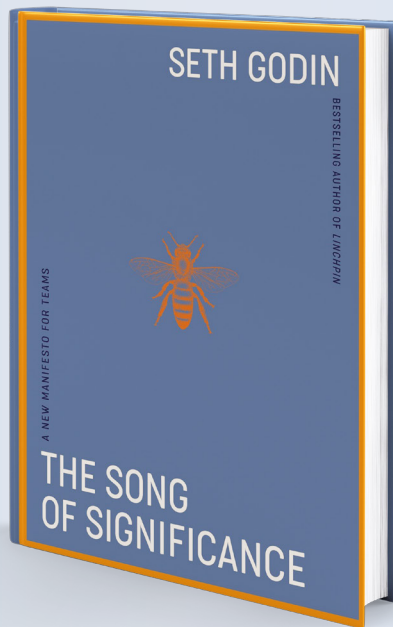


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The Song of Significance A New Manifesto for Teams

By Seth Godin

Seth Godin is the author of 21 international bestsellers that have changed the way people think about work. His books have been translated into 38 languages. Godin writes one of the most popular marketing blogs in the world, and two of his TED talks are among the most popular of all time. He is the founder of the altMBA, the social media pioneer Squidoo, and Yoyodyne, one of the first internet companies.

What Can We Do to Make Work Better?

From the very beginning of his book, Seth Godin says that his purpose for *The Song of Significance: A New Manifesto for Teams*, is to help his reader create teams based upon true leadership. He does not believe that the current way of the working world is, in fact, working, and he wants to help people center work around helping people create significance and meaning. The way Godin sees it, management is letting employees down, and employees are, in turn, letting managers down. This is partially because bosses want good work for little money while workers want to be paid well for their work. Industrialists, on the other hand, want to take away the worker's power, and one means to do this is by taking each job and breaking it down into many smaller jobs. This does not serve either employees or customers as it dehumanizes people. This does not have to be the case, however. Organizations work well when people seek increase, but too often, people are caught focusing on safety. This can lead to both burnout and dissatisfaction.

Significance

Godin believes that what people truly want is agency in their work. Agency refers to giving people control over their time and also encouraging them “to choose what [their] contribution looks like.” Employers are at times reluctant to give their employees this agency because it is “antithetical to controlled industrial piecework.” Godin believes that agency is key to giving people a sense of dignity in their work as it allows them to be treated like human beings and not like machines.

As an example of a company that does not give its employees agency, Godin examines McDonalds. Here everything is made as uniform as possible. Mechanization like this can give people jobs and create efficiency, but “late-stage industrial capitalism is different. It doesn't know where to stop. It not only captures those seeking safety, but also shackles those seeking significance.” Companies that focus on such industrial processes will often win out over those who give their employees the opportunity to pursue significance. Companies exist on a continuum with some constantly surveilling employees while others rely on people for whom the very work is their reward. There are many companies that fall between these two extremes. Companies have to decide where they want to fall.

Godin explains that many companies seek outsourcing and automation as much as possible. Unfortunately companies sometimes take advantage of these options. He does not see real value being created this way. Rather he believes that real value is “created by personal interactions, innovation, creative solutions, resilience, and the power of speed.”

Trust and Growth

Godin examines Amazon. It is one of the most managed companies in the country, but it faces such a serious problem with turnover that the company may eventually run the risk of running out of hires who have never worked for the company. Part of the reason for this is that people face very little opportunity for growth. No one can find significance because employees are not asked for their input.

Godin discusses surveillance, in particular surveillance on recorded phone conversations. Because of this surveillance, companies can better evaluate employees manning telephones. This is not always the best way to ensure success. Godin says, “The people you hire to follow instructions are rarely the people who will help you build something of innovation and substance.” As companies seek to squeeze everything they can out of every asset, eventually employees will walk away in search of better opportunities elsewhere.

Managers Versus Leaders

Godin sees a difference between a manager and a leader. Where a manager seeks compliance, a leader “seeks to create the conditions for people to make a change happen.” Attempts to treat people with dignity while using discipline to enforce compliance no longer work very well. The promise of the industrialists was that there would be a reward if people did what they were told. The effect, however, is low workplace satisfaction and low upward mobility. One way to find good leaders, Godin says, is to look at the people they have led and where they have gone to. The job of a leader is to help plant seeds for years to come, so the employees of solid leaders will often go on to become successful.

Godin sees a problem with the very idea of human resources. This is because companies squeeze resources, and employees ought not be squeezed. He believes companies need to “create value, cause change, and make a difference by leading with humans instead of treating them as cogs in a soulless machine.” He says that human beings evolved to notice and avoid fearful situations. Industrialists have noticed this and have taken advantage of it. Managers threaten firing to underperforming workers, and as this triggers ancient fears, it becomes an effective way to keep employees in line. Godin says, “dancing with fear requires significance, tension, and the belief that we’re doing something that matters.”

Godin defines the Japanese word *kokoro* as an expression of personhood. It is “the dignity and connection we seek in the things we do and the way we’re understood.” He believes companies need to provide this *kokoro* to their employees. This respect needs to flow all the way to frontline workers. They

need to be made to feel safe, however, before they will be able to contribute substantially.

Impediments

Meaningful work can be scary. People may face resistance which is a “natural, personal aversion to doing important or creative work.” People need to be willing to make and keep commitments. There are numerous traps Godin says people can fall into such as avoiding solutions just because they are not perfect or focusing too much on discomfort. He believes that often just naming these traps can help people overcome them. Organizations need to overcome fear and mere compliance because “great work creates more value than compliant work.”

The concept of enrollment is key to Godin’s claims. He believes that employees need to be enrolled in the company or the project in order to make significant contributions. Organizations have gotten off track due to industrialism, but he believes they can go back and reclaim their human nature. He says, “enrollment, mutual connection, federation, recognized dignity, and the journey of increase: together these create the conditions for a powerful, reliant way forward.” It is up to leaders to create these conditions.

People need to feel safe. After that, they seek affiliation and status. These are important, but Godin believes what people most want is significance. By this he means being able to impact the world around and making the world different than it would be had they never existed. Tension is not necessarily something to be avoided. He believes that tension and enrollment are partners. Enrollment as Godin describes it is “the desire to be right here, right now.” None of this can be created merely through extrinsic means such as money. People must also be motivated intrinsically as well. This type of work of significance requires people to be present both where they are and where they want to be.

Working Environment

Godin says that “Significant work is project work.” This project work is where people find significance. Because of this, leaders do not have to know how to do every aspect of a job. Rather, they need to be able to assemble a team competent to do these jobs. Miracles in the world of work do not happen instantaneously. Rather they are deliberate. It is not individuals who change the world. Rather it is connected people who work on significant projects. As an example of a successful way that a company sought significance for their employees is Barnes & Noble. James Daunt managed to turn the bookstore around by giving individual stores agency over their own shops.

Godin believes that people are dissatisfied with work when it is based on a lie. There are numerous commitments organizations need to make to their employees. One of these is providing a sense of belonging. Instead of working under the assumption that business thrive most when poorly working cogs are replaced, he believes organizations need to give people a chance to make a difference. Organizations need to support human dignity.



Leaders should be looking for people who live up to standards rather than those who simply follow in obedience.”

Likewise, companies need to embrace mistakes. Part of finding solutions is finding and then rejecting faulty solutions. Godin says, “If you’re not trying things that don’t work, you’re not trying hard enough.” He also extols taking responsibility and giving credit. Instead of relying on a traditional organizational chart, Godin advocates building a culture “around taking responsibility.” People can be hesitant to approach criticism because of how they are conditioned to receive it and how others give it. Good feedback, however, is beneficial. People may see feedback as a threat if they think it will lead to getting fired, but really it is crucial if people are to improve.

Mutual respect is a non-negotiable for Godin. He does not want bullies around an organization because bullies kill connection which he already established as being crucial. To build this respect, every human encountered must be treated as though they are worthy of respect. Godin says, “an institution can’t serve or collaborate with those who refuse to offer respect in reciprocity.” Similarly, leaders should be looking for people who live up to standards rather than those who simply follow in obedience. People who do the right thing even when there are no possible negative repercussions are living by their standards.

Real Skills

Godin urges people to stop referring to interpersonal and leadership skills as soft skills and instead refer to them as real skills. He believes that companies hire based on vocational skills and retain employees for those same skills. Real skills are just as important, but they are often overlooked, and when people have weak real skills they often are not hired or even rehired. The ability to communicate with other people is the hallmark of a real skill, and yet the majority of managers claim to be uncomfortable speaking with those they manage.

Empathy is part of what is necessary to be a good listener. This requires people to acknowledge that other people experience the world differently than they do. Other people do not understand the world in the same way that we do, and people need to be humble in their listening and acknowledge that the other party may be hearing something differently than the speaker meant it. This requires people to acknowledge that they are dealing with human beings, not machines.

Godin encourages his readers to consider the meetings they hold. Conversations are key for businesses, but meetings can subvert this. Godin discusses the company Zapier that successfully implemented a week without meetings. To take the place of these meetings, the company employed numerous asynchronous and direct messaging procedures whereby employees could communicate with each other. They found that this method rewarded

people who were working hard because their input made them directly accountable. Not all meetings are bad. Meetings which encourage two way conversation and in which only necessary people are invited can be productive. Meetings are most productive when there is a specific decision to be made.

Creating a Significant Organization

Godin then seeks to help his reader create significance within their organization. Many of these concepts have been covered in prior sections, but he adds to them at this point in his book. One of these methods is to embrace uncertainty. Godin does not believe in fake posturing if a person does not know the way forward. Rather, he encourages his reader to be clear about what they do not know. This allows others to offer suggestions and contributions. Godin also asks people, when they encounter novel situations, to avoid putting the situation into a familiar box. When they put it into a box, they have a tendency to believe they know what to do with it. This could prove helpful at times, but when the person is wrong in their assumptions, it creates problems. Wonder can open the door to moving forward.

Seth Godin has encountered a corporate world set on industrialization, and he sees this as a major cause of dehumanization in the workforce. People merely following directions are not invested in a company, and they are not going to put the safety of their job at risk in order to bring needed change and humanity to their workplace. The flow of his book, *The Song of Significance: A New Manifesto for Teams*, can be choppy and hard to follow at times as it is broken up into 144 different sections. Its purpose, however, remains clear and noble: to create a workforce in which all people can be treated with dignity and both the organization and the individuals invested in it can flourish.

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