productivity is the unwillingness to allow for chaos or the lack of creativity in dealing with it.”

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HOW TO STRENGTHEN YOUR FOCUS

The modern workplace is full of interruptions in the form of email alerts, social media newsfeeds, blinking cellphones, and open-space offices where colleagues can ask you questions at all hours of the day. Gary Keller outlines how to protect your focus in even the most distracting settings.

■ Block your time

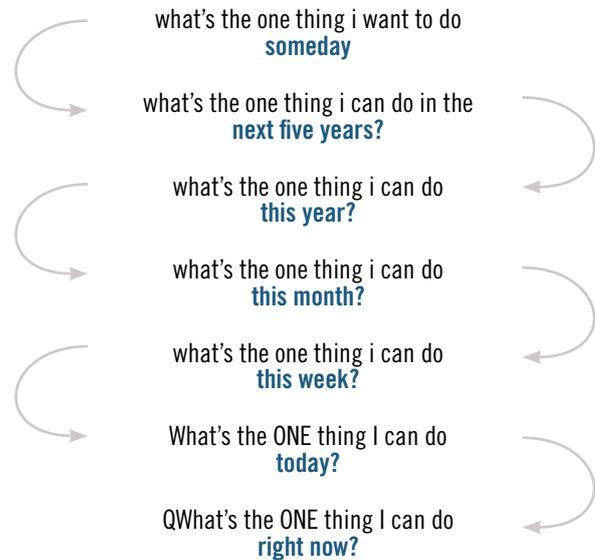
“Most people think there’s never enough time to be successful, but there is when you block it,” writes Gary Keller. “So, go to your calendar and block off all the time you need to accomplish your ONE Thing. If it’s a onetime Thing, block off the appropriate hours and days. If it’s a regular thing, block off the appropriate time every day so it becomes a habit. Everything else—other projects, paperwork, email, calls, correspondence, meetings, and all other stuff—must wait.” In addition to “blocking” your time, he urges you to manage your energy, because, in his words, “high achievement and extraordinary results require big energy” (See “*Save your time and energy for what counts*,” *Business Digest no 235, April 2013*).

■ Four proven ways to protect your time blocks

“There are plenty of ways your time block can get sabotaged,” notes Gary Keller. “Here are four proven ways to battle distractions and keep your eye on your ONE Thing.”

- 1. Build a bunker:** “Find somewhere to work that takes you out of the path of disruption and interruption” — even if this means leaving the office!
- 2. Store provisions:** “Have any supplies, materials, snacks, or beverages you need on hand and, other than for a bathroom break, avoid leaving your bunker.”
- 3. Sweep for mines:** “Turn off your phone, shut down your email, and exit your Internet browser. Your most important work deserves 100% of your attention.”
- 4. Enlist support:** “Tell those most likely to seek you out what you’re doing and when you’ll be available. It’s amazing how

Goal setting



accommodating others are when they see the big picture and know when they can access you.”

In addition to applying these insights to improve your individual focus, what can you do as a manager to improve the focus of your teams? Clifford Nass suggests that, at a minimum, managers communicate clearly that team members are not expected to respond instantly to emails. He also advises managers to discourage the use of instant messenger chats and cellphones for work purposes. Finally, managers can cluster meetings at the beginning or end of the day to support the ability of teams to block large chunks of time for uninterrupted work. ■

1. “Workplace Distractions: Here’s Why You Won’t Finish This Article,” by Rachel Emma Silverman (*The Wall Street Journal*, December, 2012).
2. “Are You Multitasking Your Life Away?” Clifford Nass at TEDxStanford, June 2013.
3. “The Myth of Multitasking,” NPR interview with Clifford Nass, May 2013.

Don't let email control you!

The overwhelming research indicating that multitasking — or, more accurately, *task-switching* — seriously compromises productivity suggests it’s time to change how we work, starting with workplace expectations around email. The latest approach is to turn off email alerts and instead respond to emails at scheduled times throughout the day. Tina Roth Eisenberg, founder of swissmiss, CreativeMornings, and TeuxDeux and the recipient of about 1000 emails a day, recounts how setting up an autoresponder helped her overcome the constant distraction of incoming emails. “The thought of disappointing people and not being responsive and not getting back to people, that really stressed me out. It got to the point where it wasn’t healthy,” Eisenberg says. “So I put the auto-responder up to adjust expectations for people that email me.” Source: “The Greatest Productivity Tool You Never Thought Of: Email Autoresponder” by Drake Baer (*Fast Company*, October 14, 2013).