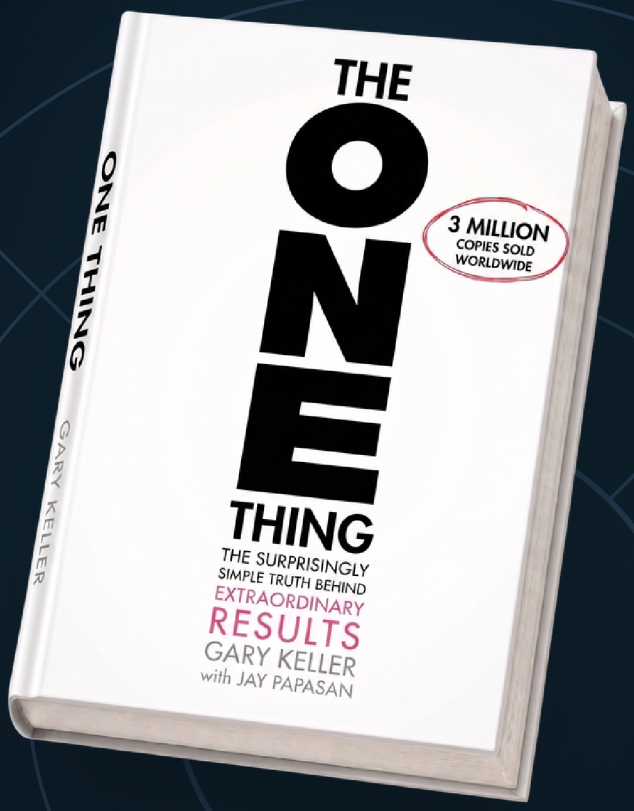
BOOK SYNOPSIS · 10 KEY LESSONS

The ONE Thing

by **Gary Keller & Jay Papasan** · 2013

The big ideas, read through the eyes of a business owner — *and exactly how to use them.*



Field guide narrated by

Steve Cory

START HERE

Why this book

This is a 240-page argument against busyness as identity. And most business owners need to hear it more than once.

Keller built Keller Williams into one of the largest real estate companies in the world. He did it not by doing more things but by relentlessly pursuing fewer. The ONE Thing framework is the distillation of that experience: the focusing question, the domino effect, the time block, the success list, the purpose-priority-productivity sequence. Each one is a tool. Together they form the operating system of people who produce extraordinary results without working extraordinary hours.

This book belongs in the library alongside Essentialism — they're making the same case from different angles. McKeown gives you the philosophy of subtraction. Keller gives you the focusing question that identifies what to keep.

HOW TO READ THIS GUIDE

This is a narrated field guide — my teaching points, my voice, my perspective on how this material applies to you as a business owner. The book is Keller and Papasan's. The application and the lens are mine. Where you see My Take, that's me responding to the framework from 27 years of being in business — what I agree with, what I'd push back on, and what I've actually seen. Lines in quotation marks are the author's exact words. Lines marked The Big Idea are the author's idea in my words.

MY TAKE
Where I respond to the author from my own experience.

YOUR MOVE
One action to take this week.

HONEST QUESTION
The one you probably don't want to answer.

MY QUICK SUMMARY

Ask the focusing question: what's the ONE Thing I can do, such that by doing it, everything else becomes easier or unnecessary? Then block the time for it first. Do it before email, before admin, before anyone else's priorities fill the morning. Replace the to-do list with a success list. Say no to good things so the great one gets done. Connect today's action to the long-term purpose. The entire framework is a delivery system for one conviction: success is sequential, not simultaneous, and the owner who does one thing extraordinarily well will outperform the one doing ten things adequately every time.

AT A GLANCE

The 10 lessons

01	The Focusing Question
02	The domino effect: small focused actions compound into extraordinary results
03	Success is sequential, not simultaneous
04	Willpower is a finite resource: protect when you use it
05	Time blocking: protect the time before anything else fills it
06	Replace the to-do list with a success list
07	Learn to say no to good things to make room for the great ones
08	Big goals, specific actions: goal setting to the now
09	Balance is a myth in building seasons
10	Purpose → priority → productivity: in that order, always

Each lesson includes the idea, my take, the key principles, the author's big idea, your move, and the honest question.

01

LESSON 01 OF 10

The Focusing Question

The entire book is built around one question — and Keller is deliberate about placing it at the center of everything: "What's the ONE Thing I can do, such that by doing it, everything else becomes easier or unnecessary?" The quality of your outcomes is directly tied to the quality of the question you ask yourself. A small question produces a small life. A mediocre question produces a mediocre business. The focusing question is powerful precisely because it forces a different kind of thinking — not 'what should I do today?' but 'what one thing, done well, would make everything else matter less or require less of me?' Keller argues that this question is applicable at every scale: for the year, for the month, for the week, for today, and for right now. At every level of time horizon, the same question produces the right answer for that scale.

MY TAKE — Steve Cory

The focusing question is the most useful single tool in this book because it redirects attention from the list to the leverage point. Most owners are asking 'what do I need to do?' and producing lists. Keller is asking 'what one thing would make everything else easier or unnecessary?' — and that question produces a completely different answer. The list is about covering ground. The focusing question is about finding the domino.

KEY PRINCIPLES

- The quality of your outcomes is directly tied to the quality of the question you ask yourself.
- Applicable at every scale: the year, the month, the week, the day, right now.
- Ask a small question — get a small result. Ask the focusing question — find the leverage point.
- The focusing question shifts attention from covering ground to finding the domino.

IN THE AUTHOR'S WORDS

> **"What's the ONE Thing I can do such that by doing it everything else will be easier or unnecessary?"**

— Gary Keller & Jay Papasan

YOUR MOVE

Apply the focusing question to your most important current business challenge. Write it out in full: 'What's the ONE Thing I can do with [challenge], such that by doing it, everything else becomes easier or unnecessary?' Sit with the answer for 10 minutes before moving to the next task.

HONEST QUESTION

When you plan your week, are you asking 'what should I do?' and producing a list — or asking 'what one thing would make everything else easier?' and finding the leverage point?

LESSON 02 OF 10

02 The domino effect: small focused actions compound into extraordinary results

Keller opens with a physics principle that reframes the entire conversation about leverage: a single domino can knock over another domino 50% larger than itself. If that chain continues, the 57th domino in the sequence would reach the moon. The implication for business: you don't have to push every domino simultaneously. You only have to find the first one — the ONE Thing that, when done, sets off a chain that makes everything else either easier or unnecessary. This is the compound effect applied to action rather than habit. Success is not achieved by working on everything at once. It is achieved sequentially — one domino at a time, each one setting up the next, until the momentum becomes self-sustaining and the results appear sudden to anyone who wasn't watching the sequence build.

MY TAKE — Steve Cory

The domino illustration is what made this book land differently from every other focus book I've encountered. Not because the principle is new — sequential progress over simultaneous effort has been the advice for decades. But because the domino image makes visible something the advice alone doesn't: the early dominoes look trivial compared to what they eventually knock over. The first domino is always smaller than the result it produces. That's not luck. That's leverage.

KEY PRINCIPLES

- A single domino can knock over another 50% larger. The 57th in the sequence reaches the moon.
- Success is sequential, not simultaneous. One domino sets up the next.
- You don't have to push every domino. You only have to find the first one.
- The early dominoes always look trivial compared to what they eventually produce.

IN THE AUTHOR'S WORDS

> **"Success is sequential, not simultaneous."**

— Gary Keller & Jay Papasan

YOUR MOVE

For your most important current business goal, identify the first domino — the ONE action that, if done consistently, would set off a chain making everything else easier. Write it down. That's your only focus for the next 30 days.

HONEST QUESTION

Are you currently trying to push multiple dominoes simultaneously — and is the result average progress across all of them rather than extraordinary progress on any one?

03

LESSON 03 OF 10

Success is sequential, not simultaneous

Keller built one of the largest real estate companies in the world — Keller Williams — and documented the moment it broke through: the moment he stopped trying to do everything and focused on building one key thing at a time. The company grew at 40% annually for a decade immediately following that decision. The lesson isn't that multitasking is impossible. It's that multitasking is possible and mediocre. You can pursue five things simultaneously and produce average results on all five. Or you can pursue one thing sequentially and produce extraordinary results on each. This is the counter-cultural challenge at the heart of the book: in a world that rewards busyness and celebrates the ability to juggle multiple priorities, Keller is arguing that the highest achievers are almost never juggling. They're sequencing. One extraordinary thing at a time.

MY TAKE — Steve Cory

The sequential vs. simultaneous distinction is where I find the most resistance from business owners — because sequential focus requires saying no to real opportunities while the focused work is happening. The fear is that the opportunities will disappear while you're focused elsewhere. What I've observed is the opposite: the owner who does one thing extraordinarily well attracts more opportunities than the one who does many things adequately. The focus creates the reputation that creates the next opportunity.

KEY PRINCIPLES

- Multitasking is possible and mediocre. Sequential focus is possible and extraordinary.
- The highest achievers are almost never juggling. They're sequencing.
- Average progress on five things simultaneously is not the same as extraordinary progress on one.
- Extraordinary focus on one thing creates the reputation that attracts the next opportunity.

IN THE AUTHOR'S WORDS

> **"You need to be doing fewer things for more effect instead of doing more things with side effects."**

— Gary Keller & Jay Papasan

YOUR MOVE

List the five things currently competing for your primary attention in the business. Apply the focusing question to all five and identify the one that, done well, would most advance everything else. Put the other four on a future list. Focus only on the one.

HONEST QUESTION

Is the breadth of things you're currently pursuing producing depth of results on any of them — or are you producing adequate results across everything and extraordinary results on nothing?

LESSON 04 OF 10

04 Willpower is a finite resource: protect when you use it

Keller draws on the research that has since become widely known but was counter-cultural at the time of the book's publication: willpower depletes as the day goes on. It is not a character trait that some people have more of than others. It is a biological resource that exhausts itself through use. The implication is direct and most owners violate it daily: your most important work — the ONE Thing — must be done first, when willpower is at its peak. Most business owners do the opposite. They spend their sharpest morning hours on email, administrative tasks, and low-friction reactive work, then attempt the important, difficult, creative work in the afternoon when the resource they need most has already been spent. Protecting the morning isn't a productivity preference. It is a biological necessity for anyone trying to produce their best work consistently.

MY TAKE — Steve Cory

The willpower research reframes something most owners experience as a discipline problem. The afternoon inability to focus on the most important work isn't weakness. It's biology. The owner who can't seem to do their strategic thinking after 3pm isn't lacking commitment — they've spent the resource. The solution isn't more willpower. It's earlier scheduling of the work that requires it most.

KEY PRINCIPLES

- Willpower depletes throughout the day. It is a resource, not a character trait.
- Spending peak hours on email and administration is spending the resource before the work begins.
- Your most important work must be done when willpower is at its peak — which is early.
- The inability to focus on important work in the afternoon isn't weakness. It's biology.

THE BIG IDEA

When you don't know what to do, do the thing that matters most first. Your willpower is highest in the morning. Use it on what matters most before anything else gets a vote.

— Gary Keller & Jay Papasan, paraphrased

YOUR MOVE

Identify your most important current ONE Thing. Schedule it as the first thing you do tomorrow morning — before email, before social media, before any reactive work. Protect 90 minutes minimum. Track what gets produced in those 90 minutes versus your typical afternoon attempt at the same work.

HONEST QUESTION

What are you spending your peak willpower hours on — and is it your most important work or your most available work?

LESSON 05 OF 10

05 Time blocking: protect the time before anything else fills it

Keller's prescription for actually doing the ONE Thing is direct: block the time before anything else claims it. Not after everything else is scheduled. Before. Dedicate at minimum four uninterrupted hours daily to the most important work. Everything else — meetings, calls, administrative tasks, email — works around the block. Not the other way around. The reason most owners can't find time for their most important work is that they schedule the most important work last, after everything else is placed. By then the calendar is full and the most important work becomes the thing that gets consistently displaced. The solution is not to find time for the ONE Thing. It is to block time for the ONE Thing first and then schedule everything else around it.

> **MY TAKE** — Steve Cory
>
> *This is especially difficult in a community-focused market like Middle Tennessee where relationship responsiveness is a real cultural value and unavailability feels like rejection. The time block isn't unavailability — it's protected focus that makes every interaction outside the block more present and more useful. The owner who protects four hours and then is fully engaged for the rest of the day serves their relationships better than the one who is partially present for twelve hours.*

KEY PRINCIPLES

- Block the time for the ONE Thing before anything else fills the calendar.
- Everything else — meetings, calls, admin — works around the block, not the other way around.
- The most important work that's scheduled last is the most important work that never gets done.
- Four uninterrupted hours on the right thing produces more than twelve scattered hours on everything.

THE BIG IDEA

Instead of managing your time, manage your focus. A 4-hour block of uninterrupted time on your ONE Thing produces more than an entire day of fragmented effort.

— Gary Keller & Jay Papasan, paraphrased

YOUR MOVE

Block four hours on your calendar tomorrow — or the next available morning — for your ONE Thing. Mark it as unavailable to everything else. Do the ONE Thing and nothing else during that block. At the end, evaluate the output versus a typical fragmented day.

HONEST QUESTION

When did you last have four uninterrupted hours to work on your most important thing — and if you can't remember, what does that tell you about how your most important work is actually getting prioritized?

06

LESSON 06 OF 10

Replace the to-do list with a success list

A to-do list is everything you could do. A success list is the one thing you must do first. Keller's distinction cuts at something most owners have never examined: the to-do list feels productive because it gets longer as things are added and shorter as things are crossed off. But most to-do lists are actually a record of other people's priorities — requests, responses, follow-ups — masquerading as the owner's own agenda. A success list forces a different kind of choice. Not 'what's on the list?' but 'what one thing on the list, done today, would make the greatest difference?' That question is harder than checking off items. It requires judgment about what actually matters versus what is merely present on the list because someone asked or because it's been there long enough to feel urgent.

MY TAKE — Steve Cory

The to-do list problem is one I recognize immediately in the owners who feel busy but not productive. The list is long and they're crossing things off all day and the business isn't moving. The list is full of activity. It's not full of leverage. The success list asks a different question before the work starts — not 'what needs doing?' but 'what one thing would move the needle more than anything else today?' That question changes the entire day.

KEY PRINCIPLES

- A to-do list is everything you could do. A success list is the one thing you must do first.
- The success list forces a judgment call: what actually matters versus what is merely present?
- Most to-do lists are other people's priorities masquerading as yours.
- Productive busyness and actual progress are not the same thing. The success list separates them.

IN THE AUTHOR'S WORDS

> **"Instead of a to-do list, you need a success list — a list that is purposefully created around extraordinary results."**

— Gary Keller & Jay Papasan

YOUR MOVE

Tomorrow morning, before you open email or look at your existing to-do list, write one item on a blank page: the single most important thing you could do today. Work on that item first. Only look at the to-do list after the success item is done or well underway.

HONEST QUESTION

Is your typical workday organized around your most important priority — or around the accumulated requests, responses, and reactive tasks that filled the list before the day started?

LESSON 07 OF 10

07 Learn to say no to good things to make room for the great ones

Keller is direct about the cost of the ONE Thing: you must say no to good things to make room for great things. Not bad things. Good things. Legitimate opportunities, reasonable requests, worthwhile commitments — all of which are also competition for the time and attention the ONE Thing requires. Most high achievers are not undisciplined. They are saying yes to the wrong things. Every yes carries a hidden no — to whatever would have occupied that time otherwise. The owners who build something extraordinary are not the most agreeable. They are the most intentional. They have decided what the ONE Thing is and they protect it from the pressure of everything else that wants the same hours.

MY TAKE — Steve Cory

The no to good things is the hardest no in business because it requires having a clear enough priority that the trade-off is visible. When you know what your ONE Thing is, saying no to a good request becomes possible because you can see exactly what you'd be saying no to instead. When the priority isn't clear, every good thing looks like it deserves a yes. Clarity of priority is what makes the no possible — and the no is what makes the ONE Thing achievable.

KEY PRINCIPLES

- You must say no to good things to make room for great things. Not bad things — good ones.
- The most successful people are not the most agreeable. They are the most intentional.
- Every yes is a hidden no to whatever would have occupied that time.
- Clarity of priority is what makes the no possible. Without it, every good thing looks like a yes.

THE BIG IDEA

Saying yes to something is easy. Learning to say no is hard. But the discipline to say no is the only way to make time for your ONE Thing.

— Gary Keller & Jay Papasan, paraphrased

YOUR MOVE

Look at your commitments for the next two weeks. Identify one thing that is good — genuinely worthwhile — but not the most important thing. Decline or defer it. Notice what the reclaimed time produces when redirected to the ONE Thing.

HONEST QUESTION

What are you currently saying yes to that is good enough to feel justified but is actually competing for the time your most important work requires?

LESSON 08 OF 10

08 Big goals, specific actions: goal setting to the now

Keller introduces a framework he calls Goal Setting to the Now: start with the biggest possible version of what you're trying to build — the someday goal — then work backward through time until you reach today. What would you need to accomplish in the next five years to be on track for the someday goal? What would you need to accomplish this year to be on track for the five-year goal? This month? This week? Today? Right now? The framework connects the largest possible ambition to the smallest possible action — what you do in the next 90 minutes. The power is in making the connection explicit. Most owners either dream big without connecting it to today's action, or focus on today's action without connecting it to a meaningful long-term direction. Goal Setting to the Now does both simultaneously.

MY TAKE — Steve Cory

The backward mapping from the big goal to today's action is the most practically useful framework in this book for the owner who feels the gap between their long-term vision and their daily reality. The gap exists not because the vision is wrong or the daily actions are wrong — but because the connection between them has never been made explicit. Goal Setting to the Now makes the chain visible. Once it's visible, today's ONE Thing stops being a task and starts being a step in a sequence that actually leads somewhere.

KEY PRINCIPLES

- Start with the someday goal. Work backward through five years, one year, this month, today.
- The gap between vision and daily reality exists because the chain hasn't been made explicit.
- Connect the largest ambition to the smallest current action.
- Today's ONE Thing stops being a task and starts being a step once the chain is visible.

THE BIG IDEA

Think big. Go small. Big is how you set the goal. Small is how you reach it. The pathway from big to small is the secret of extraordinary achievement.

— Gary Keller & Jay Papasan, paraphrased

YOUR MOVE

Write your someday goal for your business in one sentence. Then work backward: what would need to be true in five years? One year? This month? This week? Today? Write each level down. The answer to 'today' is your current ONE Thing.

HONEST QUESTION

Is your daily work connected to a long-term direction you've made explicit — or are you executing tasks in a context of direction that has never been written down and tested for coherence?

09

LESSON 09 OF 10

Balance is a myth in building seasons

Keller makes a point that most business culture is reluctant to say plainly: at times, building something significant requires going out of balance professionally. The season of intense focus that produces a breakthrough is not a balanced season. It is a season of deliberate imbalance in one direction. This doesn't mean the personal life is ignored indefinitely. Keller's distinction is important: go out of balance professionally when the ONE Thing requires it, but return to what matters most personally quickly. The imbalance is a temporary condition in service of a long-term outcome — not a permanent operating mode or an excuse to neglect relationships that matter. Chasing balance during a building season is not virtue. It is often an excuse to avoid the level of commitment that building something significant actually requires.

MY TAKE — Steve Cory

The balance conversation is one of the most honest in the book because it refuses to pretend that significant achievement and perpetual balance coexist. They don't — at least not in the short term. The business owner who builds something real almost always has seasons of intense imbalance toward the work. The key distinction Keller makes is that those seasons are chosen and bounded — not indefinite, not unconscious, and not at the permanent expense of the personal life they're supposed to be funding.

KEY PRINCIPLES

- Building seasons require deliberate professional imbalance. That's not a flaw — it's the cost.
- The imbalance is temporary and in service of a long-term outcome, not a permanent operating mode.
- Go out of balance professionally when necessary. Return to personal priorities quickly.
- Chasing balance during a building season is often an excuse to avoid the required level of commitment.

THE BIG IDEA

Think about it: if you have a large number of things you try to stay 'in balance' with, by definition they'll all get less attention. When you give your ONE Thing more time, everything else gets less. That's not failure. That's the trade-off that success requires.

— Gary Keller & Jay Papasan, paraphrased

YOUR MOVE

Identify whether you are currently in a building season or a maintenance season. If building: name the specific professional imbalance the season requires and the specific personal priority you are protecting through it. If maintenance: assess whether you're in the right season for what the business needs.

HONEST QUESTION

Are you chasing balance during a season that actually requires focused imbalance — and is that balance-chasing protecting your relationships or protecting you from the level of commitment the next phase requires?

LESSON 10 OF 10

10 Purpose → priority → productivity: in that order, always

Keller's governing sequence is the deepest framework in the book and the one that ties everything else together. Purpose is why you do what you do — the big reason the work matters beyond the revenue it generates. Priority is what your purpose demands you focus on — the ONE Thing that most directly advances the purpose. Productivity is what happens when you protect the time to execute the priority. The sequence is not interchangeable. Productivity without priority is efficient busyness — moving fast in a direction that doesn't matter. Priority without purpose is arbitrary — choosing a focus without a reason that makes it worth protecting from everything competing for the same time. Purpose without priority is inspiration without execution — a meaningful why with no corresponding what. All three are necessary. The order is non-negotiable.

MY TAKE — Steve Cory

The purpose-first sequence is what connects The ONE Thing to the Ignite philosophy at its deepest level. Effectiveness isn't just about doing the right things — it's about doing the right things for the right reasons. The owner whose ONE Thing is connected to a genuine purpose — a belief about why the work matters beyond themselves — has access to a motivational reserve that the purely efficiency-focused owner doesn't. When the focusing question feels hard, the purpose is what makes the answer worth pursuing anyway.

KEY PRINCIPLES

- Purpose: why the work matters beyond the revenue it generates.
- Productivity: what happens when you protect the time to execute the priority.
- Priority: what purpose demands you focus on — the ONE Thing.
- The sequence is not interchangeable. Each one depends on the one before it.

IN THE AUTHOR'S WORDS

“Purpose without priority is powerless.”

— Gary Keller & Jay Papasan

YOUR MOVE

Write your purpose in one sentence — the big reason your business exists beyond making money. Then identify the single priority that most directly serves that purpose right now. Then block the time to execute it. Do all three steps in sequence before Tuesday.

HONEST QUESTION

Is your current business focus driven by a clear sense of why it matters — or are you focused on priorities you've chosen without examining whether they connect to a purpose worth the level of commitment they require?

CLOSING

One last thing

Keller ends with the question he opens with, because the whole book is just an extended argument for why it's the right question:

What's the ONE Thing I can do, such that by doing it, everything else becomes easier or unnecessary?

Ask it every morning. Ask it before every major decision. Ask it when the list is long and the day feels scattered and nothing feels like it matters more than anything else.

The answer is always available. The question is whether you're willing to hear it and act on it before everything else gets a vote.

IN THE AUTHOR'S WORDS

> **"Until my ONE Thing is done, everything else is a distraction."**
>
> — Gary Keller

WHAT'S NEXT IN THE LIBRARY

Essentialism

by Greg McKeown

The ONE Thing finds your priority. Essentialism helps you clear away everything competing with it.

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