



# WISDOM, INC.

26 BUSINESS VIRTUES

THAT TURN

ORDINARY PEOPLE

INTO EXTRAORDINARY

LEADERS



**Seth Godin**

FOREWORD BY ZIG ZIGLAR

# WISDOM, INC.

*Seth Godin*



HarperBusiness

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My parents, teachers, friends, and my wife, Helene, have helped me realize that the more you put into life, the more you get out of living. I hope that some of their insight comes through to you.

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# FOREWORD

In this book, Seth Godin has literally written “something for everyone.” That sounds fairly presumptuous for a foreword, but he has compiled information which will be invaluable to anyone serious about being, doing and having the good things in life. I firmly believe that you’ve got to be before you can do, and you must do before you can have.

The research Seth has done on the values, qualities and attributes which are considered critical for success by people who are successful is impressive. He has identified qualities that will be helpful, whether an individual is a household executive, a college professor, salesperson, member of the military, physician, coach, or simply “good old Joe,” trying to make the best of life.

Outstanding executives around the country have decreed that ethics, teamwork, honesty, curiosity, hard work, intelligence, self-motivation and a sense of humor all are important. These qualities, when developed and applied, will help anyone acquire more of the things money will buy and all of the things money won’t buy.

Here is a book that will be helpful to you. The book is easy reading and virtually every page contains usable information. Those who apply the message daily in their personal and family life, as well as in their career, will benefit enormously. You will want to read it, and keep it handy for reference. *Wisdom, Inc.* is a major contribution toward achieving balanced success.

Zig Ziglar

# PREFACE

When I was twelve, my father taught me how to ski.

The first few lessons were pretty easy. I had absurdly short skis, and I quickly learned how to do parallel turns and traverse.

Then I plateaued. I could ski but not very well. I'd lean back and head down the slope but I felt all the excitement of riding a bicycle.

"Lean forward," my dad would say.

Leaning forward struck me as a ridiculous concept. I was already going down a steep hill—actually, more like a mountain. Leaning forward seemed like a maneuver that would surely lead to hurtling over a cliff and definite serious injury.

After a few weeks of fighting my dad's advice, I happened to catch some ski racing on "Wide World of Sports." "These guys really know how to ski," I said to myself. "How do they do it?" I watched carefully, and soon learned the trick: they all leaned forward.

Turns out that leaning forward is the secret of skiing. When you lean forward, you commit to the slope. Instead of coasting, you carve your turns on the mountain. The stakes get higher—the decisions that you make each second become crucial. You are more fully engaged with the sport and with yourself.

Unfortunately, most skiers never learn to lean forward. Leaning back is easier, simpler, safer. It's more natural. But it leads to mediocre skiing.

I haven't skied in a while, but working on this book made me think a lot about that early lesson. Because this is a book about leaning forward. It's about how to change your attitude at work in a way that your bosses, co-workers, and employees will notice and appreciate.

That may sound simple. It is. But there's absolutely nothing easy about changing attitudes. Just as I resisted my father's "simple" instruction to lean forward, you're likely to let fear and inertia keep you from changing your approach to work.

It doesn't have to be that way. Stop for a minute. Look around your workplace. Find the people who are engaged, happy, motivated. Aren't

they also the ones getting the best projects, the fastest promotions, the most job security? Chances are, they're leaning forward.

Nearly every business book written in the last twenty years identifies attitude as a crucial element in a company's success. When employees are engaged, committed and motivated, a company's profit, market share, and long term growth potential go off the charts.

Something else happens as well. Employees' lives are changed.

A long time ago, I decided that life's too short to waste even one day sleepwalking through a deadend job, checking your watch, and waiting for the next coffee break or the end of the day or for the weekend. This book is your wake-up call. Make a commitment to adopting the virtues and attitudes outlined in the following pages. Try it for thirty days.

If you do, you'll enjoy your job more. You'll enjoy your family more. You'll have more energy. You'll be leaning forward, racing down the ski slope of life, feeling fully alive. Your life will change. Mine did.

Send me e-mail and let me know how the book helped you. Meanwhile, I'll see you on the mountain!

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# INTRODUCTION

Imagine for a minute that you own a really first-class restaurant. You and your investors have spent more than \$800,000, to lease and renovate a space, train the staff, and advertise. You've been open three months and business is still a little slow.

At five o'clock one Saturday a good friend of yours, who works at the city paper, calls. In hushed tones, he says he just heard that the paper's restaurant critic is dining at your restaurant tonight. Incognito of course. A bad review could wipe you out; four stars could mean a full house for years.

So what would you do? What would you tell your waiters and waitresses, your maitre d', your chef? How would you want people to behave, the food to look, the restaurant to feel?

Now, here's a better question: Wouldn't you want it to be that way *every* night?

You can bet that on this particular Saturday night every member of your restaurant staff is on his/her toes waiting for the restaurant critic to arrive. But once the pressure's off, once the boss looks the other way, most people have a natural tendency to coast a little.

This book is the result of a survey we sent to more than 20,000 mid-level and top managers around the country, asking them, in essence, what would keep that restaurant staff performing as if a critic was in the house every night—whether or not the boss was there. What qualities would they seek and encourage in employees and in themselves to help their companies succeed? What separates an exceptional employee from a mediocre one? What are the most important business virtues?

## THE SURVEY

Exactly one survey respondent, a business owner from South Dakota, checked *well-groomed* as an important virtue. The same person was one of only six who checked *punctual*. Not a single soul said *humble*, but then people who look for *humble* probably aren't humble themselves. Read on for further tidbits culled from the hundreds of questionnaires we received.

Our quest for virtues began with the help of the leading executive recruiting firm, Ward Howell International, Inc. Chairman John Raynolds sent out 8,000 letters to top business executives nationwide. He asked them to fill out the one-page survey reprinted on page 7.

In addition, the *Journal of Business Strategy*, a magazine with a circulation of 15,000, ran a full-page survey for readers to tear out and return.

We didn't know what to expect. We had no preconceived agenda. As the responses came in via fax and mail, it wasn't only their sheer volume that impressed us. It soon became clear that we had created a lightning rod for a discussion of values in the workplace. People were very eager to share their ideas on the subject of business virtues. We were stunned by the thought and time shown by the answers, considering the hectic schedules most of these executives maintain. When busy executives

take time out to fill in a survey, it must be because they are genuinely intrigued with the subject. Many wrote variations on the theme of "This is a great idea" or "I can't wait to read this book" or "A much needed book." Others picked up the phone to find out more about the project. Still others agreed to talk with us in depth about their answers.

One enthusiastic respondent even brought the survey to his church in Greenwich, Connecticut. The minister there made it the focus of an ongoing weekly discussion group. Soon church members were debating the difference between *ethical* and *responsible*, both in their personal and in their work lives.

From IBM to NBC, from Alcoa to Colgate-Palmolive, some of America's top corporations are represented in this survey. We heard from those in most major industries, including financial services, communications, consumer products, health care, education, and manufacturing. In terms of management levels, there were 181 vice presidents, 176 presidents, 90 directors, and 67 CEOs or COOs, for a total of 524 out of about 700 respondents.

Plenty of small business owners and entrepreneurs were interested in virtues as well. In fact, we could almost guess which category respondents represented from simply glancing at their answers. The buttoned-down types tended to stress ethical, honest, and teamwork oriented. Their entrepreneurial counterparts liked curious, creative, and proactive.

Although responses came from every state, we didn't find any particular geographic weighting toward one virtue over another. For example, if stereotypes are to be believed, we might assume that Californians would check *balanced lifestyle* more often than New Yorkers. They didn't. New York must be catching up (or vice versa). The survey contained absolutely no geographical clichés at all.

When we ranked virtues by percentage the top ten turned out to be:

- 49% Ethics
- 38% Teamwork
- 36% Honesty
- 35% Curiosity
- 27% Hard work
- 26% Intelligence
- 22% Self-motivation
- 16% Sense of humor
- 16% Initiative
- 15% Creativity

Regardless of the virtues chosen, our respondents were passionate in their responses. Over and over we read identical descriptions of different virtues: "Without this virtue, all others are meaningless," or "This virtue encompasses all the others," or "You can teach everything else but this virtue." Apparently, executives are certain that their virtues are the best virtues.

To some extent, such variation is semantic. If you take a look at the original survey list of virtues, it's easy to see that many of them are similar, if not synonymous. One person's *hardworking* is another's *productive*. Or, as the song goes, you say *visionary*, I say *conceptual*, you say *persistent*, I say *tenacious*. In a few cases, we combined responses that we thought truly had identical meanings—instead of poetic license, call it survey prerogative. We realize there are always subtle denotations, but trust our respondents won't mind if we interpreted *attention to detail* to mean *thorough*.

The semantic issue comes up again in looking at what people filled in under *other*—almost every one could be considered the same as one of the virtues we did list: effective, experimental,

caring, analytical, adaptable, dependable, efficient, trustworthy, good communicator, entrepreneurial, customer focused, flexible, positive, knows to ask for help.

Our personal favorites, however, were: *horse sense* and *lucky*. We should all be so...

## TOWARD VIRTUOSITY

The book is organized around twenty-six virtues, each described in anecdotes, quotes, statistics, and examples. Included for many virtues are summaries of our survey findings for that particular virtue. Each chapter concludes with a "Toward Virtuosity" section in which we suggest a few concrete ways to practice and strengthen the virtue. We purposely kept these tips and exercises low-key, gentle, and open-ended. We think you'll find them both effective and fun.

There's no need to read straight through from beginning to end. This book rewards the browser equally richly. We suggest you start by looking over the reprinted survey and listing your own top ten most important virtues. Then look up each one and see how others rate them and apply them.

Or pick the three traits you think you need to develop and use the practical steps toward mastery. If you could do a much better job if you were in on brainstorming meetings, volunteer for the next one. If you're nuts about people being organized, it's important that you share that data.

Can you measure these virtues? Why not? It's not as easy as computing how many widgets are assembled per hour, but it's not that tough either. The Toward Virtuosity section contains ways to benchmark your virtues. So you can use this book as a reference for giving and receiving job performance feedback.

We take for granted that people know they should be thorough and quality conscious and self-motivated. The truth is:

*These virtues aren't easy habits.* If they were, we'd already be practicing them. Business virtues are learned skills. They require effort and lots of feedback and praise in order to flourish. Most employees need a road map, a specific list of what to concentrate on. Such a blueprint of exactly what will make the most impact is rarely offered to a new—or even an older—employee.

But consider: what if your workplace were populated by bosses who encourage employees to go the extra mile for a client, who—for example—reward a cashier for running after a customer who left a twenty-dollar bill when he meant to leave a five? What if America were filled with employees like the Federal Express driver who rented a helicopter to fly over a blocked road to deliver a package? Or the taxi driver in New York who offers passengers magazines to read while they travel?

All you need—all anyone needs—is a book of business virtues. So here it is, a handbook for getting hooked on the satisfaction and thrill of good work...better work...the *best* work.

## 2 The Book of Business Virtues: Survey\*

**N**ext year, HarperCollins, publishers of *Reengineering the Corporation* and *In Search of Excellence*, will publish *The Book of Business Virtues*. This is the first book that attempts to codify the important habits, attitudes and skills that employers look for in an employee.

We need your help in order to make our survey as accurate as possible. The thoughts, insights and contributions of survey respondents will make the book more effective. Will you take a minute to answer these two questions and fax us back your response?

- 1 Of these 'virtues,' which five are the most important to you in employees and co-workers? (Please circle five.)

Always Learning	Fearless	Organized	Sincere
Attention to Detail	Focused	Patient	Stamina
Balanced Lifestyle	Generous	Perceptive	Strategic
Challengeable	Goal Oriented	Persistent	Teamwork Oriented
Conceptual	Good Self Esteem	Personable	Tenacious
Conscientious	Grace Under Pressure	Proactive	Thorough
Consistent	Hard Working	Productive	Time Aware
Creative	Honest	Punctual	Visionary
Curious	Humble	Resourceful	Well Groomed
Driven	Independent	Respected	Willing to Take the Blame
Empathetic	Intelligent	Responsible	Willing to Dream
Energetic	Knows to Ask for Help	Self Motivated	Other _____
Engaged	Leader	Sense of Humor	
Ethical	Loyal	Sense of Ownership	

- 2 Please choose one virtue and tell us *why* you think it's important to your company.

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**Share your thoughts with us:**

If you have stories, anecdotes or ideas about the role of virtues in the workplace, we'd love to hear from you. Please attach them to this survey.

Attach your business card here or type below:

Your name \_\_\_\_\_  
 Title \_\_\_\_\_  
 Company \_\_\_\_\_  
 Address \_\_\_\_\_  
 City \_\_\_\_\_ State \_\_\_\_\_ Zip \_\_\_\_\_  
 Phone \_\_\_\_\_ FAX \_\_\_\_\_

**FAX YOUR RESPONSE BY DECEMBER 15.**

Please return to Seth Godin Productions. Fax: (914) 693-8132. Mail: Box 660, Dobbs Ferry, NY 10522. Feel free to call us at (914) 693-7711.

\*Note: The title on the original survey, *The Book of Business Virtues*, was subsequently changed to *Wisdom, Inc.*





# *Attention to* DETAIL

A white tablecloth with one tiny ink spot on it is more than 99 percent clean. But every person who sees it will remember the stain, not the rest of the cloth.