

AT THE SPEED OF SETH



What I Learned Working with
Seth Godin and the Domino Project

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In my hands are two plastic handles, and from them thin nylon rope stretches out and away.

“I’m going to throw the kite up in the air,” my dad says. “You need to run fast, so it catches.”

The kite goes up, and I back peddle hard trying to get purchase. It hovers, bobbing, trying to make up its mind.

And in that middle space, hesitating between yes and no, it suddenly turns tail and slams into the dirt.

Getting anything up and flying is a tricky business. I’m still learning how to catch the wind just right in most of the things I do. This story is about launching a new project. If it were a kite, right now it’d be crashed and broken on the ground. But this was a book project that looked like it would never get *off* the ground.

It’s early 2010, and I am excited. In my book, *Do More Great Work*, I’d talked about the importance of identifying a Great Work Project—Great Work being defined as the stuff you do that makes a difference, that has meaning, that really matters. (I wrote [a ChangeThis manifesto](#) about this idea if you’d like to explore it further.) And to practice what I preach, I’d identified a project of my own: a collection of short pieces written by cool and clever people, the twist being we’d use the book to raise money for a worthy cause.

And I had started strong. I'd picked the cause: malaria, a disease that's devastating Africa and that, for the price of a \$10 net, could be contained. I contacted some leading authors, and ten top-notch contributors had immediately jumped on board. My publisher offered to underwrite the cost of printing the first 10,000 books.

But when I'd needed that next gust to lift it up and away, the wind died on me. I was undone by the money, figuring out how to generate enough of it from the book sales. The labyrinthine complications of the publishing process defeated me, and the whole thing fell apart in my hands.

18 months later, and it's all changed. End Malaria launches September 6th, published by Seth Godin's latest venture The Domino Project. 58 smart men and women share their best insights, strategies and tips to stop the overwhelm, focus on the work that matters and make a real impact in the work you do. And we've solved the money thing. \$20 from every \$25 book sold goes to Malaria No More, to further their mission of ending malaria in Africa by 2015.

I want to share with you why my own Great Work Project got off the ground the second time around, and what I learned (and you can learn, too) from traveling at the speed of Seth.

1. Embrace Promiscuity

Just around the corner is Cherrybomb café, and there I sipped my espresso and weighed up my assets. I knew I wanted to do something different, something big, something that would make a difference to the world. A Great Work project. But, if I was building something that mattered, what material did I have at hand to do it with?

One of the unexpected things I found I had was some connection with a bunch of influential people. Weak ties, but ties nonetheless.

David Allen had started it all. When I self-published my first book in 2005, I asked myself, “What wouldn’t I do to make this a success?” It was a short list. Nothing immoral or illegal, but that was about it.

“Calling influential people and asking them for a testimonial” wasn’t on the “don’t do it” list, which put in on the “you should do this” list. And that’s where I started.

I took a deep breath, and wandered over to my bookshelf. There, top left of my “essentials” shelf (they were in alphabetical order) was Getting Things Done, one of the key tomes on productivity. Back to my computer, a quick Google search, and I had a phone number for the company. Time to start the process of working through the “gatekeepers” to find this David Allen guy. I dialed.

Rin-

“Hello, David Allen here.”

I had nothing prepared, no pitch, not even a clear idea of what I wanted. And to my horror, for some inexplicable reason David Allen himself had picked up the phone on the first ring.

I stumbled through some sort of request to let me send him a copy of my book, and he graciously accepted. We later met in person and did a series of podcast interviews together on the power of provocative questions. And it was there the idea of an interview series around the topic of Great Work with people I admired was born.

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The approach was simple. Find someone cool and invite them to play. 20 minutes of their time, no preparation needed, and I’d promote the interview to get the word out about their ideas. It was all upside for them. Since then, I’ve done more than 100 of these interviews.

When the time came to ask people to participate in the new book, I had a thin bridge of connection to impressive people who’d done interviews with me, like Sally Hogshead, David Rock, Brené Brown, Roger Martin and Gwen Bell.

In the six years since I first called David Allen, it’s become even easier to find who you want. Plotting a path through LinkedIn, connecting on Twitter, going to Google+... these days, people are accessible like never before. There’s no reason why you can’t find extraordinary people with whom to play.

In End Malaria, Patrick Lencioni (“Making Virtual Teams Work”), Gina Trapani (“Reflections”), Charlene Li (“The Importance of Failure”) and others write on ways and means to collaborate.

You can see all the contributors at www.EndMalariaDay.com.

The flipside is that everyone you might want to connect with is overwhelmed by requests for help, and typically these requests are deeply self-serving. There's a long game to be played here. Connect in a way that's generous, human and agenda-free—and build relationships, not resources.

FROM INSIGHT TO ACTION

- Nominate three people who you'd like to know (and who you'd like to be known by). They might be possible supporters or influencers for you in the future. Or they may just be someone you admire. Make one an “A lister.”
- Define the first action to begin to build the relationship, something that would help them, show your humanity and that it isn't all about you.

2. Measure Irritation

“You're calling it End Malaria? Really?”

I was talking to one of the contributors on the phone.

“That's a really, umm... stupid title.”

She wasn't alone in thinking that.

A number of people on the project had raised an eyebrow or two at what we'd decided to call the book. And the truth was, I wasn't exactly sure of it myself. I mean, this was meant to be a business book.

It had been a Seth Godin moment, when he'd Purple Cow'd the whole thing. The insight was this: There are more than a thousand business books published every year—officially published that is, and that doesn't count self-published books, ebooks, white papers, blogs and so on—and, like

corporate mission statements, they all start to sound and look the same after a while. We needed to disrupt normal.

So when we got one of these two reactions—“Yes! Genius!” and “No! Stupid!”—we knew we were fine. What we didn’t want to hear was “Whatever.” Indifference is death.

But this wasn’t just about being different for the sake of difference. It was about being strategically clear on what this project was about. It’s the question every organization should ask themselves, “What business are you really in?” How you answer defines everything.

We became clear that in End Malaria we weren’t really producing a business book. We were creating the opportunity for a philanthropic moment, a way for people to save a life. We wanted the comments on Amazon to be “I’m glad to support the campaign” more than “I liked the chapter ‘Love & Be Kind.’”

You can’t do Great Work without breaking some rules. And you can’t break rules without irritating people, people who’ve got something vested (explicitly or implicitly) in the status quo.

If everyone’s happy, something’s gone wrong.

FROM INSIGHT TO ACTION

- Write down all the rules of the game, especially the unspoken, obvious ones.
- Decide which ones you could break.
- Decide which ones you will break.

In End Malaria, Nancy Duarte (“Don’t Be the Bland Leading the Bland”), Nilofer Merchant (“Avoiding Suck-ness and Silence”), Seth Godin (“Heads or Tails?”) and others share insights and tools on how to Disrupt Normal.

You can see all the contributors at www.EndMalariaDay.com.

3. Double Down

Sure, I'd been bold about the project. A big splash? Hell, yes.

I figured if I could give \$10 away from every book sold, I'd be streets ahead of any other project like this, where typically the most that might be at stake is the 8% or so of the author's cut. I'd heard that 93% of books sell less than 1,000 copies, so why not go for 10x that.

Ten bucks. Ten thousand copies. That's a hundred grand—a sweet fortune for Malaria No More.

But the size of the game you're used to playing defines "bold." And working with Seth meant that we were no longer playing the game by my definitions of "bold" or, in fact, playing any game that had anything to do with what was normal in the publishing industry.

Any project you face is like a big mixing board, full of levers and knobs you can use to change the sound. There are some essentials levers we can always manipulate: money (bigger or smaller input or output), timing (faster or slower), participation (many or few) and format. Exploring how these different parameters can be tweaked can make the difference between bland or bold.

Here's how Seth remixed the project:

- Quadruple the speed of production. Deadlines were impossible, and we were holding on for dear life.
- Increased the number of contributors by 50%. The more contributing, the bigger the platform and therefore impact.
- Doubled the money raised per book to \$20. In a bound, twice the impact for Malaria No More.
- Increased the target of books to sell 10x to 100,000, or 2 million dollars raised.

*In End Malaria, Derek Sivers
("In a Perfect World...") Jonah Lehrer
("Don't Pay Attention"), Danielle
LaPorte ("What Creative Types
Already Know About Productivity")
and others write about dreaming big.*

*You can see all the contributors at
www.EndMalariaDay.com.*

One way of knowing if you've got a Great Work Project on your hands? The "is this enough of a stretch?" sweaty palm test.

With these new goals, we passed that test with ease.

FROM INSIGHT TO ACTION

- Find someone who's not part of the usual game to help you see and break the rules.
- Identify the levers that can make the difference: the timing, the scope, the money.
- Take a look at what 2x would mean.
- And then try out 10x. At 10x you can't just do the same faster. You have to find a new way altogether.

Any project you face is like a big mixing board, full of levers and knobs you can use to change the sound.

4. Pick Up Speed

I had a life outside of this book. Clients to serve, friends to see, adventures to have, family to love. Still, I thought I was moving things along at a fair clip for what was, as End Malaria contributor Pam Slim would call it, a “side hustle.”

It was drifting towards the end of February, and I had 10 or so contributors’ articles “in the can” and another 10 or so promised. Michael Parish DuDell, The Domino Project editor, pinged me an email: It would be great to get all 50 or so contributors’ pieces by April 1st.

Huh.

I knew I was traveling for 3 weeks in March with full-on client commitments. Thank goodness for the “wink” in the April 1st date. I wrote back, “MPdD—appreciate the request, but really, that’s an impossible deadline for me.”

Him: Really, April 1st would be good.

Me: No, really. Impossible.

Him: No. April 1st.

So there it was.

And you already know how this pans out. I hustled more, slept a little less, and got to use Seth Godin as the force outside my control. (“I know, I know. It’s totally unreasonable, I quite agree. And can you do it?”)

In End Malaria, Chris Guilebeau (“Ordinary Courage”), Alexandra Levit (“Change Your Career While at Work Today”), Chris Brogan (“Countdown to Escape Velocity”) and others share tips for moving from ideas to action.

You can see all the contributors at www.EndMalariaDay.com.

Acceleration stopped this being a project I was dabbling in and made it a project I was fully committed to. It's what Steve Pressfield would call the moment when I shifted from being an amateur to being a pro.

FROM INSIGHT TO ACTION

- Check the deadlines on your project. First, do you even have any or is it drifting along slowly like a leaf on a river?
- If you do have deadlines, are they deadlines that respect your excited anxiousness about the importance of the project, meaning they build in slack for all those unimportant tasks you do to distract yourself from the real work? Or are they deadlines that barrel right through that to get it done?

5. Give Up Control

"It's amazing what you can accomplish if you don't mind who gets the credit." Sure, I'd read that quote by Harry Truman before. Nodded my head and gone, "of course".

But underneath this mild-mannered, quirky and charming exterior lies a man who likes a finger in every pie, likes to be the final arbitrator and be in control. And while that's a comfortable place to be, I've paid a price: my impact has been as limited as the scope of my imagination and the size of my bottleneck.

So when this project took off, I suddenly found control slipping away. I gave up total control over who would contribute. I stepped back to be an "influencer" on the design. I was just part of the team for the marketing and PR. I was in the loop working with Malaria No More.

In End Malaria, David Allen ("The Strategic Value of Clear Space"), Dan Pink "What's the Matter with Millennials", Les McKeown ("The Power of the Mundane") and others write about keeping and losing control.

You can see all the contributors at www.EndMalariaDay.com.

It was awful and awesome, both.

What made it bearable was getting clear about my own role and where I could do my best. It was my role to find and engage a diverse and extraordinary range of contributors, help them create the best piece they could, and then to merge it into something that would do them and the project proud. And it was my role to get out of the way on the other stuff, contributing where I could.

What made it extraordinary is seeing how much more was done when people were on your side and playing flat-out to achieve the same goal—to raise as much money as possible for Malaria No More.

You can't do Great Work by yourself. The discomfort of giving up total control is trumped by the excitement of gaining the bigger prize.

FROM INSIGHT TO ACTION

- Repeat, if true for you too: I'm [insert your name] and I like control. (And welcome to the club, by the way.)
- Figure out what it is over which you really need to maintain control. It's less than you'd think.
- Make sure everyone knows the final destination. And make it a destination that is worth breaking some patterns and letting go of control for.

Catching Flight

I'll bet dollars to donuts that you'd like a little more Great Work in your life, that you want to be doing more of the work that matters and less of all the other stuff. But that's not an easy thing. We're all busy and overcommitted. We're all comfortable with our old habits and rituals. The day-to-day stuff never seems to end.

Try focusing on a Great Work Project. A project, a dream, a challenge that you want to bring your very best to. Something that will challenge you and light you up over the coming months. This is the thing you'll be telling great tales about in a year's time when someone asks, "What's cool things have you been up to recently?"

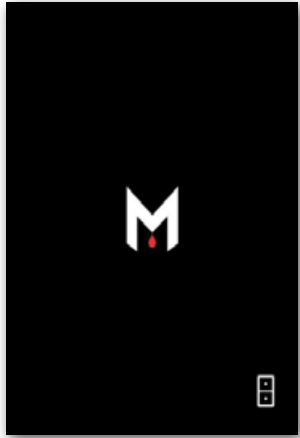
In this manifesto there are five tactics to help you get your Great Work Project off the ground:

- Get Promiscuous: Find fantastic people to work with
- Measure Irritation: Stop trying to make everyone happy. Indifference is the enemy
- Double Down: Be bolder, much bolder, about what you're striving forward
- Pick Up Speed: Whatever you're doing, doing it faster
- Give Up Control: Find your sweet spot and hand over the rest

But the most important tactic of all? **Start something... and see where it takes you.** 📖

This time, the wind catches. The kite goes up and up.
The sky's the limit as the string unspools in your hands.

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**BUY THE BOOK**

Get more details or buy a copy of Michael Bungay Stanier's [End Malaria](#).

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Michael Bungay Stanier, Senior Partner of Box of Crayons, is the author of *Do More Great Work*. His new project is *End Malaria*, which was conceived of and edited by him. It's a collection of 58 thought leaders sharing their best wisdom on how to do more Great Work. \$20 from every \$25 sale goes to Malaria No More. \$20 is enough to buy a mosquito net and support their life-saving work in the fight against malaria. You can buy your copy and save a life at www.EndMalariaDay.com.

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