

THE DIP



THE DIP

A LITTLE BOOK THAT TEACHES YOU
WHEN TO QUIT (AND WHEN TO STICK)

Seth Godin
Illustrated by Hugh Macleod

PORTFOLIO

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Being the Best in the World Is Seriously Underrated

I FEEL LIKE GIVING UP.

Almost every day, in fact. Not all day, of course, but there are moments.

My bet is that you have those moments, too. If you're the kind of high-achieving, goal-oriented person who finds herself reading a book like this, you're probably used to running into obstacles. Professional obstacles, personal obstacles, even obstacles related to personal fitness or winning board games.

Most of the time, we deal with the obstacles by persevering. Sometimes we get discouraged and turn to inspirational writing, like stuff from Vince Lombardi: "Quitters never win and winners never quit." Bad advice. Winners quit all the time. *They just quit the right stuff at the right time.*

Most people quit. They just don't quit successfully. In fact, many professions and many marketplaces profit from quitters—society assumes you're going to quit. In fact, businesses and organizations count on it.

If you learn about the systems that have been put in place that encourage quitting, you'll be more likely to beat them. And once you understand the common sinkhole that trips up so many people (I call it the Dip), you'll be one step closer to getting through it.

Extraordinary benefits accrue to the tiny minority of people who are able to push just a tiny bit longer than most.

Extraordinary benefits also accrue to the tiny majority with the guts to quit early and refocus their efforts on something new.

In both cases, it's about being the best in the world. About getting through the hard stuff and coming out on the other side.

Quit the wrong stuff.

Stick with the right stuff.

The Best in the World

Hannah Smith is a very lucky woman. She's a law clerk at the Supreme Court. She's the best in the world.

Last year, more than forty-two thousand people graduated from law school in the United States. And thirty-seven of them were awarded Supreme Court clerkships.

Those thirty-seven people are essentially guaranteed a job for life after they finish their year with the Court. Top law firms routinely pay a signing bonus of \$200,000 or more to any clerk they are able to hire. Clerks go on to become partners, judges, and senators.

There are two things worth noting here. The first is that Hannah Smith isn't lucky at all. She's smart and focused and incredibly hardworking.

And the second thing? That any one of the forty-two thousand people who graduated from law school last year could have had Hannah's job. Except they didn't. Not because they weren't smart enough or because they came from the wrong family. No, the reason that most of them didn't have a chance is that somewhere along the way they quit. They didn't quit high school or college or law school. Instead, they quit in their quest to be the best in the world because the cost just seemed too high.

This is a very short book about a very important topic: quitting. Believe it or not, quitting is often a great strategy, a smart way to manage your life and your career. Sometimes, though, quitting is exactly the wrong thing to do. It turns out that there's a pretty simple way to tell the difference.

In addition to being smart and focused and incredibly hardworking, Hannah Smith is also a quitter. In order to get as far as she's gotten, she's quit countless other pursuits. You really can't try to do everything, especially if you intend to be the best in the world.

Before we start on the quitting, though, you probably need to be sold on why being the best in the world matters so much.

The Surprising Value of Being the Best in the World

Our culture celebrates superstars. We reward the product or the song or the organization or the employee that is number one. The rewards are heavily skewed, so much so that it's typical for #1 to get ten times the benefit of #10, and a hundred times the benefit of #100.

According to the International Ice Cream Association, these are the top ten flavors of ice cream

Vanilla

Chocolate

Butter Pecan

Strawberry

Neapolitan

Chocolate Chip

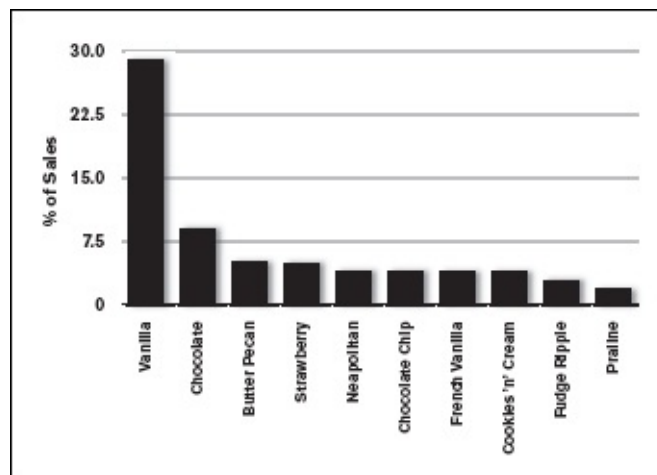
French Vanilla

Cookies 'n' Cream

Fudge Ripple

Praline

You'd be forgiven if you assumed, as you assume with most lists, that the top-ranked flavors did a little bit better than the others. But here's what the distribution really looked like:



It's *always* like this (almost always, anyway). It's called Zipf's law, and it applies to résumés and college application rates and best-selling records and everything in between. Winners win big because the marketplace loves a winner.

Here's another example; these are box-office rankings from a particularly bad week at the movies in August 2006:

Invincible

Talladega Nights: The Ballad of Ricky Bobby

Little Miss Sunshine

Beerfest

World Trade Center

Accepted

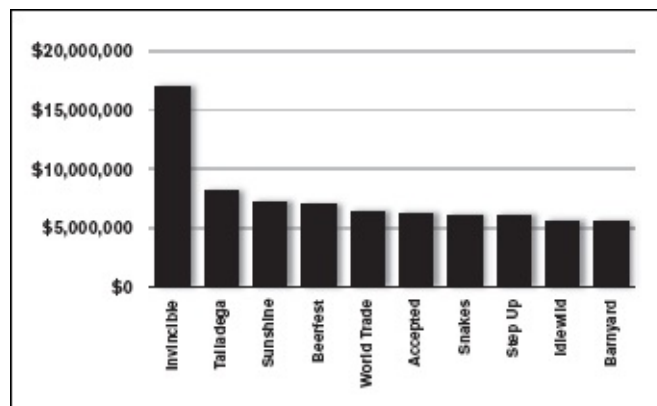
Snakes on a Plane

Step Up

Idlewild

Barnyard

It's hard to feel sorry for the horrible movie *Beerfest*. After all, it came in fourth. But look at the chart of actual revenue:



If you've read Chris Anderson's *The Long Tail*, this isn't news to you. But I don't care about the long tail right now—I want to show you the short head. The short, big, profitable head. That's the juicy share of the market that belongs to the people at the top of the list.

The Reason Number One Matters

People don't have a lot of time and don't want to take a lot of risks. If you've been diagnosed with cancer of the navel, you're not going to mess around by going to a lot of doctors. You're going to head straight for the "top guy," the person who's ranked the best in the world. Why screw around if you get only one chance?

When you visit a new town, are you the sort of person who wants to visit a typical restaurant, or do you ask the concierge for the best place?

When you're hiring someone for your team, do you ask your admin to give you the average résumé, or do you ask him to screen out all but the very best qualified people?

With limited time or opportunity to experiment, we intentionally narrow our choices to those at the top.

You're not the only person who looks for the best choice. Everyone does. As a result, the rewards for being first are enormous. It's not a linear scale. It's not a matter of getting a little more after giving a little more. It's a curve, and a steep one.

The (Real) Reason Number One Matters

The second reason there are such tremendous benefits to being number one is a little more subtle. Being at the top matters because there's room at the top for only a few. *Scarcity makes being at the top worth something.* There are hundreds of brands of bottled water, and they're all mostly the same. So we don't shop around for bottled water. There is no top for bottled water. Champagne is a different story. Dom Pérignon is at or near the top, so we pay extra for it.

Where does the scarcity come from? It comes from the hurdles that the markets and our society set up. It comes from the fact that most competitors quit long before they've created something that makes it to the top. That's the way it's supposed to be. The system depends on it.

The Best in the World?

Anyone who is going to hire you, buy from you, recommend you, vote for you, or do what you want them to do is going to wonder if you're the best choice.

Best as in: best for them, right now, based on what they believe and what they know. And *in the world* as in: their world, the world they have access to.

So if I'm looking for a freelance copy editor, I want the best copy editor in English, who's available, who can find a way to work with me at a price I can afford. That's my *best in the world*. If I want a hernia doctor, I want the doctor who is best because she's recommended by my friends or colleagues and because she fits my picture of what a great doctor is. That, and she has to be in my town and have a slot open. So *world* is a pretty flexible term.

The mass market is dying. There is no longer one best song or one best kind of coffee. Now there are a million micromarkets, but each micromarket still has a *best*. If your micromarket is "organic markets in Tulsa," then that's your world. And being the best in *that* world is the place to be.

Best is subjective. I (the consumer) get to decide, not you. *World* is selfish. It's my definition, not yours. It's the world I define, based on my convenience or my preferences. Be the best in my world and you have me, at a premium, right now.

The world is getting larger because I can now look *everywhere* when I want to find something (or someone). That means that the amount of variety is staggering, and it means I can define my world to be exactly what I have an interest in—and find my preferences anywhere on the planet.

At the same time, the world is getting smaller because the categories are getting more specialized. I can now find the best gluten-free bialys available by overnight shipping. I can find the best risk-management software for my industry, right now, online. I can find the best clothing-optional resort in North America with six clicks of a mouse. So while it's more important than ever to be the best in the world, it's also easier—if you pick the right thing and do it all the way. More places to win, and the stakes are higher, too.

Andy Warhol was the best in the world. So is the Sripraphai Thai restaurant in Queens. So is my editor. So are you, if you want to be. If you're not sold on being the best in the world, you probably don't need the rest of what I'm about to tell you. But if you're sold on being the best, but you've been frustrated in the route you're taking to get there, then you need to start doing some quitting.

The Infinity Problem

The problem with infinity is that there's too much of it.

And in just about every market, the number of choices is approaching infinity. Faced with infinity, people panic. Sometimes they don't buy anything. Sometimes they buy the cheapest one of whatever they're shopping for. Faced with an infinite number of choices, many people pick the market leader. Best-selling books still outsell backlist titles. Web sites highlighted on Digg still get a hundred times as much traffic as ordinary sites. Big insurance companies get clients just because they're big.

The number of job seekers is approaching infinity. So is the number of professional services firms, lawyers, manicure shops, coffee bars, and brands of soap. Better to be the best.



Is That the Best You Can Do?

Job applications in ALL CAPITAL LETTERS. Junk mail with a misspelled name. Salespeople who are eager to open an account, but never follow up. Doctors that don't bother to call to see if a new

medication worked for a long-time patient. People settle. They settle for less than they are capable of. Organizations settle too. For *good enough* instead of *best in the world*.

If you're not going to put in the effort to be my best possible choice, why bother?

Is "Well, no one better showed up" a valid strategy for success? Are you hoping to become a success because you're the only one being considered?

The reason that big companies almost always fail when they try to enter new markets is their willingness to compromise. They figure that because they are big and powerful, they can settle, do less, stop improving something before it is truly remarkable. They compromise to avoid offending other divisions or to minimize their exposure. So they fail. They fail because they don't know when to quit and when to refuse to settle.

The Biggest Mistake They Made in School

Just about everything you learned in school about life is wrong, but the wrongest thing might very well be this: Being well rounded is the secret to success.

When you came home from school with two As, a B+, and three Bs, you were doing just fine. Imagine the poor kid who had an A+ and four Cs. Boy, was he in trouble.

Fast-forward a few decades from those school days, and think about the decisions you make today—about which doctor to pick, which restaurant to visit, or which accountant to hire. How often do you look for someone who is actually quite good at the things you don't need her to do? How often do you hope that your accountant is a safe driver and a decent golfer?

In a free market, we reward the exceptional.

In school, we tell kids that once something gets too hard, move on and focus on the next thing. The low-hanging fruit is there to be taken; no sense wasting time climbing the tree.

From a test-taking book: "Skim through the questions and answer the easiest ones first, skipping ones you don't know immediately." Bad advice. Superstars can't skip the ones they don't know. In fact, the people who are the best in the world specialize at getting really good at the questions they don't know. The people who skip the hard questions are in the majority, but they are not in demand.

Many organizations make sure they've dotted all their i's—they have customer service, a receptionist, a convenient location, a brochure, and on and on—and all of it is mediocre. More often than not, prospects choose someone else—their competition. Those competitors can't perform in some areas, but they're exceptional in the ones that matter.

The Magic of Thinking Quit

Twenty years ago, I read a book that changed my life. It was called *The Magic of Thinking Big*. I actually don't remember anything about the book at all. What I do remember is that in one quick

moment, it changed the way I thought about success.

My hope is that the next page or two might do the same for you. I want to change the way you think about success (and quitting).

Most people will tell you that you need to persevere—to try harder, put in more hours, get more training, and work hard. “Don’t quit!” they implore. But if all you need to do to succeed is not quit, then why do organizations less motivated than yours succeed? Why do individuals less talented than you win?

It involves understanding the architecture of quitting, and, believe it or not, it means quitting a lot more than you do now.

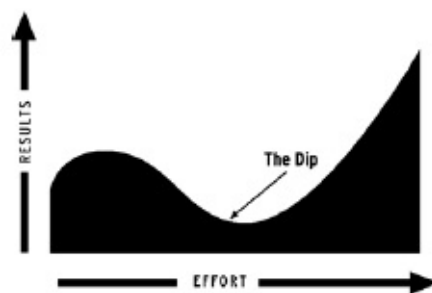
Strategic quitting is the secret of successful organizations. Reactive quitting and serial quitting are the bane of those that strive (and fail) to get what they want. And most people do just that. They quit when it’s painful and stick when they can’t be bothered to quit.

There are two curves that define almost any type of situation facing you as you try to accomplish something. (A couple of minor curves cover the rest.) Understanding the different types of situations that lead you to quit—or that should cause you to quit—is the first step toward getting what you want.

CURVE 1: THE DIP

Almost everything in life worth doing is controlled by the Dip.

It looks like this:



At the beginning, when you first start something, it’s fun. You could be taking up golf or acupuncture or piloting a plane or doing chemistry—doesn’t matter; it’s interesting, and you get plenty of good feedback from the people around you.

Over the next few days and weeks, the rapid learning you experience keeps you going. Whatever your new thing is, it’s easy to stay engaged in it.

And then the Dip happens.

The Dip is the long slog between starting and mastery. A long slog that’s actually a shortcut,

because it gets you where you want to go faster than any other path.

The Dip is the combination of bureaucracy and busywork you must deal with in order to get certified in scuba diving.

The Dip is the difference between the easy “beginner” technique and the more useful “expert” approach in skiing or fashion design.

The Dip is the long stretch between beginner’s luck and real accomplishment.

The Dip is the set of artificial screens set up to keep people like you out.

If you took organic chemistry in college, you’ve experienced the Dip. Academia doesn’t want too many unmotivated people to attempt medical school, so they set up a screen. Organic chemistry is the killer class, the screen that separates the doctors from the psychologists. If you can’t handle organic chemistry, well, then, you can’t go to med school.

At the beginning, when you announce that you’re premed, you get all sorts of positive feedback and support. Your grandmother can’t believe her good fortune! But soon, the incredible grind of organic chemistry kicks in, and you realize you’re doomed.

At trade shows, you see dozens of companies trying to break into an industry. They’ve invested time and money to build a product, to create a marketing organization and rent booth space—all in an attempt to break into a lucrative market. A year later, most of them don’t return. They’re gone, unable to get through the Dip.

The same thing happens to people who dream of the untold riches and power that accrue to the CEO of a Fortune 500 company. Private jets, fancy country clubs, unchecked decision-making power. Who wouldn’t want to live like modern-day royalty? Of course, if you look at the résumé of a typical CEO, you’ll see that he endured a twenty-five-year Dip before landing the job. For a quarter of a century, he needed to suck it up, keep his head down, and do what he was told. He needed to hit his numbers, work longer hours than everyone else, and kiss up to his boss of the moment. Day in and day out, year after year.

It’s easy to be a CEO. What’s hard is getting there. There’s a huge Dip along the way. If it was easy, there’d be too many people vying for the job and the CEOs couldn’t get paid as much, could they? Scarcity, as we’ve seen, is the secret to value. If there wasn’t a Dip, there’d be no scarcity.

IMPORTANT NOTE: Successful people don’t just ride out the Dip. They don’t just buckle down and survive it. No, they lean into the Dip. They push harder, changing the rules as they go. Just because you know you’re in the Dip doesn’t mean you have to live happily with it. Dips don’t last quite as long when you whittle at them.

CURVE 2: THE CUL-DE-SAC

The Cul-de-Sac (French for “dead end”) is so simple it doesn’t even need a chart. It’s a situation where you work and you work and you work and nothing much changes. It doesn’t get a lot better, it

doesn't get a lot worse. It just is.

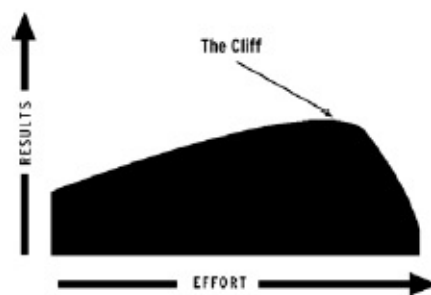
That's why they call those jobs dead-end jobs.

There's not a lot to say about the Cul-de-Sac except to realize that it exists and to embrace the fact that when you find one, you need to get off it, fast. That's because a dead end is keeping you from doing something else. The opportunity cost of investing your life in something that's not going to get better is just too high.

That's it. Two big curves (a bonus, the Cliff, follows). Stick with the Dips that are likely to pan out, and quit the Cul-de-Sacs to focus your resources. That's it.

CURVE 3: THE CLIFF (RARE BUT SCARY)

Cigarettes, it turns out, were redesigned by scientists to be particularly addictive. If you were going to draw a chart of the pleasure of smoking over time, it would look like this:



Except for that nasty drop-off at the end (otherwise known as emphysema), smoking is a marketer's dream come true. Because smoking is designed to be almost impossible to quit, the longer you do it, the better it feels to continue smoking. The pain of quitting just gets bigger and bigger over time. I call this curve a Cliff—it's a situation where you can't quit until you fall off, and the whole thing falls apart.

It's no wonder that people have trouble stopping.

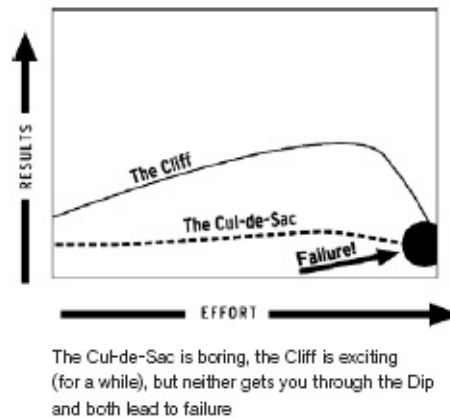
The thing is, a profession in selling isn't like smoking cigarettes. Neither is making it as a singer or building a long-term relationship with someone you care about. Most of the time, the other two curves are in force. The Dip and the Cul-de-Sac aren't linear. They don't spoon feed you with little bits of improvement every day. And they're just waiting to trip you up.

If It Is Worth Doing, There's Probably a Dip

Tennis has a Dip. The difference between a mediocre club player and a regional champion isn't inborn

talent—it's the ability to push through the moments where it's just easier to quit. Politics has a Dip a well—it's way more fun to win an election than to lose one, and the entire process is built around many people starting while most people quit.

The Dip creates scarcity; scarcity creates value.



The Cul-de-Sac and the Cliff Are the Curves That Lead to Failure

If you find yourself facing either of these two curves, you need to quit. Not soon, but right now. The biggest obstacle to success in life, as far as I can tell, is our inability to quit these curves soon enough.

It's easy to complain that the advice in this little book is brain-dead obvious. I mean, who doesn't already know that the secret to success is to be successful, that providing a great product or service is the right thing to do, and that you shouldn't quit in the face of adversity?

You don't. That's the bad news. The good news is that your boss and your competitors don't know either.

I mean, you *know* it, but my guess is that you're not doing anything about it. When it comes right down to it, right down to the hard decisions, are you quitting any project that isn't a Dip? Or is it just easier not to rock the boat, to hang in there, to avoid the short-term hassle of changing paths? What's the point of sticking it out if you're not going to get the benefits of being the best in the world? Are you overinvesting (really significantly overinvesting) time and money so that you have a much greater chance of dominating a market? And if you don't have enough time and money, do you have the guts to pick a different, smaller market to conquer?

Once you're doing those things, *then* you get it.

The Dip Is Where Success Happens

If you haven't already realized it, the Dip is the secret to your success. The people who set out to make

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