



# The One Thing

## The Surprisingly Simple Truth Behind Extraordinary Results

Gary Keller and Jay Papasan  
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## Rating

8

- 9 Applicability
- 7 Innovation
- 8 Style

## Focus

Leadership & Management  
Strategy  
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**Career & Self-Development**  
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Concepts & Trends

## Take-Aways

- Multitasking and following long to-do lists might pose the biggest obstacles to achieving your goals.
- Superior success comes from extraordinary focus on your “ONE Thing.”
- Developing a singular focus on what’s necessary puts many larger forces in motion.
- Aligning your purpose with your one thing brings you clarity and happiness.
- Your aligned purpose directs your single priority and tells you how to spend your time.
- Trade your to-do list for a short success list, and use that to chart your course.
- From that list, block out time for what’s truly important for achieving success.
- Learn to say no and accept the chaos that accompanies any pursuit of greatness.
- Take care of your health and energy with good food, exercise, stress relief, family time and sleep.
- Create an environment that supports your goals.

# Relevance

## What You Will Learn

In this summary, you will learn: 1) Why trying to do everything doesn't usually bring success, 2) How to turn your do-everything approach into a targeted "ONE Thing" approach, and 3) How to manage your time to improve your work and home life while achieving unparalleled success.

## Review

Gary Keller, co-founder of Keller Williams Realty and a best-selling author, overcame his own issues about focus, which makes his claims about cultivating better habits even more compelling. Multitasking isn't fruitful, he says, since success requires long periods of laser-like concentration, not scattershot swats. If you find your "ONE Thing," Keller says, everything else will fall into place. Keller, writing with co-author Jay Papasan, breaks his approach down into manageable steps based on research and experience. With an engaging writing style and plenty of bullet points, this reads much faster than its 200-plus pages. *getAbstract* recommends Keller's methods to new managers, time-strapped executives and anyone seeking habits that build success.

# Summary

*"You want your achievements to add up, but that actually takes subtraction, not addition. You need to be doing fewer things for more effect instead of doing more things with side effects."*

*"The most productive people start with purpose and use it like a compass. They allow purpose to be the guiding force in determining the priority that drives their actions."*

## The Importance of Focus

In the early 1990s, a grumpy old cowboy named Curly, played by Jack Palance, revealed a great truth in a popular movie, *City Slickers*. "One thing. Just one thing. You stick to that," he told a city slicker named Mitch, played by Billy Crystal, offering a formula for success in a few words.

One-shot prioritizing – or "going small" with a focus on a singular purpose or achievement – enables some people to get more done in a day. Desks groaning with to-do lists and calendars packed with dozens of projects divide your concentration into tiny pieces, while excelling at a few things is the way to succeed. Adding more projects without cutting others dooms your results, your family relationships, friendships, diet, sleep patterns and health. Chopped up, your life gets small, but developing a singular focus on one necessary target puts many larger forces into motion. When you prioritize your primary task, everything else falls into line, like dominoes.

This functions in science, as Lorne Whitehead noted in the *American Journal of Physics* in 1983. He found that one domino can topple another that is 50% larger. Starting with a two-inch domino, "geometric progression" means the 23rd domino would be taller than the Eiffel Tower and the 57th would nearly reach the moon. So shoot for the moon by creating a domino effect to get there. Success builds on itself; it is "sequential, not simultaneous." Very successful brands reached the top by focusing on "ONE Thing." Consider Coors beer, KFC chicken, Starbucks coffee and Google search. Your challenge is to find your one focal point. Until you find it, seeking it will be your one thing.

Passion and skill often align with a person's one thing. Singular focus leads to spending a large amount of time developing a skill that improves your results and adds to your enjoyment. Bill Gates developed his high school passion for computers into a singular skill for programming. He built that knowledge into success as co-founder of Microsoft.

*“Applying the ‘ONE thing’ to your work – and in your life – is the simplest and smartest thing you can do to propel yourself toward the success you want.”*

*“Where I’d had huge success, I had narrowed my concentration to one thing, and where my success varied, my focus had too.”*

*“Knowing when to pursue the middle and when to pursue the extremes is in essence the true beginning of wisdom. Extraordinary results are achieved by this negotiation with your time.”*

*“Willpower is like a fast-twitch muscle that gets tired and needs rest. It’s incredibly powerful, but it has no endurance.”*

## Forget the Lies

Working and living according to the one-thing philosophy is simple. The hard part is moving beyond all the mistaken conventional wisdom you’ve absorbed. Various clichés, myths and untruths about productivity sound valid, but they aren’t. Problems arise when you fall back on them to shape important decisions.

To succeed, eliminate these lies from your thinking:

- **“Everything matters equally”** – When life gets busy, your natural tendency is to make decisions quickly and haphazardly. Instead, winnow your lengthy to-do list – not to a few things you should do, but to the one thing that matters most. Use this as your guiding principle. Learn to say no or “later” to anything else.
- **“Multitasking”** – Doing several things at the same time doesn’t make you more efficient. It just gives you the chance, as motivational speaker Steve Uzzell says, “to screw up more than one thing at a time.” It actually slows your work, leads to stress and saps 28% of employees’ workdays since they must reorient to their main tasks after each distraction.
- **“A disciplined life”** – Success does not come from discipline, but from developing a habit of doing the right thing. You need discipline to establish that habit, but, on average, a habit takes only about 66 days to establish – a pretty fast track to success. Then, use “selected discipline” to simplify your life. Ditch your concerns for everything but your one thing.
- **“Willpower is always on will-call”** – Willpower is limited, and you shouldn’t rely on it. Willpower drains quickly and has little endurance, so schedule your important work for when your willpower is high. For many people, that’s early in the day. Feed your brain, which consumes a fifth of your energy calories despite comprising just 1/50th of your body mass. Your brain needs protein and complex carbohydrates.
- **“A balanced life”** – The balanced life is a myth. “Counterbalance,” however, enables you to lead a life of significance and meaning as you constantly adjust priorities to achieve what might appear to be balance. Prioritize what’s most important at work so you can get home. Focus on the most important thing at home so you can return to work.
- **“Big is bad”** – Don’t succumb to thinking small about what you can achieve. Thinking determines actions, which determine results, so “think as big as you possibly can.” Look beyond the obvious and “double-down.” If a reasonable goal is 10, seek 20, and make a plan to achieve it. Don’t fear failure; it’s part of the journey to success.

## The Smooth Road to Success

Always, the best way to get the right answers is by asking the right questions. Finding the answer to the pivotal “Focusing Question” will reveal the proper answer you can use to define your journey – which will become your life. Here’s the question: “What is the one thing I can do such that, by doing it, everything else will be easier or unnecessary?” This is a simple question, but not an easy one. It provides both an overview and a laser focus on what you must do today to achieve your one thing. The question propels you to go beyond simple tasks on your to-do list and directs you to what is most important, that “first domino” that will make everything else fall into place.

Asking, “What’s my one thing?” defines your “big one thing” by prompting you to craft a conceptual path for your career, your business and your personal life. Asking, “What’s my one thing right now?” reveals the “small one thing” that drives your daily activities. This puts your top priority at the center of your focus and leads you to a productive workday and a properly focused home life.

Along the way, change a few other things in your life:

*“No matter how many to-dos you start with, you can always narrow it to one.”*

*“The prescription for extraordinary results is knowing what matters to you and taking daily doses of actions in alignment with it.”*

*“Time blocking is one thing; productive time blocking is another.”*

*“The people who achieve extraordinary results don’t achieve them by working more hours. They achieve them by getting more done in the hours they work.”*

- **Start a few good habits** – This sounds more daunting than it is; everyone makes and breaks habits all the time. Decide to set habits that will propel your life toward success. Asking the focusing question can become a habit that will affect your future. In the beginning, try to apply it to your spiritual, physical, personal, work and financial lives to form a solid foundation for fulfillment. Tweak the question to fit each category and add a time element. For example: “What’s the one thing I can do such that, by doing it, everything else will be easier or unnecessary...for my spiritual life?” Add “right now,” “this year” or – for larger goals – “someday.” Create a formula, starting with this set up, and adding the question, the time and the final phrase: “...such that, by doing it, everything else will be easier or unnecessary?” If you want, you can get more specific; for example: “For my physical health, what’s the one thing I can do to ensure that I exercise such that, by doing it, everything else will be easier or unnecessary?”
- **Develop this approach in five steps so it can become a habit** – 1) Accept the concept, making sure that you understand it; 2) Put it into practice, asking the question each morning; 3) Form a habit so you can access its full power; 4) Set up reminders so you don’t forget; and 5) Ask for help from your family, friends and co-workers.
- **Use the key question to perfect your additional questions** – This will lead to “big and specific” powerful answers. Define your answers in measurable terms so you’ll know exactly what you’re going to do to achieve them. Push your target beyond your comfort level to attain extraordinary results.

### The Extraordinary Key

The formula for reaching your goals is “purpose, priority and productivity,” which are like the undersea parts of an iceberg. The tip above the water is a small portion of the iceberg, which is shaped by everything beneath the surface. For example, a business can rely on profit as a visible result – the tip of the iceberg – of its driving forces and the depth and sturdiness of its foundation. Charge your goals with purpose, priority and productivity to achieve results. Your purpose is your foundation. Your big one thing is your priority for action. Your small one thing fuels your productivity.

Momentary happiness that comes from, say, a raise, or things money can’t buy – doesn’t last. With purpose, you can seek lasting happiness as you pursue contentment. Being engaged and doing something meaningful are the best ways to find true happiness, according to Dr. Martin Seligman, former president of the American Psychological Association. Knowing your purpose and going after it daily brings success and happiness. A defining purpose brings clarity and conviction to your life and helps you make quicker choices. Often, this means you’re making decisions before others, a benefit that can lead to outstanding results. Purpose keeps you on your path, so everything else falls into place. If you don’t have a purpose, decide on a goal and make a plan to reach it.

### Understand Your Priority

Identify your priority each day; you will get where you want to be. The word “priority” is singular, not plural. Until the 20th century, it was always “priority,” a use that dates back to the word’s 14th-century Latin origins, and refers to something that “mattered the most.” Its relatively recent use as a plural dilutes its meaning: Focus your intent on a single priority.

Focus only on the present, the only moment you can affect. Piling up these moments leads to success, according to economics research, because most people work harder for present rewards than for future ones. This innately human bias toward the present makes it easy

*“Activity is often unrelated to productivity, and busyness rarely takes care of business.”*

*“Taking complete ownership of your outcomes by holding no one but yourself responsible for them is the most powerful thing you can do to drive your success.”*

*“Connect today to all your tomorrows. It matters.”*

to delay bigger challenges and bigger results. To override this bias, try “goal setting to the now.” Look inside a long-term goal to find the priority for today, inside the priority for the week, inside the priority for the month and so on until you reach your goal. Connecting these goals through time takes practice and thinking. As with dominoes, visualization helps, as does writing down your goals. People who write their goals are 39.5% more likely to accomplish them than people who don’t.

### Focus on Productivity

Follow up on your steps and maximise what you do. As success almost always equals productivity, measure your results as money. Productive people earn more; they dedicate most of their time to being productive on one thing, and therefore achieve better results.

Working long hours for years might not work for everyone, so try “time blocking.” “It’s a way of making sure that what has to be done gets done” by focusing your energy on your most important work. Take your calendar, block off the time you need to accomplish your one thing – even if the amount of time seems disproportionate. A productive person’s pie chart might show spending half of the day on one big priority and half on everything else. Extend your time blocking for extraordinary results.

Follow three guidelines:

1. **Block time for rest and relaxation** – “Resting is as important as working.”
2. **Block time for your one thing** – Use all of the time allotted, and more if needed, to complete your one task. If you finish sooner, refocus the remaining time on the next step toward your one thing. Block this time out as early as possible in the day. Take four hours as a minimum time-block for your one thing. Paul Graham, founder of the venture capital firm Y Combinator, believes that business as usual often interferes with productivity by interrupting creative, productive time – referred to as “maker” time – with “manager” time, which is often spent in meetings. He changed his company’s culture by clustering meetings at the end of each day.
3. **Block time for planning** – Use this time for setting and evaluating your goals and progress. Take an hour each week to look at your monthly and annual goals. Take time toward the end of each year to check in on your long-term goals.

Commit to success by seeking mastery. Find the best way to carry out each step along the way to your one thing and accept accountability for doing everything possible to achieve it. Look for a mentor who can direct you along your path.

Use four tips to ward off productivity hijackers:

1. Learn to say no.
2. Accept the chaos that accompanies any pursuit of greatness.
3. Take care of your health with good food, exercise, stress relief, family time and sleep.
4. Create an environment that supports your goals.

## About the Authors

**Gary Keller**, author of *The Millionaire Real Estate Investor*, is chairman of the board of Keller Williams Realty, where co-author **Jay Papasan** is vice president of publishing.