

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 *serving 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.

Contact

Press enquiries, please contact:

Liz Richards, Director of Creative Content, RainmakerThinking

lizr@rainmakerthinking.com

(203) 772-2002, x110