

MEDIA KIT

**THE ART OF BEING
INDISPENSABLE
AT WORK**

**WIN INFLUENCE, BEAT
OVERCOMMITMENT, AND
GET THE RIGHT THINGS
DONE**

BY BRUCE TULGAN

HARVARD BUSINESS REVIEW PRESS

The Art of

BEING



INDISPENSABLE

AT WORK



win influence

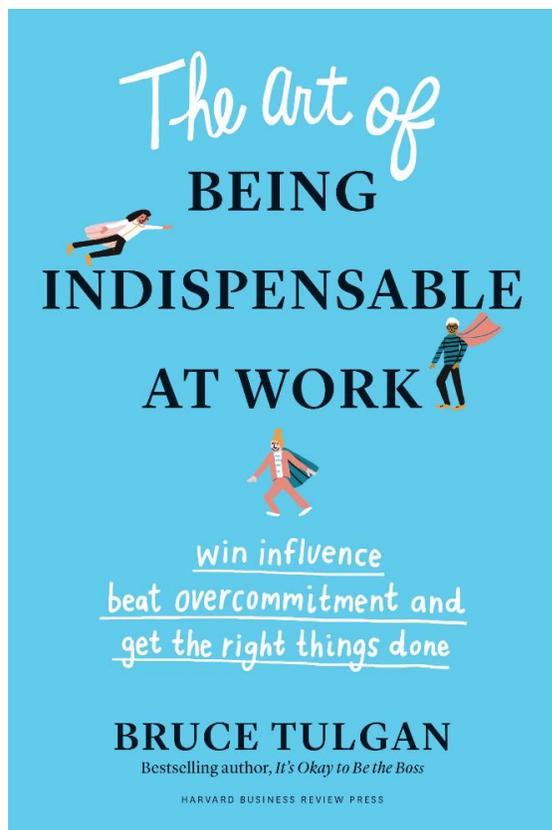
beat overcommitment and

get the right things done

BRUCE TULGAN

Bestselling author, *It's Okay to Be the Boss*

HARVARD BUSINESS REVIEW PRESS



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In today's workplace, everybody is dealing with so many people—up, down, sideways, and diagonal. In this game-changing book, talent guru and bestselling author Bruce Tulgan shows how Go-to People not only behave differently, but also think differently, building up their influence with others by doing the right things at the right times for the right reasons regardless of whether they have any formal designation of authority.

Endorsements

"For anybody at any level in any organization who wants to be that indispensable go to person, read this book."

--Ray Blanchette, President & CEO, TGI Friday's

"Do you want to be a better leader, better performer, or #1 in your peer group? If so, read this book. Both of my sons are young military officers, and I'm sending them a copy."

--Greg Lengyel, Major General, USAF (retired), Deputy Commanding General U.S. Joint Special Operations Command (2016-2018), Vice President Sandoval

"This could be the most practical and immediately usable book I have ever read. Bruce just gave you the ultimate roadmap."

--Eric Hutcherson, Chief Human Resources Officer, National Basketball Association

"By zeroing in on the behaviors that make the most successful people 'tick', Bruce highlights the key attributes that are critical to survive AND thrive, despite the challenges."

--Susan Unvarsky, Head of US Customer Service, Back Office, Prudential Financial

About the Author

Bruce Tulgan is the best-selling author of numerous books including *It's Okay to Be the Boss*, and the founder and CEO of RainmakerThinking, a management research, consulting and training firm.





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THE ART OF BEING INDISPENSABLE WORK

Win Influence, Beat Overcommitment, and Get the Right Things Done

Bruce Tulgan

Today, more than ever, we all want to be viewed as an indispensable go-to person. However, in this new world of work, getting things done is more complex than ever. While in many companies there is a clear organizational chart, in reality, day-to-day working relationships are much more tangled. Trying to become indispensable means thinking we need to say yes to everything and everyone. But, collaborating with an increasing number of people leads us to being overwhelmed and prone to burnout. How can we win influence, tackle overcommitment, and get the right things done? That's the art of being indispensable at work.

For nearly three decades, Bruce Tulgan, bestselling author and founder of RainmakerThinking, has followed the latest developments in the workplace through several long-term organizational studies: on generational shifts in the workplace, best practices for leading and managing others effectively, and techniques for optimizing performance. Based on the insights he's garnered through his research, he reveals in **THE ART OF BEING INDISPENSABLE WORK** what truly sets go-to people apart, how they think, and what they do:

They understand the peculiar mathematics of real influence. Go-to people make the right decisions and get the right things done. Over time, they get a reputation for delivering, or having good reasons when they decline something. By doing the right thing for the long term, they add value to everything they do. As a result, colleagues want to do things for them, make good use of their time, and contribute to their success. That's real influence.

They lead from wherever they are. Today, many of us are constantly being asked to do things by people who aren't our boss, and where we must ask things of others who don't report to us. Go-to people understand what's required and what's allowed—up and down the chain of command—is the secret to success. Tulgan says the first step is to go vertically before going sideways (or diagonally): ensuring alignment on priorities, ground rules, marching orders, and next steps through regular structured communication.

They know when to say no and how to say yes. The secret to saying yes is to ensure the project is set up for success with a concrete plan—a clear sequence of events and ownership of next steps. Sometimes, instead of saying no, Tulgan reveals the better response is “not yet” because the opportunity doesn't have a clear plan and needs to be developed further.

They work smart. Go-to people identify what they do best and what they want to be known for. One of the ways to discover this, Tulgan says, is to create checklists, step-by-step instructions, or best practices for tasks, to better see where we contribute unique value. By professionalizing

everything we do and specializing in what we do best, we can steadily expand our repertoire of specialties.

They finish what they start. Go-to people understand that the way to win is to complete projects so they can take on new ones. The busier people are, the more they try to handle it all by being a juggler, but inevitably they will drop the ball. The secret to handling a long list of responsibilities and projects is to focus on one thing at a time. Tulgan recommends keeping a to-do list and scheduling time for each task, instead of toggling back and forth between them all. To make an intimidating project seem more do-able, break the work into small chunks and find gaps in your schedule for focused execution time.

They get better and better at working together. Relationships are key, but go-to people know the way to build them isn't through politicking and personal rapport. By focusing on getting work done, the work will go better. When the work goes better, the relationship will go better. Go-to people celebrate success with a supersonic thank-you. They channel finger-pointing into continuous improvement through after-action reviews. They also plan the next collaboration by looking around the corner with others.

They promote go-to-ism. Go-to people find other indispensable people throughout the organization and build new go-to people whenever there's a chance to do so. That way, if they can't say yes, they can recommend someone else who can help. That's how the upward spiral of real influence is built.

Nearly a century ago, Dale Carnegie's classic *How to Win Friends and Influence People* propelled millions of readers up the ladder of success. In this new world of work, Bruce Tulgan provides the must-read guidebook for achieving real influence and learning to thrive in **THE ART OF BEING INDISPENSABLE WORK**.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Bruce Tulgan is a bestselling author, an adviser to business leaders all over the world, and a sought-after keynote speaker. Since 1995, Tulgan has worked with tens of thousands of leaders and managers in hundreds of organizations, ranging from Aetna to Walmart and from the US Army to the YMCA. He lectures at the Yale Graduate School of Management, as well as other academic institutions. Tulgan's books include the updated and expanded edition of *Not Everyone Gets a Trophy* and the bestselling *It's Okay to Be the Boss*. He is the Founder and Chairman of RainmakerThinking, Inc., and he lives in New Haven, CT.

THE ART OF BEING INDISPENSABLE WORK

Win Influence, Beat Overcommitment, and Get the Right Things Done

Bruce Tulgan
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Author's Note

I completed this book just weeks before the COVID-19 pandemic emerged and began killing so many, frightening all of us, and radically disrupting our world. Who could ever have imagined that such grave challenges might be just around the corner?

This book was written to help you succeed in today's increasingly demanding and uncertain world of work. It is a guide to navigating through constantly shifting priorities and unclear lines of authority. It is about how to think and conduct yourself when there are so many factors outside your control.

Well, the world just got a lot more scary and uncertain. I never anticipated this book being the *How to Win Friends and Influence People* for the postpandemic era. Nothing in it speaks, directly, to social distancing, personal protective equipment, handwashing, or even working from home or videoconferencing. Moreover, no one can predict all the many ways this generation-defining crisis will reshape our society and the workplace.

But one thing is clear: we have all just experienced, firsthand and together, how very much can change—so very quickly and with so very little warning. Now so many of our workplaces have become “virtual,” organization charts are being redrawn almost by the hour, interpersonal contact has all but disappeared, and we are speaking to each other through screens. Even the most worthy,

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well-established missions and practices are being fundamentally challenged.

So why is this book more important than ever? Let me explain.

When everything around you spins out of control, what do you do? What *can* you do? You can control you. That's *all* you can do.

When boom goes to bust, who is still indispensable? Who will keep adding value, no matter what? Who will lead us through tough times? Who will pull more than their weight? Who will help us adapt and bounce back stronger than ever? Who will keep doing their best work very well, very fast, on time, and on budget? Who will do all this and, in the process, keep building up—rather than damaging—their working relationships?

It will be the ones I call “go-to” people. They are the people I've been studying for decades now, whose ways of thinking and conducting themselves are the basis of all the advice in this book. They are the indispensables, those upon whom you want to model yourself in the best of times—and especially in these most challenging of times.

But doing your job just got a lot more difficult and complicated. You and your colleagues, no matter where you're positioned on the organization chart, are relying on each other even more now than before. Many, after sheltering in place during the pandemic, will continue working remotely. Everybody will be under added stress for the foreseeable future, doing more with less, and tackling entirely new obstacles along the way.

Every new request will feel like a special occasion or a 911 call. You don't want to let anybody down, especially in this new, anxious world. You will want to keep proving yourself to be that indispensable go-to person.

In the postpandemic era, the would-be go-to person is at greater risk than ever before of succumbing to overcommitment syndrome. Fight it. If you try to do everything for everybody, you'll end up doing nothing for anybody.

Now more than ever, it will take extra savvy and skill to manage yourself, your many work relationships, and all the competing demands on your time and talent.

The techniques in this book were not specifically designed for the postpandemic era, but they might as well have been:

- If ever there was a time to adopt a true service mindset, this is it. The good news is that the more you serve others—by seeking to add value in every interaction—the more they want to build you up and help you out too.
- People are more likely to work things out with you, or take your word on something, when you're known for being aligned with the chain of command and you have a track record of making the right decisions.
- When you can get things done very well, very fast for people, those people will keep coming back to you.

Connection with people is the key. In the uncertainty of the postpandemic world, people will be our anchors, our relationships to one another a source of strength and security. Be a go-to person and build up your network of go-to people you know you can rely on. Invest in each other with intention. We can lift each other up and together be the jet fuel for the next great boom.

Bruce Tulgan, May 2020

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The Art of Being Indispensable at Work
By Bruce Tulgan

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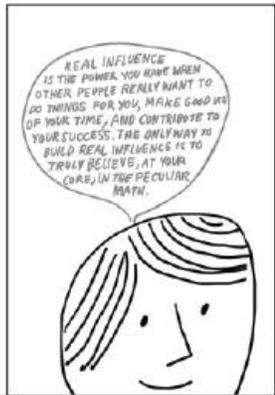
Chapter Summaries



In today's workplace the so-called Go-to Person, over time, usually becomes anything *but* that.

Overcommitment gets in the way. The process of becoming indispensable too often means stretching oneself beyond human capacity so that priorities become muddled. Important tasks are left undone or done ineffectively. All of this might leave you wondering when all this collaboration business is going to blow over so you can get back to doing your

"real" job. I have news for you: This *is* your real job now. Navigating collaborative relationships is not going away. And doing that job very, very well is how true Go-to People, in the real world, *win real influence, beat overcommitment, and get the right things done.* (**Chapter 1**)



Understand and believe in *the peculiar mathematics of real influence*, versus false influence. Real influence is the power you have when other people really want to do things for you, make good use of your time, and contribute to your success. The only way to build real influence is to truly believe, at your core, in the peculiar math: The more you serve others by doing the right thing for the long term, moment by moment, adding value in every single

interaction, the richer you become in real influence. (**Chapter 2**)



Know what's required and what's allowed—*up and down the chain-of-command*—before you try to work things out “at your own level.” You have to go vertical before you go sideways (or diagonal): Ensure alignment on priorities, ground rules, and marching orders, every step of the way, through regular structured communication up, down, sideways and diagonal. (**Chapter 3**)



Know *when to say “no”* (and “not yet”) and how to say “yes.” And remember, “yes” is where all the action is. Every yes is your opportunity to add value for others and build up your real influence. Don't waste your “yesses.” Set up every “yes” for success with a concrete plan—a clear sequence, timing, and ownership of all the next steps. (**Chapter 4**)



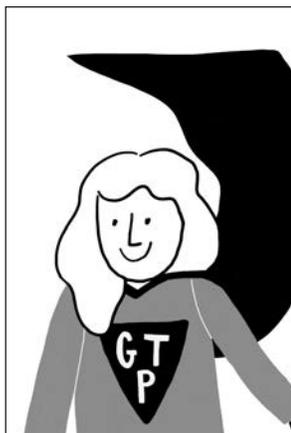
Work smart by professionalizing everything you do, specializing in what you do best, and steadily expanding your repertoire of specialties. Know what you want to be known for: That means mastering best practices, repeatable solutions and job aids. (**Chapter 5**)



Finish what you start. The busier you are, the less you can afford to be a juggler. If you are always juggling, you will inevitably drop the ball. You have to be able to handle a long and diverse set of responsibilities and projects, but you have to execute one thing at a time. Keep a long to-do list and schedule. But break work into small “do”-able chunks and find gaps in your schedule for focused execution time. You can only finish one thing at a time. **(Chapter 6)**



Keep getting better and better at working together. Lift people up and they will lift you up too. Relationships are the key, but don’t focus on building relationships through politicking and personal rapport. Focus your relationship building on the work, and the work will go better. When the work goes better, the relationship will go better. How? Celebrate success with a supersonic “thank you.” Channel finger-pointing into continuous improvement through after-action reviews. Plan the next collaboration by looking around the corner together. **(Chapter 7)**



Promote Go-to-ism throughout your organization. Be a Go-to-Person. Find Go-to People wherever you need them. Build new Go-to People whenever you have the chance. That’s how you build the upward spiral of real influence, the power that people give each other because they want each other to be powerful. I call it “Go-to-ism,” aka, *the art of being (nearly) indispensable at work.* **(Chapter 8)**

About the Author

Bruce Tulgan is the best-selling author of numerous books including *It's Okay to Be the Boss* and the founder and CEO of RainmakerThinking, a management research, consulting and training firm. All of his work is based on decades of research and his work has been the subject of thousands of news stories around the world. You can follow Bruce on Twitter @BruceTulgan or visit his website at rainmakerthinking.com.

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Reviews and Testimonials for *The Art of Being Indispensable at Work*

During my 33 years in the military, many people would ask me how they could improve to be the #1 person in their peer group. I'd ask them who they thought the #1 person was, and they almost always had the correct answer. I'd say to them, "if you want to be #1, be more like that person." Bruce Tulgan analyzes, provides vignettes, and summarizes for us the essence of how to be that indispensable, "Go-to" person. Do you want to be a better leader, better performer, perhaps #1 in your peer group? If so, read this book. Both of my sons are young military officers, and I'm sending them a copy.

Greg Lengyel, Major General, USAF (retired), Deputy Commanding General U.S. Joint Special Operations Command (2016-2018), Vice President Sandoval Custom Creations Inc.

I am, yet again, tremendously impressed with Bruce's ability to present these complicated and important issues in an understandable, and useful way. This is a must read, fantastic "how-to-guide" to understand the positive power of attitude, influence, teaming, collaboration, building professional relationships, and being a leader in developing a culture of excellence.

Brigadier General Kevin Jacobsen, USAF (ret), 16th Commander (Special Agent) Air Force Office of Special Investigations (2010-2014), Managing Director, Ernst & Young, LLP

This could be the most practical and immediately usable book I have ever read. I found myself dropping these suggestions right into my current situation and going oh! Right! So that's what I did wrong! I can do it this way next time! Bruce has found a way to boil down the most complicated and delicate balance of yes, no, commit, and manage expectations of anyone I have ever seen. Mastering Go-to-ism is a thing! And Bruce just gave you the ultimate roadmap.

Eric Hutcherson, EVP, Chief Human Resources Officer, National Basketball Association

For anybody at any level in any organization who wants to be that indispensable go to person, read this book. In this constantly changing world, we all have to be able to rely on each other at work more than ever and the best way is for all of us to learn how to be better at serving each other. Bruce's research-based approach will show you how to lead from wherever you are—up, down, sideways... and diagonal.

Ray Blanchette, President and CEO, TGI Friday's

Bruce Tulgan does it again. By zeroing in on the behaviors that make the most successful people 'tick', he highlights the key attributes that are critical to survive AND thrive, despite the challenges.

Susan Unvarsky, Head of US Customer Service, Back Office, Prudential Financial

The Art of Being Indispensable at Work is a must read for someone who really wants to differentiate themselves in today's workforce. Bruce Tulgan reminds us that seemingly small actions can make such a huge difference! Great concepts in a practical and pragmatic approach to becoming that "go-to" person at work.

Vanessa Boulous, Chief Operations Officer, YMCA Retirement Fund

Wow, *The Art of Being Indispensable at Work* is an incredible book that explains those subtle, yet crucial, keys to victory in the workplace. This information provides step-by-step instruction on the necessary components to building relationships that drive success. If you are challenged in how to get ahead based on your accomplishments, these are the answers to questions you didn't know to ask. With this guide, anyone can start building an upward spiral of real influence to create a personal people power.

Kymberlee Dwinell, Director, Global Diversity & Inclusion, Northrop Grumman Corporation

"Having led in a complex matrix structure for over 20 years, Bruce's deep experience and knowledge in management and leadership really shines through in this book. He is absolutely "spot on" regarding the challenges of being effective working outside a clear chain-of-command type organization. His research about how to thrive in that environment – when you have to rely on people you cannot hold directly accountable—provides a bona fide step-by-step plan for succeeding in today's workplace. This is a book I want all of my team to read so they can benchmark that the key to success is serving each other, adding value in every interaction, and making themselves indispensable to each other.

Jon Morrison, President, Americas, WABCO

Finally, a book on how to be effective as an individual contributor, a team player, *and* a leader—someone who can be counted on to deliver on spec, on time, every time. Bruce lays out the path to gaining real influence, leveraging alignment to get things done through others, setting yourself and your team up for success, and delivering tangible results. A true lesson in servant leadership, teamwork and followership.

Shaun McConkey, COO, US Operations, Carclo Technical Plastics

The Art of Being Indispensable at Work is practical, forward-thinking, and provides excellent tips, best practices, and insights for succeeding in your career. This is a must-read for anyone wanting to be the best in their position and truly indispensable in their role. I personally plan to implement what I learned from this book.

Anne Anderton Warren, Executive Vice President & Chief Human Resources Officer, MKC

Bruce puts into words principles I've observed over the years, but didn't know how to communicate them effectively to others. From describing how to earn "real influence" and principles for good decision-making, to the importance of professionalizing and continually improving yourself and your work.

Paul White, Ph.D., Co-author, *The 5 Languages of Appreciation in the Workplace*

In this ever-changing environment, Bruce Tulgan provides insight and sound guidance for professionals to achieve success. In his latest book, *The Art of Being Indispensable at Work*, he continues his direct, yet easy to read, advice as our jobs get harder, more consuming, and require flexibility and teamwork. While I enjoyed the entire book, I, personally, like the chapter, *Go-to-ism, The Art of Being Indispensable at Work* which emphasizes the importance of corporate culture, inclusivity, and tone at the top in attaining and maintaining a successful organization. With the most recent global event that impacted our economy and work environments, Bruce Tulgan's book is a reminder of how we need to maintain our professionalism and positivity in our daily responses to challenges.

Michelle McHale, Partner, Plante Moran

In today's challenging economy, it may seem critical to say yes to every request. And they're coming in fast and furious from all sides! Bruce Tulgan's new book, *The Art of Being Indispensable At Work*, is a practical guide to being the Go-To Person you want to be right now—while preserving your sanity.

Janet Altman, Partner, Kaufman Rossin

Once again Bruce has masterfully navigated the speed and complexity of the work environment to clearly define today's top challenges and offer down-to-earth, practical advice and solutions to address the issues. Filled with real-life examples and stories, he guides the reader on how to be successful in the workplace and life. If you want to increase your influence with others, gain clarity, increase efficiency and effectiveness, and rid yourself of overwhelming workloads and commitments, this book is a must read! It has already made a difference in my work and life.

Jill Kilroy, AVP Talent Management, Horace Mann Companies

Tulgan's message on being indispensable at work is insightful, practical, and can be applied immediately. It is amazing what teams can do when they pull together during times of uncertainty. I appreciate the examples and scenarios Bruce uses to drive points home. Bruce uses real life scenarios to inspire us to take accountability and take action to practice, practice, practice his practical approach to collaboration and leadership.

Ryan Mayotte, Director Sales Capability, CDW

As we come out of the economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic there will be challenges to all businesses. Bruce Tulgan has very good words of wisdom not only for those starting a new career but so too those who are seasoned veterans as employees be it staff or managers—even good for owners! Being an indispensable employee is now more important than ever. A very good read.

Bill Jacobs, Board of Trustees, King's Daughter Medical Center, Publisher of the Daily Leader and Prentiss Headlight (1995-2012)

Bruce Tulgan's book is an absolute must read for business owners, management and anyone who wants to be one of those indispensable go-to people at work. One of my secret weapons in building a 100 million dollar business was figuring out how to hire and develop exactly the sort of go to people Bruce writes about in this book.

Peter Stavisky, Founder & CEO, Barrington Media Group

Tulgan once again delivers an extraordinary blueprint for performance that should be in the hands of every employee who wants to make a difference, get ahead and succeed. This book is a master class on becoming indispensable that perfectly balances what to do with what not to do. A great gift for every graduate entering the workforce, anyone who wants to succeed and particularly for use in mentoring programs. This book is destined to become a classic.

Pamela S. Kaczer, Director, Human Resources, RBC, CT Aerospace Operations

Like all of Bruce's books, *The Art of Being Indispensable at Work* gives you practical, but highly insightful, answers to the top challenges business leaders and their teams face. What sets Bruce's books apart from others, is the relatable stories summarized from the decades of research he has done. This how-to-guide is applicable for anyone in business who wants to, as the title says, become indispensable. This book will help you be a leader even if you are not "designated" as one, learn to follow through with what you have taken on and perhaps most importantly, when to say no.

Maria Melfa, President & CEO, The Training Associates

A great read. What I like most about this book is that you can feel Bruce's passion and all of the best practices are research based. Everyone at every stage in their career can benefit from more focus on increasing the value we bring to our work.

Ken Taylor, President, and Editor in Chief, Training Industry, Inc.

Bruce has an innate way in truly listing out how we can succeed in the work place of today. No matter what position you are in, the size or age of the organization, the truths that are expressed throughout can be used to succeed whether managing up or down. "How you align yourself in terms of decision making and support—and with whom—is the first core mechanism of becoming indispensable at work". This is my go forward mantra.

Anisa Telwar Kaicker, Founder & CEO, Anisa

FEATURE ARTICLE: The Art of Being Indispensable at Work

Imagine that tomorrow morning, some high-priced workplace consultant shows up at your job. This purported expert on employee performance is there to conduct a talent review: an assessment of all the personnel in the organization. What would this expert say about you?

If you are like most people, this question might make you pause. Not because you're not great at what you do, but because these days doing your job is a lot harder. Your work requires way more than it once did: constant collaboration, managing relationships all over the organization chart, and serving a seemingly unlimited number of "internal customers" at work.

If that sounds familiar, this book is for you.

The Art of Being Indispensable at Work is the newest title from Bruce Tulgan, best-selling author of *It's Okay to Be the Boss* and CEO of RainmakerThinking, the management research, consulting and training firm he founded in 1993. *The Art of Being Indispensable* was written in response to the increasing prevalence of what he calls "overcommitment syndrome" and "siege mentality"—what most people would identify as burnout.

In 27 years of interviewing and working with employees in workplaces of all sizes, in every industry, Tulgan has identified a trend that has picked up steam in the past decade or so: day-to-day working relationships that are spread all over the organization chart. What he hears—from people at all levels—is the biggest workplace challenge today is collaborating with so many people in so many nebulous relationships.

"It's the irony of ironies: the so-called go-to person becomes anything *but* that, because overcommitment gets in the way," Tulgan says. "The process of trying to become indispensable too often means stretching oneself beyond human capacity. But the hard truth is, navigating collaborative relationships is not going away. Doing that very, very well is how go-to people are going to succeed in today's work environment."

If you have a job, and you care about doing that job well, this likely sounds familiar to you. But what is the solution? How does someone beat overcommitment, win real influence, and get the right things done today? How do you set yourself apart as an indispensable, go-to person?

At least part of the solution is, Tulgan says, about facing up to some hard new realities of what it means to be an ambitious, hardworking employee today:

- Positive attitude, hard work, personal responsibility, and being great at your job are just table stakes.
- No matter how creative and tenacious you may be, you still have to do things by the book and follow orders.
- You cannot ever do everything for everybody. Overpromising may please people up front, but if you fail to deliver, that's all they will remember.

- You must make choices about what you are not going to do, so you get the right things done. Making no choice is still a choice, and no choice is almost as bad as a bad choice.
- To make good choices, you must do your due diligence, the sooner the better, every step of the way.
- You can't be great at everything, so you need to build a repertoire of things you are known for consistently doing very well and very fast.
- You only get credit for the results you deliver. You get a lot more credit when you deliver on time and on spec.
- People are your number-one asset, but they are also very high maintenance, so managing relationships is mission critical.

Tulgan wrote *The Art of Being Indispensable* not just to help people understand these new realities, but to provide concrete strategies for dealing with them.

"All I do in my seminars is teach frustrated, would-be go-to people to imitate what the most successful go-to people actually do every day in the real world," he explains. "I've now shared those techniques with so many thousands of real people with such successful results that I knew I had cracked the code. I wrote this book so those techniques could be shared with everyone."

"By zeroing in on the behaviors that make the most successful people 'tick', Bruce highlights the key attributes that are critical to survive *and* thrive, despite the challenges," says Susan Unvarsky of Prudential Financial. If you are like most people in today's economy, that sounds like a pretty good deal.

The Art of Being Indispensable at Work: Win Influence, Beat Overcommitment, and Get the Right Things Done is available for purchase from Amazon, Barnes & Noble, and all major booksellers on July 21, 2020 from Harvard Business Review Press.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Bruce Tulgan is the best-selling author of *It's Okay to Be the Boss* and the CEO of RainmakerThinking, the management research, consulting and training firm he founded in 1993. All of his work is based on 27 years of intensive workplace interviews and has been featured in thousands of news stories around the world. You can follow Bruce on Twitter @BruceTulgan or visit his website at rainmakerthinking.com.

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ARTICLE: In a Post-Pandemic World, Being Indispensable Is More Important than Ever Before

By Bruce Tulgan

When I founded my company, RainmakerThinking, in 1993, companies began inviting me to speak at their conferences, train their managers, observe their operations, interview their leaders, and conduct focus groups and interviews with their employees. That work has given me the opportunity to ask hundreds of thousands of people (we lost count at a half-million), in organizations of all shapes and sizes, some version of the same basic question: *What challenges are you facing that make it harder for you to do your job and get things done?*

For more than a quarter century, the answers I've heard to that question have sounded remarkably similar. It seems that the same basic things that challenged people in 1993 are what they continue to grapple with now. From the beginning, for instance, I've heard from managers about the trouble they have managing their direct reports—and from their direct reports, about the many ways their managers could do better at managing them. Here we're talking about work relationships in which the lines of authority are very clearly defined.

But even in the 1990s and early 2000s, I also heard people talking about the challenges of work situations in which authority was *not* clearly defined—the interdependent relationships of collaboration, what we later started referring to as working across siloes. Yesterday and today, getting what you need from lateral colleagues is difficult, especially if they are already overcommitted, since you have no easy way to hold them accountable. And juggling incoming requests from lateral colleagues is also difficult, for much the same reason.

I wrote *The Art of Being Indispensable at Work* to help those people.

The Art of Being Indispensable is a guide to navigating through constantly shifting priorities and unclear lines of authority. It is about how to think and conduct oneself despite the existence of so many factors outside any one individual's control. I completed writing it just weeks before the COVID-19 Pandemic emerged and began radically disrupting our world. Who could ever have imagined that such grave challenges might be just around the corner?

Suddenly, the world has gotten a lot more uncertain and unclear for everyone. I never anticipated this book being the “How to Win Friends and Influence People” for the post-pandemic era. Nothing in it speaks, acutely, to social distancing, personal protective equipment, handwashing, or even working from home or videoconferencing. Moreover, no one can predict all of the many ways this generationally defining crisis will reshape our society and the workplace.

But one thing is clear: we have all experienced, firsthand and together, how very much can change so quickly and with so little warning. This book is more important than ever now that

many workplaces have become “virtual,” organization charts are exploding, casual contacts have disappeared and we speak to each other through screens. Even the most worthy, well-established missions and practices are being fundamentally challenged.

Why is being indispensable more important than ever before? Let me explain.

When *everything* around you spins out of control, what do you do? What can you do? You can control you. That’s *all* you can do.

When boom goes to bust, who is still indispensable? Who will keep adding value, no matter what? Who will lead us through tough times? Who will pull more than their weight? Who will help us adapt and bounce back stronger than ever? Who will keep doing their best work very well, very fast, on time and on spec? Who will do all this and keep building up (rather than damaging) their working relationships in the process?

It will be the ones I call “go-to” people. They are the people I have been studying for decades now, whose ways of thinking and conducting themselves are the basis of all the advice in *The Art of Being Indispensable at Work*. They are the titular indispensables, those upon whom you want to model yourself, in the best of times, and especially in the most challenging of times.

But doing one’s job just got a lot more difficult and complicated. Everyone and their colleagues, all over the organization chart, are relying on each other more now than ever before. Many, after sheltering in place during the pandemic, will continue working remotely. Everybody will be under added stress for the foreseeable future, doing more with less, and tackling entirely new obstacles along the way.

Each new request will feel like a special occasion. Most of us don’t want to let anybody down, especially in this new world. We will want to keep proving ourselves to be one of those indispensable, go-to people.

In the post-pandemic era, the would-be go-to person is at greater risk than ever before of succumbing to overcommitment syndrome. And if they don’t fight it, instead trying to do everything for everybody, they will end up doing nothing for anybody.

Now more than ever, it will take extra savvy and skill to manage oneself, their many working relationships, and the many competing demands on their time and talent.

The techniques in *The Art of Being Indispensable at Work* were not specifically designed for the post-pandemic era, but they might as well have been:

- If ever there was a time to adopt a true service mindset, this is it. The good news is that the more you serve others—by seeking to add value to others in every interaction—the more they want to build you up and help you out, too.

- People are more likely to work things out with you, or take your word on something, when you are known for being completely aligned with the chain of command and having a track record of making the right decisions.
- When you can get things done very well, very fast for people, those people will keep coming back to you.

Connection with people is the key. In the incredible uncertainty of a post-pandemic world, people will be our anchors—relationships are a form of security. If we can be a go-to person and build up our network of go-to people upon whom we know we can rely, we can be the wind beneath each other's wings. We must invest in each other, with intention. That will be the jet fuel for the next great boom.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Bruce Tulgan is the best-selling author of *It's Okay to Be the Boss* and the CEO of RainmakerThinking, the management research, consulting and training firm he founded in 1993. All of his work is based on 27 years of intensive workplace interviews and has been featured in thousands of news stories around the world. Bruce's newest book, *The Art of Being Indispensable at Work*, is available July 21 from Harvard Business Review Press. You can follow Bruce on Twitter @BruceTulgan or visit his website at rainmakerthinking.com.

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Author Q&A with Bruce Tulgan

The Art of Being Indispensable at Work

Q1. At the heart of this book is the concept of “go-to-ism.” What is go-to-ism?

A: Go-to-ism is “the way of the go-to person.” You might say that go-to-ism is both a philosophy of work and a way of conducting yourself at work. It is a particular way of behaving and interacting with others. It’s all about making yourself incredibly valuable to the people around you, building goodwill and a positive reputation, which makes others want to do things for you and make good use of your time.

I’ve been studying go-to people for decades now. Whenever I work with organizations, I ask everyone, “Who are your go-to people?” And I pay attention to the individuals, or types of individuals, whom others cite most frequently and consistently. What they have in common, the ways of the go-to people, that’s what I have dubbed “go-to-ism.”

You might think that the go-to person is the best technical expert with very sharp skills for important tasks, responsibilities, and projects. And, of course, go-to people must certainly be very good at their jobs, but not all technical experts are go-to people.

Most people would much rather go to a colleague who might be less of an expert but willing to take personal responsibility for working through obstacles and getting things done. Personal responsibility and getting things done are important qualities of go-to people. But that doesn’t mean they are steamrollers who won’t take no for an answer. Or sly organizational politicians who grease palms or flatter to get things done. Or rule benders who are always willing to end-run the chain of command or find a shortcut or a workaround. Yes, tenacity and creativity are important, but most people prefer to steer clear of steamrollers and slick politicians, and very few want to risk getting tangled up in unnecessary trouble.

Most people prefer instead to go to colleagues who know how to work professionally and methodically within the system, follow the rules, and stay in alignment with the chain of command. Things tend to work out so much better that way

I’ve spent years trying to figure out what it is about these go-to people that makes them so special. What is it that these go-to people really have in common, fundamentally?

In the end, the answer is deceptively simple: they are truly committed to *servicing others*. Stop focusing on what other people can do for you and focus instead on what you can do for other people. Make yourself super valuable to others. The more value you add, the more truly invested others become in your success and that’s how go-to-ism creates an upward spiral. That’s really what the book is all about.

Q2. Most people, nowadays, serve a seemingly unlimited number of “internal customers” at work, in addition to their boss and their immediate colleagues. They are inundated by requests for help from colleagues all over the organization chart. This leads some to say or think those common refrains “you are not my boss” and “that’s not my job.” What would you say to those people?

A: I have news for you: this *is* your real job now. Navigating collaborative relationships is not going away.

Whatever your role, wherever you work—in a restaurant, store, bank, accounting firm, hospital, school, construction site, or battlefield—your job now is shared services. And so is just about everybody else’s.

Everybody at work is your “customer” now. And you are theirs. Up, down, sideways, and diagonal. Of course, collaboration itself is not revolutionary. Collaboration is as old as human civilization. In today’s context, the “collaboration revolution” is just a fancy way of describing the need for more and more people to work more and more closely together, more and more regularly, at all levels, in support of each other.

The difference between yesterday and today is that siloes made the occasional collaborative work much easier and clearer. Everybody knew who they ultimately had to answer to. Most were able to simply keep their heads down and do their jobs within their own organizational reporting line, for the most part—their own team, department, or location.

Today, that’s all changed. While most employees are still organized in siloes, at least on paper, their day-to-day working relationships are all over the organization chart. The speed and complexity of work requires so many more interactions.

More and more, to get your own job done, you and everyone else will be forced to manage directly many more working relationships than before, with a much wider range of colleagues in a much greater diversity of positions, many without clear lines of authority: up, down, sideways, and diagonal.

Q3. The subtitle of this book is “win influence, beat overcommitment, and get the right things done.” What do you mean by “winning influence?”

A: Authority is official power—position power in an established hierarchy, within an organization with rules and resources. Authority gives you the power to make decisions and enforce them through control over rewards and punishments. If you have authority, then people do things for you because they’re required to comply; this makes authority a highly resource-intensive enterprise because it needs monitoring and policing.

Influence, on the other hand, is less conventionally powerful than authority. It comes without position, rules, or control over rewards and punishments. Yet it is infused with unofficial power that can prove every bit as potent as the official variety, and even more so. Influence is the power that others invest in you because they want you to have it. It is a function of what other people think of you and how they feel about you.

If you have *real* influence, then people do things for you because they want to. It costs nothing because there is no enforcement required. Plus, people tend to work smarter, faster, and with a much better attitude when doing things because they want to do them.

Real influence is the Holy Grail for the go-to person. When you are known for delivering for people on time, on spec, with a great attitude, consistently, then people want to go to you and people want to contribute to your success.

Q4. How do you define overcommitment, and why is it an increasing issue in today's workplace?

A: People try so hard to be the go-to person that they end up saying yes, yes, yes to everything and then they become overcommitted. Everybody is competing for limited resources, human resources. There is competition for your time and their time. None of you will get everything done. At some point, you are bound to let each other down. Nonetheless, you keep saying yes to each other, because everything is "urgent and important."

As everyone gets more and more overcommitted, the chances of things going wrong start increasing. Delays become inevitable. Communications slip through the cracks. People misunderstand each other or lose track of specifications. As more things go wrong, everybody has more delays and mistakes to deal with, so everybody's overcommitment just keeps getting worse.

The collaboration revolution has meant that everyone at work is inundated with more requests from others in the organization, they are responsible for managing relationships with others over whom they have no formal authority, and "everything is your job." Sadly, even the best attitude and most diligent work ethic won't be enough to keep overcommitment syndrome at bay. Nobody can work enough hours with a big enough smile to do everything for everybody all the time.

Q5. How has the "collaboration revolution" redefined working relationships for everyone?

A: Some say all this new collaboration is nothing more than good old-fashioned teamwork—at a much-heightened scope, frequency, and intensity—brought about by technology, globalization, and decades of restructuring and reengineering. But there's more to it than that.

First, there's the macroeconomic situation: today's world is more highly interconnected, knowledge driven, and fiercely competitive. In ways that are unprecedented in history, even

very small organizations are plugged into global networks of potential vendors, partners, and customers.

Second, while it's true that employers continue to restructure and reengineer for speed and flexibility as work becomes more complex, the result is more dramatic than simply heightened teamwork. Layers of management have been eliminated. Managers are now handed a wide expanse of control in which reporting relationships change with the wind. Meantime, most employees find themselves in short-term project teams on top of their regular jobs. In short, everybody's trying to do more and more while leveraging the same limited resources they've always had.

Things are changing so quickly for businesses—customer needs, competitive threats, regulations, trade laws—that it's a full-time job just to orchestrate coordinated responses that jibe with company strategy. That requires a shift to wholesale collaboration within the organization, as far down the chain of command as possible. Such work environments—no longer hypothetical or futuristic, but alive and well—require everybody to deal directly with anybody and everybody, every step of the way, even though they don't report to each other or, for the most part, to each other's boss.

Q6. Another reason managing relationships at work has become so tricky is many people are now interfacing with colleagues in other departments or other teams, all across the traditional chain-of-command. How can anyone—at any level—effectively manage these relationships without causing more problems?

A: This is what I call “the authority conundrum.” The goal is to empower collaboration throughout the organization as far down the chain of command as possible. But when there's a problem and someone is left to work things out at their own level, by definition nobody has the power of rank to resolve things swiftly and efficiently. And the conundrum emerges even when you are dealing with people in diagonal roles—up or down. One person might have a higher rank, but no one has direct authority, which complicates the relationship even more.

The answer is *alignment*. How you align yourself in terms of decision making and support—and with whom—is the first core mechanism of becoming indispensable at work. Know what's required and what's allowed—*up and down the chain of command*—before you try to work things out at your own level. You have to go vertical before you go sideways or diagonal: ensure alignment on priorities, ground rules, marching orders, and every next step through regular structured communication with everyone and anyone involved.

Q7. A lot of people will say they feel burned out and overcommitted because they “don't know how to say no” to their colleagues. What is your advice for those people?

A: No matter how much you sugar coat ‘no’ it is still no and nobody wants to hear no. So I really don't think it is about how to say ‘no,’ but rather when. It's all about timing and logic.

And it's not just about when to say no, but also about *how to say yes*. For every ask, the answer, at core, is either yes or no. Often, the answer—yes or no—is simply not within your discretion to make. The decision has already been made—implicitly or explicitly—by your boss or someone else further up the chain of command.

That's why alignment is so important. Knowing what decisions are not for you to make is like having guardrails. Guardrails can be very empowering. Once you really understand the constraints, what is not within your discretion, it becomes clear what is.

Every decision about yes and no really comes down to how you're going to spend your time. Decisions about yes and no are all about opportunity cost:

- Every bad no is a missed opportunity or a delayed and soured opportunity if the no gets overturned.
- Every bad yes is a waste of time, energy, and money that will crowd out a better opportunity.
- Every good no—or not yet—makes room for a better opportunity.
- Every good yes is a chance to make the most of a good opportunity and serve others by adding value and building your real influence.

Q8. You advocate adopting a service mindset as a way to build influence in the workplace, but how do you do that without getting overcommitted?

A: Therein lies the real secret of the go-to person. Yes, you have to be committed to service, but you have to play the long game. That means making the right decisions every step of the way.

Being committed to serving others does not mean doing everything for everybody all of the time. That is a good way to render yourself useless, or at best inconsistent. Then people might appreciate your efforts and intent, but they certainly will not want to go-to you. So, the sort of influence you have will not be the real enduring influence of the go-to person, but rather the sort of influence of the generous but not very effective person.

Yes, you must lead from wherever you are, but if you are not in charge, then first you must align up the chain of command and make sure your people stay aligned too. Yes, you want to say yes, but you cannot do everything for everybody, so you have to make good decisions. Maybe you can outwork everyone, but you have to work smart or else you will not get the right things done the right ways. You can take on more and more responsibility, but you have to get stuff done or else you are just making yourself into a log-jam. You must build up relationships with people at work, but it's not about politics or best friends at work, it's about getting better and better at working together.

That's what real service looks like in the real world. The people who are able to relentlessly add value in service to others are the ones who put rhyme and reason into everything they do.

The long game of real influence is a generous, other-centered focus that adds value to every interaction. And, in turn, the value you add:

- Makes the other person more valuable, including *to you*, instantly and over time
- Contributes to more successful and fruitful interactions as well as better short- and long-term outcomes
- Builds up your reputation as a true servant to others

If you understand the mathematics of real influence—and believe in it—you can make yourself incredibly rich in a very potent source of power by dedicating yourself to serving others, moment by moment, in every interaction.

Q9. You're certainly not the first person to say "work smart." What does working smart mean to you?

A: Too many people make the mistake of thinking that the key to being a go-to person is being the hardest worker. And hard work is very important, of course. But if you work really hard at doing the wrong things or doing things wrong, you are not adding value.

That doesn't mean you can work only in your areas of passion and strength, a popular aphorism in management circles, but not very realistic in the real world. It does mean, whatever you have to do, you had better take the time to get really good at it.

What I mean by "work smart" is working to add the most value, which means three things:
professionalize everything you do,
specialize in what you do best, and
steadily expand your repertoire of specialties.

You cannot be great (or even good) at everything. But you need to get good at the things you need to do, so that means learn proven best practices, master repeatable solutions, create job aids. That's how you get good at something.

Then, once you get good at something, try to specialize, so you can spend as much of your time doing that stuff as you possibly can. That means, know what you want to be known for.

Make yourself so very much in-demand when it comes to your growing list of specialties that it truly makes no sense whatsoever for you to spend time doing things that are not your specialty.

Of course, you will have to do things that are not your specialty. If you find yourself doing them a lot, you had better stop, get really good at them (professionalize) and then add them to your specialties.

Q10. In this book, you point out that being a go-to person is not about being the busiest person, with the longest to-do list, but rather being the most effective, with the most concrete results. You say one of the most important marks of the go-to person is to “finish what you start.” Please explain.

A: In a collaboration revolution workplace, where the lines of authority are unclear and priorities become muddled, almost everyone worth their salt will tell you they're “always juggling.” Often, they say it as if it's something to be proud of, proof that they are super busy with lots of “very important work.”

And it's true: today you do need to work cross-functionally and handle a long and diverse list of responsibilities and projects. But that's precisely why juggling doesn't work. The busier you are and the heavier your workload, the less you can *afford* to be a juggler. If you are always juggling, you are bound to start dropping balls.

If you want to be indispensable at work, you need to be known for executing on one important thing after another very well, very fast, all day long. That means purposefully contributing to the value of those things—be they meetings, emails, conversations, research, whatever—by giving them your full, focused attention.

That's why, you don't just need a to-do list. You need a DO TODAY list. What are you going to finish, today? Often that means carving up work into smaller chunks, so they can be completed in the amount of focused execution time you have available.

That's also why, you don't just need a schedule. You need to focus on the GAPS IN YOUR SCHEDULE. Those gaps are your opportunity for do-not-disturb focused execution time. Most people need larger chunks of focused execution time.

Smaller chunks of work and larger chunks of time. Like eating an elephant. One bite at a time. Bite, chew, swallow. How many bites can you eat in one sitting?

Q11. Of course, lots of people want to be a go-to person. It seems like many people succeed at being the go-to person for some period of time, but then they fizzle out. They start disappointing people and then people stop wanting to go to them. Why is that?

A: Once people realize that there are no short-cuts to being the go-to person for the long-term, that service to others is the key, they are immediately in danger of succumbing to overcommitment syndrome.

If you are smart, you realize quickly that you cannot be a true go-to person just by being great at the technical aspects of your job. Relationships are critical. But you cannot build the kind of relationships you need by working around the system, sidestepping rules, playing politics or making friends with the right people. You cannot make yourself powerful just by being a steamroller who won't take no for an answer. Nobody will want you to be successful and

powerful either if you turn everything you do into a favor that you add up on a ledger tally, and expect something in return quid-pro-quo style.

Once you realize that service to others, adding value for others, is the key to being a go-to person, then you face a whole new set of challenges: You are in danger of trying to do everything for everybody. You are in danger of saying yes, yes, yes until you are overwhelmed. You try to outwork everybody. Add more and more responsibilities to your to-do list. And soon you are overcommitted.

Maybe you start dropping the ball. And people take note that your work is not as consistently reliable as it was.

Maybe you get burned out and hide for a while. I call that “siege mentality,” when you start saying no, no, no to everyone and everything. It is understandable, but it is no way to be a go-to person.

That’s why being a go-to person consistently over time is as complicated and difficult to maintain as it is deceptively simple at its core.

Q 12. Building one’s influence is, of course, primarily about relationship building. What are your thoughts on playing workplace politics or building personal rapport in the workplace?

A: Workplace politicking and personal rapport are not good business reasons for making decisions or taking actions in the workplace. They are complications at best and, at worst, can lead you to make the wrong decisions or take the wrong actions. In the real-world ethics of real influence, the best politics in the workplace—and the best way to protect personal relationships with coworkers—is to stay focused on the work. There are a few reasons for this.

First, sometimes you must make judgment calls that your “friends” at work don’t appreciate. Then those people might say, “Gee, I thought we were friends.” Then the friendship suffers, and as a result your entire working relationship suffers.

Second, most people, if they want your respect, are going to be attuned to flattery and see it for what it is: manipulation. Nobody wants to be known for making decisions because you’re their puppet master. It makes everyone look bad.

Third, if you build a reputation for basing your own judgment calls on personal bias—trying to make certain people happy, regardless of what the best business decision might be—your judgment is going to become worthless.

Q13. You mention building an “upward spiral of real influence” in your book. What do you mean by that?

A: When you reject false influence and instead let yourself be guided by real-influence thinking—always doing what’s right, in the right order, and putting service to others first—you conduct yourself in such a way that things get better, right away. And you make other people really want to rely on you and want to do things for you.

Go-to-ism describes an essential belief: that serving others very well is what being indispensable is all about. The greatest source of social power—real influence—comes from being a person whom others want to go to in order to get their needs met. Serving others is what makes you the kind of person others want to help succeed. This is not an exchange, but rather actions taken because others respect who you are and how you conduct yourself. As a result of your real influence, others want you to be powerful because your power helps them get their needs met and potentially makes them more powerful, too.

That’s how you build the upward spiral.

Q14. Is go-to-ism only a strategy for lower-level employees, or those without formal managerial or leadership influence in an organization?

A: Every day I tell people that a big part of go-to-ism is going out of your way to find high-potential individuals at every level in all parts of the organization. And then you invest some of your own time and energy in building them up.

If you are anybody’s boss, part of your job is helping your people get better. You owe it to them to be a coaching-style or teaching-style leader: Spelling out expectations at every step; following up; guiding, directing, supporting; tracking performance; troubleshooting; problem solving; and providing course- correcting feedback.

What are you doing to build up your direct reports? What about those who want to be go-to people but are really struggling? Try helping them get better at their jobs and to go the extra mile. Teach them how to work faster, smarter, and finish what they start. Show them by example how to do those things with a better attitude. Encourage them to learn and grow and aim for the next level.

Q15. The title of this book is “The Art of Being Indispensable at Work.” Do you think the strategies in this book only apply to workplace relationships?

In any human relationship, the key to real influence is adding value to others. To really add value consistently over time, you can’t do things just to please others in the short term, you have to play the long game. That means doing the right things for the right reasons. That means playing by the rules. That means making good decisions. That means getting really good at whatever you do and trying to specialize in the things you do best. It means finish what you

start -- -get things done. It means keep building up the relationship by getting better and better at whatever you do together. It means being valuable to others and helping others be more valuable.

About the Author

Bruce Tulgan is the best-selling author of *It's Okay to Be the Boss* and the founder and CEO of RainmakerThinking, a management research and training firm. His newest book, *The Art of Being Indispensable at Work*, is available July 21 from Harvard Business Review Press. You can follow Bruce on Twitter @BruceTulgan or visit his website at rainmakerthinking.com.

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The Art of Being Indispensable at Work: Win Influence, Beat Overcommitment, and Get the Right Things Done (Harvard Business Review Press, 2020)



One-sentence bio: Bruce Tulgan is the best-selling author of numerous books including *It's Okay to Be the Boss* and the founder and CEO of RainmakerThinking, a management research, training, and consulting firm.

Medium bio: Bruce Tulgan is the best-selling author of *It's Okay to Be the Boss* and the CEO of RainmakerThinking, the management research, consulting and training firm he founded in 1993. All of his work is based on 27 years of intensive workplace interviews and has been featured in thousands of news stories around the world. Bruce's newest book, *The Art of Being Indispensable at Work*, is available July 21 from Harvard Business Review Press. You can follow Bruce on Twitter @BruceTulgan or visit his website at rainmakerthinking.com.

Long bio: Bruce Tulgan is internationally recognized as one of the leading experts on leadership and management. He is a best-selling author, an adviser to business leaders all over the world, and a sought-after keynote speaker and management trainer. Since founding

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Bruce's newest book, *The Art of Being Indispensable at Work*, is available July 21 from Harvard Business Review Press.

His other books include the best-selling *It's Okay to Be the Boss*, *The 27 Challenges Managers Face*, and *Not Everyone Gets a Trophy*. Bruce's work is based on nearly three decades of intensive workplace interviews and has been featured in thousands of news stories around the world. His writing has also appeared in Harvard Business Review, BusinessWeek, HR Magazine, the New York Times, the Los Angeles Times, and USA Today. He holds a sixth-degree black belt in Okinawan Uechi-Ryu Karate Do, making him a master in that style. He lives in Whitneyville, Connecticut with his wife Debby Applegate, who won the 2007 Pulitzer Prize for Biography for her book *The Most Famous Man in America: The Biography of Henry Ward Beecher*.

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