

The One Thing You Need to Know: ... About Great Managing, Great Leading, and Sustained Individual Success

By Marcus Buckingham

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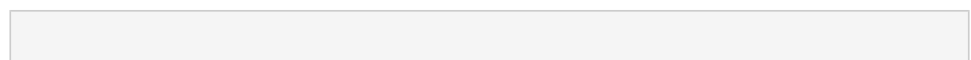
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Following the success of the landmark bestsellers *First, Break All the Rules* and *Now, Discover Your Strengths*, Marcus Buckingham offers a dramatically new way to understand the art of success.

With over 1.6 million copies of *First, Break All the Rules* (co-authored with Curt Coffman) and *Now, Discover Your Strengths* (co-authored with Donald O. Clifton) in print, Cambridge-educated Buckingham is considered one of the most respected business authorities on the subject of management and leadership in the world. With *The One Thing You Need to Know*, he gives readers an invaluable course in outstanding achievement -- a guide to capturing the essence of the three most fundamental areas of professional activity.

Great managing, leading, and career success -- Buckingham draws on a wealth of applicable examples to reveal that a controlling insight lies at the heart of the three. Lose sight of this "one thing" and even the best efforts will be diminished or compromised. Readers will be eager to discover the surprisingly different answers to each of these rich and complex subjects. Each could be explained endlessly to detail their many facets, but Buckingham's great gift is his ability to cut through the mass of often-conflicting agendas and zero in on what matters most, without ever oversimplifying. As he observes, success comes to those who remain mindful of the core insight, understand all of its ramifications, and orient their decisions around it. Buckingham backs his arguments with authoritative research from a wide variety of sources, including his own research data and in-depth interviews with individuals at every level of an organization, from CEO's to hotel maids and stockboys.

In every way a groundbreaking book, *The One Thing You Need to Know* offers crucial performance and career lessons for business people at all career stages.



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Editorial Review

Review

"*The One Thing You Need to Know* is actually a modest title. It contains many things you need to know. Marcus Buckingham is flat out the most original, provocative writer there is on the subjects of leadership and management. He comes to his theories the old-fashioned way: by truly getting to know the people and the workplaces he writes about. He also happens to be a wonderful writer and a joy to read."

-- Tony Schwartz, coauthor of *The Power of Full Engagement*; president, The Energy Project

"Buckingham is a superb writer and speaker who can make complex ideas crystal clear, cut through to the core insight, and reveal its crucial importance. He has been an inspiration to all of us at Lexus."

-- Denny Clements, group vice president and general manager, Lexus U.S.

"As I read *The One Thing You Need to Know*, for the first time I had the urge to compare someone -- Marcus Buckingham -- to Peter Drucker. Buckingham performs the most magical of acts: He speaks with surpassing common sense, yet reaches profoundly uncommon conclusions. This is a wise -- and radical -- book; a true gem worth savoring."

-- Tom Peters

"Given the tremendous complexities of today's business environment and consumer expectations, Marcus Buckingham is able to deliver a clear path of understanding to the simple truths at the heart of managing and leading. The 'one thing' I find invaluable about this book is its unique, challenging examples about how to stay laser focused on operational excellence."

-- Robert L. Nardelli, chairman, president, and CEO, The Home Depot, Inc.

"Marcus Buckingham has a keen sense of what it takes to excel, and he backs his insights with an impressive body of in-depth interviews and research. This is an important book for anybody who aspires to effective leadership, managing, or any kind of enduring individual achievement."

-- Richard M. Kovacevich, chairman, president, and CEO, Wells Fargo and Company

About the Author

Marcus Buckingham spent seventeen years at the Gallup Organization, where he conducted research into the world's best leaders, managers, and workplaces. The Gallup research later became the basis for the bestselling books *First, Break All the Rules: What the World's Best Managers Do Differently* (Simon & Schuster) and *Now, Discover Your Strengths* (Free Press), both coauthored by Buckingham. Buckingham has been the subject of in-depth profiles in *The New York Times*, *Fortune*, *BusinessWeek* and *Fast Company*. He now has his own company, providing strengths-based consulting, training, and e-learning. In 2007 Buckingham founded TMBC to create strengths-based management training solutions for organizations worldwide, and he spreads the strengths message in keynote addresses to over 250,000 people around the globe each year. He lives in Los Angeles with his wife Jane and children Jackson and Lilia. For more information visit: marcusbuckingham.com

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Chapter One: A Few Things You Should Know About the "One Thing"

"Get me to the core"

"If you dig into a subject deeply enough, what do you find?"

In one sense this book began with a conversation with Carrie Tolstedt in a hotel lobby in Los Angeles. Carrie is the head of Wells Fargo's regional banking group, a position she has held for the last four years and in which she has been inordinately successful. As with many effective leaders, though, she is by nature self-critical. Despite the fact that she had just delivered a rousing speech to her regional managers, I was not overly surprised to find her standing off by herself looking a little dissatisfied.

"What's up?" I said. "The speech went really well." One always tends to offer reassurance to speakers after a speech, but in this case it was accurate. She had been speaking on the subject of customer service and how, with most banking products being a commodity in the marketplace, Wells Fargo would live or die based on the quality of its service. This message isn't new, either for Wells Fargo or the wider business world, and in the wrong hands it can pretty quickly descend into cliché. But Carrie had managed to keep the message coherent, the stories personal, and the examples vivid and powerful. It was a good speech.

"I don't know," she replied. "Sometimes I'm not sure how effective these speeches really are. The regional managers will now try to pass the message on to their district managers, and inevitably it will get tweaked in some way, changed somehow. Then it'll get changed again when the district managers pass it on to their store managers, and again when the store supervisors hear it, until, by the time it reaches the people who can really use it -- our customer service reps and personal bankers -- it will be significantly altered.

"Don't get me wrong, it's good that each level of my organization adds its own spin, but still, I sometimes think that the only way to keep this organization on the same page about customer service is to boil it down to its essence. My message should be so simple and so clear that, across all forty-three thousand employees, everyone comes to know what's at the core."

At the time, I think I mumbled something about being sure that her message would get through to where it mattered most, but on a subliminal level her wish -- to see a subject so clearly that she could describe its essence simply, but without oversimplification -- must have registered. For weeks thereafter, no matter where I went on my travels, no matter whom I was talking to, I seemed to hear the same wish: "Get me to the heart of the matter."

Sure, the subject in question varied. Some people wanted to know the organizing principle of great management. Others were more interested in the essence of great leadership. Others asked about the driving force behind a successful career. But everywhere the wish was the same: Get me to the core.

Now, I suppose I could have chalked these wishes up to intellectual laziness. Why struggle with complex reality when you can skate by on the PowerPoint version of life instead? But this is a rather uncharitable and, in the end, unhelpful interpretation. We are all attracted to clarified versions of reality not because we are intellectually lazy, but because these versions often wind up being so useful. Take winter, spring, summer, and fall as an example. The four seasons are the PowerPoint version of the weather. Certainly they leave out a great deal of complexity, exception, and local variation, but nonetheless they've helped generations of farmers time their sowing and harvesting.

If there were any charges of intellectual laziness to be leveled, they probably should have been leveled at me. For seventeen years I had the good fortune to work with one of the most respected research organizations in the world, the Gallup Organization. During this time, I was given the opportunity to interview some of the world's best leaders, managers, teachers, salespeople, stockbrokers, lawyers, and all manner of public servants. The fact that I hadn't isolated a few core insights at the heart of great leadership, or managing, or

sustained individual success didn't mean that these insights didn't exist. It simply meant I hadn't yet been focused enough to get it done.

Carrie's wish, and the many similar wishes I heard in the months following, pushed me to get focused. Since people wanted to reach down into the heart of the matter, I was, I realized, in a perfect position to help them get there. My research experiences at Gallup mostly consisted of surveying large numbers of people in the hopes of finding broad patterns in the data. Now, in my effort to get to the core, I would use this foundation as the jumping-off point for deeper, more immersive, more individualized research. I wouldn't survey a large number of good performers. Instead I would identify one or two elite players, one or two people who, in their chosen roles and fields, had measurably, consistently, and dramatically outperformed their peers. In the end these individuals covered a wide range, from the executive who transformed a failing drug into the best-selling prescription drug in the world, the president of one of the world's largest retailers, the customer service representative who sold more than fifteen hundred Gillette deodorants in one month, the miner who hadn't suffered a single workplace injury in over fifty years, all the way to the screenwriter who penned such blockbusters as *Jurassic Park* and *Spider-Man*.

And having identified them, I planned to investigate the practical, seemingly banal details of their actions and their choices. Why did the executive turn down repeated promotions before taking on the challenge of turning around that failing drug? Why did the retail president invoke the memories of his working-class upbringing when defining his company's strategy? The deodorant-selling customer service representative works the night shift. Is this relevant to her performance? One of her hobbies is weightlifting. Odd? Yes, but can it in any way explain why she is so successful so consistently? What was each of these special people actually doing that made them so very good at their role?

I have chosen to focus this deep dive on the three roles that are the most critical if you are to achieve something significant in your life and then sustain and expand this achievement, namely the roles of manager, leader, and individual performer. In part 1 of the book we focus on the two roles that underpin sustained *organizational* success.

What is the One Thing you need to know about great managing?

To get the best performance from your people, you have to be able to execute a number of different roles very well. You have to be able to select people effectively. You have to set expectations by defining clearly the outcomes you want. You have to motivate people by focusing on their strengths and managing around their weaknesses. And, as they challenge you to help them grow, you have to learn how to steer them toward roles that truly fit them, rather than simply promoting them up the corporate ladder.

Each of these roles involves significant subtlety and complexity. But, without denying this complexity, is there one deep insight that underpins all of these roles and that all great managers keep in the top of their minds? The chapter on great managing supplies the answer.

What is the One Thing you need to know about great leading?

When you study truly effective leaders, the first thing that strikes you is just how different they are. I could use any number of examples from today's business world, but instead, think back to the first four presidents of the United States. Although each of them experienced great success in rallying people toward a better future, their styles could not have been more dissimilar. George Washington's leadership style was to project an image of soundness and constancy, but he is not remembered as an inspiring visionary. In direct contrast, the second U.S. president, John Adams, was an inspiring visionary. He was so gifted a public speaker that he

could hold a vociferous Congress in rapt silence for hours. However, as his struggles following the end of the Revolutionary War revealed, he was at his best only when railing against a perceived foe -- which, most of the time, happened to be Great Britain.

His successor, Thomas Jefferson, did not require a foe to bring out the best in him. Sitting alone at his writing desk he could conjure compelling word pictures from the blank sheets in front of him -- and yet, in contrast to Adams, he so feared public speaking that he changed the protocol so that all of his State of the Union addresses were written out and then handed to an assistant who ran down the street and delivered them to Congress.

James Madison was different again. He was a small man with a light voice who was unable to rely on inspiring word pictures to lead. Undeterred, he opted for a more pragmatic, political approach, working the floor of Congress and, one by one, building the alliances necessary to advance his agenda.

Despite these obvious differences and imperfections, each of these individuals is rightly upheld as a model of excellence in leadership. Thus, my question for the chapter on great leading is "When you study models of excellence in leadership -- whether 250-year-old models or those of the present -- can you look past the superficial idiosyncrasies and identify one primary insight that explains why they excel?"

In part 2 we shift our focus to sustained *individual* success.

What is the One Thing you need to know about sustained individual success?

During the course of your life you will inevitably be exposed to all manner of options, opportunities, and pressures. The key to sustaining success is to be able to filter all these possibilities and fasten on to those few that will allow you to express the best of yourself. But what filter should you use? Should you actively seek out experiences that will enable you to acquire a broad range of expertise, so that you have something to fall back on when one expertise become obsolete? Should you stick with a role that doesn't suit you, thereby proving to your superiors that you are a good soldier, willing to play any role for the benefit of the team? Should you imagine that your career has distinct stages and that the filter used in the early stages should be replaced with new ones as your career progresses? Or does it all depend on what kind of career you have chosen, or even what kind of personality you have?

In chapters 5, 6, and 7, we come to grips with these questions and reveal the one insight you must never forget as you strive for sustained individual success.

A lifetime of "why"s

"What drove this book?"

Before we get started, a word about myself. We're going to be in each other's company for the next few hours (days? plane rides?), so you should probably know whom you're dealing with. Although in one sense I owe the impetus for this book to my conversation with Carrie Tolstedt, in another sense, it was almost inevitable that at some point in my life I would sit down to write this book.

I always found the movie *City Slickers* a little disappointing. It wasn't that I didn't enjoy it -- the story of three stuck-in-a-rut New Yorkers heading out to a dude ranch in the American West to learn about life and friendship and loyalty is charming, and Billy Crystal, the lead, is as hysterical as ever. No, what always bothered me about the movie was that it teases the viewer and then fails to deliver on its tease. About thirty

minutes into the movie, Billy's character is trying to engage the ranch's trail boss, played by Jack Palance as a stone-faced loner, in a debate about the meaning of life. Disdainful of Billy's frenetic city-boy prattle, Palance's character, Curly, turns in the saddle to face him and holds up one finger.

"I'll tell you the secret to life. This one thing. Just this one thing. You stick to that and everything else don't mean s -- -- ."

"What's the one thing?" Billy's character asks.

"That's what you've got to figure out," Curly replies.

Since this answer didn't satisfy me, I sat through the entire movie in the hope of learning what the one thing really was. It wasn't a good sign when Curly died about an hour in, but still I stuck with it, confident that a sentimental Hollywood film would never set me up so blatantly and then fail to follow through on the punch line. But it did. At the end of the movie, when Billy and his two chums are standing on the mountain top, pondering their recent daring, their life lessons learned, and Curly, the philosopher-trail boss, Billy announces that he now sees clearly the path ahead of him.

"Why?" asks one chum.

"Because I know what he meant."

"Who?"

"Curly." Billy holds up one finger. "I know what he meant by this."

"What?"

Billy then proceeds to say exactly what Curly had said an hour earlier: "That's what you've got to figure out."

"I'm gonna deck you," says his friend.

Well, my thought exactly.

"That's what you've got to figure out." What kind of an answer is that? I was holding out for something deep and meaningful and, above all, short, some pithy little phrase that I could quote around the water cooler the next day, something like Bogart's line in *Casablanca*, "The problems of three little people don't amount to a hill of beans in this crazy world," or Laurence Fishburne's in *The Matrix*, "Welcome to the desert of real" (said very slowly). I would even have settled for something akin to Ali MacGraw's "Love means never having to say you're sorry." But no, all *City Slickers* could give me was "That's what you've got to figure out."

I suppose I have only myself to blame for expecting a summer blockbuster to deliver some deep truth, but, to be honest, I have always been attracted to the notion that beneath complex phenomena such as loyalty, or productivity, or career success, or even happy marriage, you can discover a core concept. And that armed with this core concept, you can focus your attention, see the causes more clearly, and so waste less time, be precise, make accurate predictions, and act with precision to make these predictions come true. The very idea that these core concepts exist, and can be discovered, is thrilling to me.

Many of my most vivid memories stem from the discovery of a core concept that, all by itself, served to clarify something that, a moment before, had seemed unfathomably, ineffably complex.

I remember sitting in chapel one morning -- all good English public-school boys started their day in chapel -- and hearing 1 Corinthians 13:13 for the first time: "And now faith, hope, and love, abide these three; and the greatest of these is love."

I didn't fully understand its import then, and perhaps I still don't, but I can recall being terribly excited that Saint Paul had done the analysis and concluded that, while all three were great, love was the greatest.

Since then my pantheon of certifiably cool concepts has grown. Some were deemed cool simply because they applied to me personally. From the time I was about three until just after my twelfth birthday I was cursed with a terrible stammer. Along with being hugely embarrassing, it was also, on the days when I was feeling rational enough to ponder it, intellectually perplexing. Why did I stammer? Why couldn't I say my name without drawing it out into a mess of staccato consonants and bizarrely elongated vowels? I knew my name well enough. I could even sing my name on cue. I just couldn't utter it in normal conversation. There was no rational explanation for my stammer, no identifiable cause, and as a result it became, to my young mind, more powerful and dangerous.

And then, in a magazine picked up in a doctor's waiting room, I happened to read that boys who had been exposed to higher than normal levels of testosterone in the womb were more likely to develop autism, dyslexia, and, believe it or not, stammering. The physical manifestation of this overdose of testosterone, I read, was that the boy's ring finger would be significantly longer than his index finger. Upon reading this, I immediately looked down at my fingers and noticed, I think for the first time, that my ring finger extended far beyond my index finger, almost matching my middle finger in length.

I can remember being deeply happy with this discovery. My stammer had a cause. It was, in some small way, predictable, understandable. I could start to get my mind around it and therefore, perhaps, control it. Coincidence or not, a couple of days after discovering the cause of my stammer, I felt it slipping away. Today it's virtually gone, sneaking up only occasionally, when I'm overtired or overstressed.

Some concepts were deemed cool because they were so wildly unlikely as to be just plain silly. The fact that the tides are caused by the pull of the moon falls into this category. When my brother first told me this, I thought he was pulling my leg, like the times he persuaded me that whales laid eggs or that moths raised their young in streetlights and flew around them all night to keep them warm. But, upon further investigation, I discovered that, however improbable it sounded, my brother's explanation was correct: the moon, hanging small and distant in the night sky, somehow caused the sea to sweep up the beach and swamp my sand castles, and then pulled it back out again.

Other concepts were deemed cool because they managed to explain so much so simply. In this category falls my all-time favorite concept: natural selection. Every time I think of it I am floored that someone (more accurately two people, Charles Darwin and Alfred Russel Wallace) was perceptive enough to pierce nature's indescribable variety and identify the mechanism that created it. A concept that has the range to explain why eyes develop, why male sea horses give birth, why all human anger is caused by self-righteousness, why birds fly south for the winter, and most every other living form and function, and with such economy that even an eighth grader can grasp it, is surely the king of concepts. When he read about it in an early copy of *On the Origin of Species*, Darwin's friend T. H. Huxley was reported to have said what many of us have probably felt at one time or another: "How stupid of me not to have thought of it." Amen to that.

Don't misunderstand. I am not so naïve as to believe that you can reduce all complex phenomena to a single cause. In fact, as a social science researcher by training, I have been forced to become singularly suspicious of oversimplifications, the kind that lead to one-size-fits-all explanations and get-slim-quick-pill action plans. No matter how careful your analysis, the link between the effect you are trying to predict and the factor you thought was causing it never turns out to be quite as clear and direct as you had hoped.

If you have a statistical mind-set you will be familiar with the frustrations. First, the correlation between the cause and the effect is never very strong. Positive correlations range from 0.0, no correlation whatsoever, all the way to 1.0, a perfect, positive correlation. In the social sciences, if you discover a correlation of a mere 0.5 you swoon with happiness. For example, although you'd make a lot of money betting that taller people weigh more than shorter people, the correlation between height (the cause) and weight (the effect) is only 0.5.

And second, even when you discover a positive correlation between two factors, you can rarely be certain which is causing which, or indeed whether a third, entirely different factor is causing both. For example, if you analyzed the link between BMW drivers and laptop owners you would find a positive correlation between the two, but obviously buying a BMW doesn't cause you to rush out and buy a laptop, or vice versa. Both can best be explained, and thus predicted, by something else, in this case level of income and education.

So yes, I have become skeptical of oversimplification. But this skepticism hasn't dampened my desire to dive to the bottom of a subject. Nor has it stopped me from believing that if one digs into a subject carefully enough, one can dredge up, beneath the surface complexity and unpredictability, a few deep and deeply useful truths.

The tests for the "one thing"

"Why are some explanations more powerful than others?"

"Controlling insights" rather than "deep truths" is, I think, a better way to describe what we are after. "Controlling insights" conveys the sense that although they do not explain all outcomes or events, they do serve as the *best* explanation of the *most* events. Other factors will undoubtedly come into play, but the kinds of insights that are most useful are the ones that underpin, and that therefore control, every other factor. These insights give you leverage. They help you know which of your actions will have the most far-reaching influence in virtually every situation.

In fact, for a concept to emerge as the controlling insight, as the One Thing, this is the first test it must pass: *It must apply across a wide range of situations.* Take leadership as an example. Lately, much has been made of the notion that there is no one best way to lead and that, instead, the most effective leadership style will be determined by the situation in which you happen to find yourself. Winston Churchill is usually wheeled out as the best proof of this. During the peaceful interwar years his belligerent, confrontational style was so ineffective that he was pushed out into the political wilderness, but this very same style proved extraordinarily effective when the situation changed and he was called upon to stiffen Britain's resolve against the Nazi assault.

There's no doubt that different situations do require different actions from the leader, but this doesn't mean that great leadership lacks a One Thing. Nor does it mean that the most deeply insightful thing you can say about leadership is that it's situational. This is surely a bit of a cop-out. Instead, as we'll see in the chapter on great leading, with enough focus and precision you can identify the controlling insight that explains great

leading across all situations, all styles.

The second test is this: *The controlling insight must serve as the multiplier*. It must explain excellence in a particular arena, not average, not mere survival. In any equation some factors will have only an additive value -- when you focus your actions on these factors you see some incremental improvement in the outcomes you want. The controlling insight should be more powerful. It should show you how to get *exponential* improvement. It should point to where you will net the greatest return on the investment of your time and energy.

For example, many factors combine to produce good managing. However, if you look closely, you'll quickly see that most of them don't turn talented employees into superstar performers. They merely ensure that you don't end up discouraging your employees to such an extent that they quit, either physically or psychologically. Don't pick people with no talent for the role. Don't set unclear expectations. Don't say you'll do one thing and then do another. Don't ignore them when they excel. Don't keep such a distance that you fail to build a relationship with them. Don't play them off against one another. Don't ridicule their ideas. Avoid all of these behaviors and, of course, you will be less likely to chase your best people away.

However, none of them survives as the One Thing you need to know about great managing, because none of them is the multiplying ingredient that elevates a manager from good to great. This is precisely what the controlling insight at the core of great managing must explain.

In short, no matter what the subject, the controlling insight should not merely get you onto the field of play. It should show you how to win and keep winning the game.

The third and final test: *The controlling insight must guide action*. I'd wager you bought this book not simply because you are curious and inquisitive, but rather because you want to get better at something. You want to *do* things differently, not simply look at them differently. To help you, the controlling insight must lead to action. It must point to precise things you can do to create better outcomes more efficiently and more consistently.

So, these are our three criteria for identifying the controlling insight, the One Thing: it must apply across a wide range of situations, it must serve as the multiplying factor that elevates average to excellent, and it must lead to more precise actions. To show you what we're after, here is one controlling insight that survived these tests and that should prove helpful in your personal life. Initially, this example might seem like a protracted digression. I chose to include it, though, not only because it survived the three tests, but also because it was so clearly derived from careful studies of excellence.

One controlling insight

"What is the One Thing you need to know about happy marriage?"

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You might think that social science makes a habit of studying excellence in order to learn about excellence, but it really doesn't. For the last hundred years or so, the prevailing wisdom was that good is the opposite of bad, and so in order to understand good, one should study bad and then invert the findings. Thus depression and neurosis were studied in order to learn about joy. Children on drugs were studied in order to learn how to keep children off drugs. Truants were studied in order to figure out how to keep kids in school. And unhappy marriages were studied in order to help the rest of us know how to avoid divorce.

Unsurprisingly, these studies revealed that, in unhappy marriages, neither partner understood the other very well -- they couldn't identify accurately the other's strengths, weaknesses, or values. Consequently, guided by the prevailing assumption that good must be the opposite of bad, the advice to couples in marriage therapy became, Love may be blind, but a strong relationship should not be. In a strong relationship, a clear-eyed assessment of your partner's strengths, weaknesses, and values should, over time, replace the initial rush of love. So listen to your partner. Understand that she may see the world differently from you. Love her for her strengths, but then identify, accept, and offer support in her areas of weakness. Together a perfect whole will be forged from your two imperfect halves.

On its face, this advice -- replace love blindness with an accurate understanding of who your partner really is -- seems sensible. If you understand your wife accurately, she will feel more understood and therefore more secure. On the flip side, if you expect her to possess strengths that in fact she lacks, you will surely clash when she surprises you with her behavior. Even worse, if you cling to an idealized version of her, sooner or later she will fail to live up to it, and your fragile relationship, built on an illusion, will crack and break.

From many angles, this advice seems to hold water.

However, over the last two decades, the focus of investigation has shifted away from bad marriages. Under the impetus of the leaders of the school of positive psychology -- Martin Seligman, Donald O. Clifton, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, Ed Diener -- the prevailing wisdom has come to incorporate the idea that good is not the opposite of bad, merely different, and that if you really want to identify the distinct characteristics of great marriages you must study the great ones with as much discipline and rigor as had previously been brought to bear on the bad ones. If you can discover what lies at the core of these great marriages, and offer advice stemming from these discoveries, you are much more likely to help people build lastingly rewarding partnerships.

Researchers from the State University of New York at Buffalo, the Universities of Michigan, British Columbia, and Waterloo, and Sussex University in the U.K. have opted for this approach, and their findings directly challenge the conventional wisdom that a happy marriage is founded on clear-eyed understanding and acceptance of each other. In its place they have identified a defining characteristic of happy marriages. This characteristic is so deeply counterintuitive that initially most of us will have difficulty absorbing it. And yet, upon reflection, it may just lead us to the controlling insight at the heart of a happy marriage.

These researchers have interviewed thousands of happily married or cohabiting couples over the course of many different studies, but for our purposes, I'll focus on the one that first caught my eye. In this particular study Dr. Sandra Murray, a soft-spoken professor from SUNY Buffalo, and her colleagues began by asking 105 couples (77 were married and 28 were cohabiting) to rate each other on a list of qualities, such as "kind and affectionate," "open and disclosing," "tolerant and accepting," "patient," "warm," and "sociable." They then asked the couples to rate how rewarding and satisfying they found their relationship. These couples were not love-blind honeymooners, but couples of long standing. The average length of the relationship was 10.9 years.

(A quick note: from this point on I am going to write from the perspective of the husband rating his wife. This will make things easier for me and, I hope, more comprehensible for you as I attempt to explain the findings. If you don't feel like digging up the actual research paper, you'll have to trust me when I tell you that everything I am about to describe holds true whether the husband is rating the wife or the wife the husband. If you do feel like digging up the paper, it is titled "What the Motivated Mind Sees" and can be found in the *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, volume 36, pp. 600-620.)

If it were true that accurate understanding of your partner is crucial to the building of a strong relationship, when a husband rates his wife high on "patient," "warm," and "sociable" but lower on "open and disclosing" and his wife rates herself in the same way, they should be a very happy couple. Put more simply, when their pattern of ratings match, their level of satisfaction with the marriage should be high.

Apparently not. A match between the husband's ratings of his wife and the wife's ratings of herself showed no correlation whatsoever to how happy they were in their relationship. I'm not saying there was a negative correlation. Accurate understanding of each other's strengths and weaknesses did not make the couple *more* dissatisfied. There was simply no correlation, no observable link between accurate understanding and marital satisfaction.

However, one distinct pattern did emerge. In the happiest couples, the husband rated the wife more positively than she did on *every single quality*. For some reason, the husband in a highly rewarding relationship consistently credited his wife with qualities that she didn't think she had.

A cynic might label the husband's ratings delusions. If my wife doesn't think she possesses these qualities but, after ten years, I still do, then perhaps "delusion" is not too strong a word. The researchers opted for more measured terms, such as "positive illusions" and "benevolent distortions" and "idealizations," but, whatever the label, there was no mistaking the conclusion: in the happiest couples, the husband stays blind.

Now, you might still wonder whether the happy husband, blinded by his positive illusions, is heading for a fall. My wife and I may be happy today, but woe betide us both when my wife fails to behave in line with my expectations.

The same thought occurred to the researchers, and so they decided to track these couples over the next few years. What did they find? The husband who rated his wife high on qualities that she didn't think she had was not only more satisfied with the relationship today, but in the months following reported even greater levels of satisfaction, fewer sources of conflict, and fewer moments of doubt.

So there you have it. The husband who assumes that his wife possesses strengths even she doesn't think she possesses will have a strong marriage today and an even stronger one tomorrow.

I must admit that when I first encountered this finding, it seemed through-the-looking-glass bizarre to me, as it may to you. Accurate understanding of each other doesn't lead to a stronger relationship? How can this be true? Each of the studies confirming this finding has been published in a refereed academic journal, so I trusted that it was in fact true. But why was it true?

This is how the researchers begin their explanation:

Few decisions have higher stakes than the decision to commit to one particular romantic partner. In perhaps no other context do adults voluntarily tie their hopes and goals to the good will of another. To feel happy and secure in the face of such vulnerability, individuals need to believe that their relationship really is a good one and that their partner can be counted on to be caring and responsive across time and situations.

When I tie myself to my wife, I am making one of the biggest commitments of my life. To avoid cognitive dissonance, I make myself believe that the commitment I made is a good one. My problem is that my wife is not perfect, nor does she see the world in exactly the way I do. If I dwell on these imperfections and differences of perspective, I will become insecure about my decision and, soon, about my safety in the relationship itself. As a result, I will be less comfortable with real intimacy, less forgiving, less positive in

my judgments of her, and things will slowly fall apart.

So, instead, I *overstate* the case for my commitment. I come to believe that my wife has more strengths than she actually thinks she has. These perceptions may not be real, in the sense that they may not reflect what my wife is really like. But, none-

theless, they serve the needs of our relationship very well. They make me feel secure in my decision, secure in my relationship, and therefore, even in moments of extreme vulnerability, my trust in the relationship trumps my need for self-preservation. Because I am fortified by my positive illusions, when my wife does something that upsets me, I will not retreat and look for ways to get back at her (not often; not deliberately; at least, not often deliberately) but instead will reach toward her for greater intimacy.

And so, over time, my positive illusions create an upward spiral of love. My illusions give me conviction. My conviction leads to security. My security fosters intimacy. And my intimacy reinforces love.

Putting these conclusions together, this controlling insight can serve as the One Thing you need to know about happy

marriage:

Find the most generous explanation for each other's behavior and believe it.

Love begins with positive illusions, but in strong marriages, these positive illusions do not give way to a dispassionately accurate understanding of each other's strengths and weaknesses. Instead these positive illusions weave their strength into the fabric of the relationship, until they actually become the relationship. They make themselves come true. Stated more bluntly, your positive illusions will make your love last.

As with all controlling insights, this One Thing should help you act with greater precision as you strive to strengthen your relationship. For example, the researchers tell us that when you notice a flaw in your spouse, you should not compartmentalize it. Do not put a line around it, give it a name, set it off to one side, and then try to balance it out with her positive traits, as in "Yes, she is a short-tempered person, but, on the positive side, she is also caring and creative." Balancing out clearly delineated weaknesses with equally clearly delineated strengths may seem sensible but, unfortunately, it won't help your relationship. The research reveals that husbands and wives who do this to each other end up with more doubts, more conflicts, and less rewarding relationships. It's almost as if, by defining your spouse's weaknesses specifically and vividly, you imbue those weaknesses with unwarranted power. They may lurk off in the wings for a while, but, like a stage villain, they are primed to leap out of the shadows at any moment and ruin the fun.

Instead, the researchers tell us, when you notice a flaw, recast it in your mind as an aspect of a strength. Thus "She's not impatient, she's intense." Or "She's not narrow-minded, she's focused." Initially this may feel like you're playing mind games with yourself, but you're actually doing something quite clever. Remember: the strongest relationships over time are those in which each partner finds a way to build on his/her idealized image of the other. By recasting weaknesses as aspects of a strength you are integrating all available information into this idealized image. Thus your idealized image is stronger and more robust because no new information, no newly discovered flaw, can undermine it. Any new flaw is simply reformatted as a thread of a strength, and then woven right back into your idealized image.

As I said, this insight runs counter to the conventional wisdom on marriage and may be difficult for you to square with your view of your own relationship. Does this mean you shouldn't try to understand your

spouse? Does this mean you and your spouse should never argue? What happens if your positive illusions keep getting undermined by the fact that you and your spouse value things that are diametrically opposed?

The answers to these questions could probably fill a whole book, and since this isn't that book, I won't dwell on them now. Nonetheless, despite these questions, I chose to include this recent finding on happy marriage because it was so clearly the result of a rigorous study of excellence. At the very least it should make you stop and think about how you are choosing to perceive your spouse. As the research reveals, your perceptions not only color your current reality, they actually alter your relationship and thereby create your future reality.

And if you worry that all this is derived from some new-fangled study that subsequent research will probably refute, here is the eighteenth-century poet William Blake saying pretty much the same thing and reminding us that there really is nothing new under the sun:

Man's desires are limited by his perceptions; none can desire what he has not perceived.

So, when looking at your spouse, choose your perceptions with care. They will fuel your desire.

At this point, let's leave the mysteries of marriage behind and return to the three questions at the heart of the book. What is the One Thing you need to know about

1. Great managing
2. Great leading
3. Sustained individual success

Each of these subjects is rich and complex. Each could be explored endlessly to detail fully their many facets. My aim in this book is not to deny the complexity of these subjects, but to penetrate it; not to make these subjects simpler, merely clearer. After all, we live in a world of excess access. We can find whatever we want, whenever we want it, as soon as we want it. This can be wonderfully helpful if we are trying to track down last month's sales data, an errant bank statement, or a misplaced mother-in-law, but if we are not quite careful, this instant, constant access can overwhelm us.

To thrive in this world will require of us a new skill. Not drive, not sheer intelligence, not creativity, but focus. The word "focus" has two primary meanings. It can refer either to your ability to sort through many factors and identify those that are most critical -- to be able to focus well is to be able to filter well. Or it can refer to your ability to bring sustained pressure to bear once you've identified these factors -- this is the laser-like quality of focus. The skill targeted by this book incorporates both of these meanings.

Today you must excell at filtering the world. You must be able to cut through the clutter and zero in on the emotions or facts or events that really matter. You must learn to distinguish between what is merely important and what is imperative. You must learn to place less value on all that you can remember and more on those few things that you must never forget.

But you must also learn the discipline of applying yourself with laser-like precision. As we will see, the common thread running through each of the three controlling insights is that success, whether as a manager,

a leader, or an individual performer, does not come to those who aspire to well-roundedness, breadth, and balance. The reverse is true. Success comes most readily to those who reject balance, who instead pursue strategies that are intentionally imbalanced. This focus, this willingness to apply disproportionate pressure in a few selected areas of your working life, won't leave you brittle and narrow. Counterintuitively, this kind of lopsided focus actually increases your capacity and fuels your resilience.

My hope for this book is that it will arm you with the insights you need to sharpen both aspects of your focus, the filter and the laser, and thereby enable you to manage, lead, and perform with extreme precision and effect.

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