

# The Practice Summary

By Seth Godin

Woody Allen once said that '99% of life is showing up.'

*The Practice* is an elegant little handbook that inspires us to stretch and commit ourselves to release creative work into the world. Creative work doesn't come with a guarantee, but there's a pattern of success. Showing up and engaging in the consistent daily practice of creativity is the best way forward.

Author Seth Godin is an entrepreneur, podcaster, and expert in the realm of creativity and creative entrepreneurship. In *The Practice: Shipping Creative Work*, he provides insights for all creative people wanting to change the world through their work.

Godin believes that we're all inherently creative, but deepening our creative capacity takes practice. With the right intention and process, we can learn to overcome "creative blocks," rise to the top of our field, or perhaps turn our passion into a profession. However, creative work isn't easy. The creative process goes hand in hand with fear, doubt, and feeling like an imposter. When it comes to creativity, Godin reminds us that 'Our creative work is too important to be left to how we feel on any given day.' So we need to befriend our inner imposter, let go of perfectionism, embrace criticism, and be grateful for constraints. So if you're looking to boost your creative confidence, overcome your inner imposter, and deepen your creative practice, then this book is just what you need.

We'll briefly explore Godin's take on what it means to be creative, and unpack his practical tips to re-ignite our creative capacity. And then it's yours to share with the world, because, as Godin says, 'It doesn't count if we don't share it.'

## Springing Into Bruce Springsteen

Do you have a creative person who you admire? For Godin, it's "the boss" Bruce Springsteen.

Before his "Glory Days," Springsteen had some difficult early days. The first half of Bruce Springsteen's autobiography makes things abundantly clear – it was skill, not *talent*, that sprung him into stardom. Springsteen's first two albums were commercial failures. Just about everyone dismissed him; audiences walked out, his first agent simply stopped returning his calls, and bandmates gave up and moved on. However, this didn't stop him. Springsteen was a relentless performer. His early performances weren't perfect; the concerts weren't polished, and mistakes were made. But over time, this rawness and authenticity became his drawcard. He put in the work, showed up, and he's now the blue-collar "Boss" fans know and love.

But Springsteen isn't the exception. Almost every legacy artist has taken multiple albums to find their niche. *Outliers* author, Malcolm Gladwell, reminds us that 'the Beatles were a 7-year overnight success by the time they hit the US.'

So when it comes to being creative, irrespective of our industry, this is what we need to remember; *practice* is what counts. Godin puts it like this, 'The careers and working processes of "creatives" are similar – their

output is different, their circumstances are different, and the timing is different, but the practice remains.'

## **Be Creative, Do the Work, and Ship It.**

If you subscribe to Godin's blog, you'll find a new post first thing in the morning. At 4:30 am, Godin writes his blog post and "ships" his work to his audience. That's his daily practice. And he shows up for it, even when he doesn't feel like it.

Godin is a creative professional and a successful one at that. He's the author of 19 best-selling books, the founder of the acclaimed Akimbo workshop platform for creatives and entrepreneurs, and the globally popular 30-day alt MBA course. If anyone has a "creative license" to tell us how to be creative, it's Godin.

Creativity is an inherent human capacity. We just have to be willing to show up for our creativity and be consistent. However, we often walk away from a creative life – a chance to be generous, solve problems, or pursue what we love. There are a number of reasons for this. Perhaps we think creativity is born from a mood or feeling that strikes, or a talent reserved for a chosen few. We treat creativity as a fragile magic trick, or see it as the gift of the muse. Godin believes that this isn't the way it has to be. 'The magic of the creative process,' says Godin, 'Is that there's no magic.' As soon as we can acknowledge there's no magic, it's so much easier and more powerful to do creative work. This work simply comes from committing to do "the work" even when we don't feel like it.

Consistent practice is the birthplace of creativity. And how we approach our practice matters. If we want to improve our inherent creative capacity

or turn our creative passion into a profession, we have to approach our practice in a professional way. We have to show up, do the work, and put ourselves on the hook by shipping it off to our chosen audience. (Even if, at the start, that audience happens to be your mother).

But before we jump into our creative practice and spam our mothers, it's essential that we define "shipping creative work."

*Shipping*: because it doesn't count if you don't share it. *Creative*: because you're not a cog in the system – you're a creative problem-solver and generous leader, who makes things better by producing a new way forward. And *work*: because it's not a hobby. You might get paid for it someday.

Godin's message is simple; creativity takes practice. But don't mistake simple for easy. How often do we find every excuse *not* to put in the creative work and ship it off? So often this is because we seek perfection or we see ourselves as imposters. What's more, we fear stinging critique, or believe there are too many constraints to create and ship our work.

## **Create, Because We're Not Cogs**

Creativity is so misunderstood. Art isn't just painting, drawing, or performing.

According to Godin, art is 'The human act of doing something that might not work. Something generous. Something that will make a difference. Art is what we call it when we're able to create something new that changes someone. No change, no art.'

Creatives, therefore, are generous problem-solvers who provide a different way forward. Creativity isn't just painting, singing, or poetry; it goes much deeper than this. Creativity is how we do our daily work, act in meetings, and how, as leaders, we contribute to society and create change. That's why Godin uses generosity in his definition. He means that we're expending emotional energy and labor to help somebody else.

Importantly, creativity is 'the act of making things better for someone else, by doing something that might not work. It is, by nature, uncertain. If our work becomes too secure and predictable, then it's highly possible that we're not bringing much creativity to what we do. Godin says that we then 'Give into our fears and become a hack, a hustler, or a cog.' He describes a hack as someone who copies without improving on something, a hustler as someone who operates from a selfish position, and a cog, who wants to be generous, but never disrupts the system. Creatives have to be brave and generous. But it doesn't count if it's not shared.

## **Ship The Work**

An important distinction in creativity is that we're creative because we ship our work. It's the routine and structure of shipping that make our creativity powerful.

Generosity is key to Godin's idea of creativity. Shipping is generously sharing our creative work, which helps us fulfill our potential as creative professionals. We create from a place of intention, empathy, and curiosity, and there are two helpful questions to help us be clear on our creative purposes. Who are you trying to reach with this work? And what's this work for?

When we think about who the work is for, we might conclude that it's for everyone. But by trying to please everyone, we please no one. We need to be specific about *who* we wish to serve. Think about your ideal reader, user, or viewer? What do they want, need, or fear? Our audience can either encourage excellence or make us stagnate. They need to push us and extend our thinking. They make us lean into possibility and hold us to meeting our commitments.

Secondly, we have to decide on the function behind our creative work. Is it to entertain, educate, or provoke emotion?

We won't know where we'll end up or what the creative roadmap will look like, but we can be clear on two things. We need to assess *who* we're trying to serve, and *what* we're trying to do. This will establish whether we're shipping for the right reasons and to the right people.

Sharing our work is how we develop our creative potential. Shipping our work is saying, 'Here I made this. It has meaning for me, and I hope it'll be meaningful for you.' Shipping also means that we're accountable for the targets we set, and who we serve. Deadlines are crucial, and we commit to meeting these, even if we don't feel like it. Godin emphasizes that actions matter more than feelings do. Shipping creates space for building courage and is how we improve.

We need to be clear about who we aim to serve, the purpose behind our creative work, and when we ship it. But 'If we don't put in the work, there will be nothing to ship.'

## **"Work." Because It's Not a Hobby**

Godin believes in hobbies, but if we want to get paid for our creative work one day, we have to approach our practice in a professional way. Professionalism means putting in the work and asking for a paycheck.

'Success comes when you do the work. Satisfaction comes when you do the work. Fulfillment comes when you do the work. Doing the work is everything.' Here's where Godin plays hardball. Our practice isn't some kind of preparation for the actual game. The practice *is* the game. The practice is what we do every day when we enter our workspace, shut the door, and sit down to pursue our creative dream. We need to commit at least an hour every day to our practice. Wake up early, go to bed later if you have to, but find the time. If we treat our work as a hobby, then that's all it'll ever be.

Treating our creative outlet as a job also means that we can love what we do *and* get paid. Generosity isn't necessarily working for no charge. We

can still value ourselves as professionals.

## **Be An Imposter**

Have you ever questioned your talent or skills?

Who am I to do this? Surely there's someone better suited, more qualified to do this work? What if this doesn't work? Maybe I'm an imposter. Most of us know this voice well.

To answer the imposter in all of us, yes, it's highly likely that we're not the "best person" in the world to be doing whatever it is we're trying to do. And no, whatever we're embarking on might not work. So yes, we're imposters. And this is a good thing.

The imposter syndrome, a term coined in the late 70s, is the voice in our heads that reminds us we have no place to raise our hand or stand on stage. And it's a voice, that in today's working world, is here to stay. Recent studies estimate that 40% of the workforce has a job requiring creative innovation, human interaction, and decision-making. This means that just under half the working population are likely to, and probably should feel like imposters.



To be creative is to be an imposter. It's inherent in Godin's take on creativity. When we try something "new," with the desire to make something better, we will feel as if we don't know what we're doing and be uncertain if it'll work out. We have no guarantee of success. The path of creativity is such that there's no manual, proven best practices, or go-to rulebook. We discover through doing, and we learn what does and doesn't work.

So perhaps it's time to drop the narrative that there's something wrong with being an imposter. It's a really positive sign that we're innovative.

## **Let Go of Perfectionism**

The dreaded creative block. We've all been there. You'll stare at your computer screen or a blank page and wonder if the muse of creativity will ever visit again. But what amuses Godin is that a creative block is nothing but a cultural construct. It doesn't exist.

Why then do we sometimes feel too uninspired or tense to let our creative energies flow? In a word? Perfectionism.

Perfectionism blocks us from unleashing creativity. If we begin with a perfect idea of what our product or version of our creative work will be, then we're doomed to fail. We'll never know when our work is "perfect" enough to ship, or we'll keep postponing because we're too daunted by the task ahead. We can use the cartoonist, Drew Friedman, as a role model. As a prolific publisher of cartoons in *The New Yorker*, one could have the impression that he would draw a funny sketch in a few minutes, and get paid well for it. That is until you saw the picture of his work desk and the pile of discarded cartoons on it. Our unique discard piles may

have very different content, but we need them nevertheless. If we don't build up a "no pile," we'll never see our "yes pile."

No one is dismissing having high standards, but perfectionism has a different energy. Perfectionism blocks creativity, so when you feel the weight of perfection, give yourself permission to be raw, messy, and uninhibited as you send your creative gifts into the world.

The fear of criticism in part fuels the desire for perfectionism, but if we're going to ship our work, criticism is inevitable and can be embraced instead of feared.

## **Embrace Criticism**

With the best intentions, we ship off our creative work and hope our audience will love it. But, as any artist knows, this isn't always the case. All creative greats have had to deal with criticism. And so do we. But not all criticism is the same.

Good criticism is hard to come by. There's criticism from people with unfulfilled dreams, who then break ours, and those who fear for us, so are well-meaning but negative. Then there are those who are unskilled at constructive criticism or aren't actually our target audience. But "generous critics," as Godin calls them, are priceless. We need to nurture relationships with people who get our intention, take the time to analyze, and give valuable pointers.

These are the people who want us to do well. So seek out the lesser spotted, thoughtful, generous critics, and learn from what they have to say.

## **Creativity Thrives Best Under Constraints**

'Please do this by the end of the day.' A phrase no employee enjoys hearing.

We always have constraints to work within. Godin quotes Susan Kare, who says, 'Constraints don't always hamper creativity.' In fact, they do quite the opposite.

Most of us are probably familiar with Kare's work, even if we don't realize it. Her design of icons for the original Macintosh in 1984 helped people learn to navigate the unfamiliar – the personal computer. When she was working with Apple, she was tasked to design the interface for the computer but had to do so under strict constraints. She was given a 32x32 grid to fill in the computer's icons, the design had to be black and white, and she had to work with the low resolution of an early computer screen. But working under these technical constraints made it easy for her to make quick decisions. She didn't have to agonize over a myriad of colors or choose one of many fonts to use. Technical constraints helped her understand what was possible and to work from there.

Having crafted seven thousand blog posts, Godin puts constraints on how he writes them. If his posts were three-page essays, he certainly wouldn't be able to live up to his daily blog regime.

Constraints are essential because they force us to make choices and act on them. There will always be trade-offs, and we'll make errors. However, mistakes and corrections are simply part of the process of inventing, developing, and bringing to life what hasn't been done before.

## **In Conclusion**

Success isn't about the output; it's about how we show up for the process. As Godin's friend and author Elizabeth Gilbert says, 'We can only measure our worth by our dedication to our path, not by our successes or failures.' It's our daily dedication towards our creative pursuit that matters.

Tomorrow morning when we wake up, we probably won't feel like engaging in "the practice," and even if we do, we probably won't feel the same enthusiasm the following day. But the aim is to show up anyway. If we decide we're going to be a runner, we run. If we choose to be a blogger, we blog. It's this decision that lightens our cognitive load, because there's no time and no reason to negotiate with ourselves. We've already had the debate. We decided. So now it's time to act. As Godin says, 'When it comes to creativity, feelings don't matter, actions do.'

Maybe it's time to create a partnership with your creativity and take ownership?