

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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