Julie Stofer: Hello everyone, and welcome to “How to Become a Linchpin in your Organization,” a Nonprofit 911 webinar sponsored by Network for Good.

My name is Julie Stofer, and I’m part of the marketing team here at Network for Good, and I’ll be your moderator for today’s call. Also joining me to help field questions for Seth is my colleague Rebecca Higman, and we’ve got Connie from WebEx here to help with technical questions.

All your lines have been muted, but you can submit questions to us at any time via the Q&A panel on the right side of your screen, and we’ll get to as many of them as we can.

To give you some context for this webinar, Nonprofit 911 is a free training series that’s designed to help you do better with online outreach. We host these webinars several times a month on Tuesdays and feature some of the smartest people in our sector, as well as complementary fields to help you succeed in winning hearts, minds and donations.

The latest schedule is always available at Nonprofit911.org. This webinar series is just one of the tools Network for Good provides to help nonprofits succeed online. We’ve got some other great tools for you. You can check out our “Nonprofits” tab at NetworkForGood.org and see the latest about our donation and ticket processing tools, as well as email outreach services. Those are called DonateNow, EventsNow, and EmailNow.

And you can visit our online learning center at Fundraising123.org and subscribe to our weekly tips e-newsletter to learn how you can do more to engage your supporters. So if you’re looking for tools for your online outreach or interested in learning more, you can give us a call or send us an email. You can reach us or at 888-284-7978, extension 1, or at Fundraising123@NetworkForGood.org.

So now I am happy to introduce today’s presenter. Seth Godin is an author of bestselling books about marketing, a speaker with a unique style and a great reputation, and an entrepreneur with a track record. He’s the bestselling author of 12 books and writes about marketing, the spread of ideas, and managing both customers and employees with respect. His latest book is called “Linchpin.”

Also on the line with us is Katya Andreassen, the Chief Operating Officer at Network for Good, as well as a speaker, author, and blogger about nonprofit marketing, online outreach, and social media.

In order to make today’s presentation a really interactive conversation, we’re not going to distract you with slides. Instead, Seth is going to speak for a little bit by way of an introduction, and then Katya’s going to help us field your questions, as well as ask some of her own.

So without further ado, Seth, the floor is yours.
Seth Godin: Well, thank you. And the smartest people on these calls are the six or 700 people in the audience. Smart because they’re making a difference, smart because they’re doing such important work, and smart because they’re willing to take a little bit of time to think about how they do their work.

So to everyone who came, you’re all muted, so we really can’t talk at this minute, but I want to thank you for what you do every single day. That’s why I volunteered to come back, and I’m the president of Katya’s fan club. So there you go.

I want to start by asking you what time it is. It’s not a weird question. You get asked it all the time. Where I am it’s 1:05. My guess is that just about everybody here knows what time it is. And we don’t even think about the fact that 250 years ago no one knew what time it was, that time zones hadn’t been invented. It was a different time in every village, in every city. People didn’t have wrist watches. And the very thought that you would need to know what time it is all the time was a new one.

And the reason that we know what time it is now is not merely because someone figured out how to invent the watch. We know what time it is because the system demands we know what time it is. The system is focused on getting us to organize, and maximize, and centralize, and synchronize.

You can’t have a meeting if everybody doesn’t know what time it is, because people won’t show up. You can’t have an assembly line if people don’t know what time it is, because your workers won’t show up and your assembly line won’t function. You can’t have a conference, you can’t even deliver a truck full of rice if the people you are trying to coordinate with, and centralize with, and organize with don’t know what time it is.

All ways of saying is that the world isn’t organized as it used to be, that we don’t realize it, the same way a fish doesn’t know there’s water. But we have taken for granted some of the fundamental organizing principles of our generation.

And what I want to do in the short time I have is really give you a massive headache about what you’ve taken for granted and what you’re not seeing that’s right here in front of us.

When you discovered for the first time that professional wrestling was fake, it changed everything about the way you say professional wrestling, because suddenly you started noticing the blood packs or that the chairs weren’t actually hitting the person they seemed to be hitting, or that the guy was hitting the mat harder than he was hitting the person he was wrestling with.

You might not be a pro wrestling fan, I’m not, but it changed things because you saw them differently. So let’s talk for a few minutes about what has changed.

In the 1930’s and ‘40s, there was a whole string of innovation around making lots of stuff, making profit, mass production, productivity, efficiency, cheaper. So we think about someone like Ray Kroc, the guy who bought a small hamburger stand from two brothers named McDonald, and launched the chain of restaurants that feeds the United States; one meal out of every seven is typically eaten at a McDonald’s by the entire population.
What did Ray Kroc actually build? He didn’t build a way for someone to get a hamburger when they’re on the road. He built a factory. It is a system designed to use the lowest paid, least trained people possible to churn out the cheapest, most reliable food possible in large quantities so that people can buy it.

Just down the street from Chicago where he started doing that, or where they’re headquartered now, is Detroit. And what they did in Detroit for 70 years was figure out how to mass produce cars. Cars are incredibly productive and incredibly complicated, and yet they are extremely cheap and always have been because mass production enables us to crank out stuff, to do what we did yesterday a little cheaper and a little faster than we did it before.

Head across the country a little further to Hartford, Connecticut and you’ll find all these insurance companies. And they are running factories as well. We don’t often think of the insurance business as being a factory, but sure it is. There are all these cogs in the giant system of insurance who are churning out policies, who are following the manual, who are being compliant.

And there’s a whole structure from the bottom to the top—the Executive Director, the Vice President, the Senior Vice President, the President, the Board of Directors. This model is new. It’s only 150 years old. And when the economy changes, the other things in our economy change to match it.

Organized religion 1,500 years ago was not organized around cathedrals. It was not organized around having a hierarchy of people who were telling everyone else what to do. That came because the economy changed and thus caused a shift to happen.

And the nonprofit world is running factories. That, if I look at any of the biggest nonprofits in the country, they have a factory system. They take donations in at one end, they churn it through a lot of meetings, they churn it through a lot of committees, they churn it through a lot of people, they probably have their own building or several buildings, and out the other end comes a benefit. And the goal is raise more money, become more efficient, generate more benefit.

That model understandably mimics the models of Henry Ford, and Ray Kroc, and go down the list, because that’s what was working. If you buy into the model and you are a small nonprofit, your goal is to get big like a big nonprofit so you can do more good, right? That’s why you signed up for this in the first place.

So the way you scale your effort is the same way Henry Ford scaled his effort. How do we raise more money? How do we go on more sales calls? How do we make a website that converts more people to giving us money? And then, when we get the money, how do we scale to spend the money, to crank it out, to measure the impact that we’re having, because we’re fighting the endless emergency of poverty, or because we’re finding the endless emergency of health?

And we think that that’s our job. And so innovations come along and the world changes, and we ignore them. And we ignore them because they don’t seem to be analog substitutes for what we’re counting on.
So when the web showed up, most corporations looked at it and said, “How can I use this as a cheaper version of advertising?” And nonprofits looked at it and said, “How can I look at this as a cheaper version of fundraising?”

And to this day, I would argue that most of the people who are listening today work for teams of people who think that their primary function of the web is to come up with a faster, cheaper way to either turn a non-donor into a donor or turn a donor into someone who donates more.

And the problem, you have probably already guessed, is simple. All the companies that have succeeded on the web, every one of them, has not succeeded because they used the web as a cheap alternative to advertising.

And if we look at nonprofits, the ones who are really transforming themselves and the world are not using the web as a slightly cheaper way to raise money without the personal horror of face to face rejection. That’s not what’s working here. It’s not what changes things.

Groupon is the fastest growing company in the history of the world. They’re based in Chicago. Groupon has grown the way they have grown not by saying, “Let’s run some ads.” Not by saying, “How do we build an old kind of company and leverage it on the web?”

What they’ve done is they said, “What is the Internet good at?” And it turns out the Internet is good at several things. The biggest one is this: it connects people to one another. It is a connection machine.

But, this is a big but, people do not want to be connected merely because it’s important to you. People do not want to have a meeting just because you know someone, who knows someone, who knows someone on LinkedIn. People do not want to take a sales pitch from you just because you sent them an email because somehow you found their email address.

That’s not the kind of connection I’m talking about. The Internet is a connection machine based around fascination, and remarkability, and deep personal connection, or selfish ego. But in all the cases of what’s growing fast online, that’s what makes it grow.

We go to Facebook to answer the $10,000 question: What do they really think of me? We go to Facebook to see if people are making fun of us. That’s selfish. We go on Twitter to let people know we’re still here and hope that they would miss us if we were gone. That’s a basic human need that has nothing to do with sending another $100 to Charity: Water.

When online fundraising works, it’s either this slightly efficient shortcut of actually having to read their credit card into the phone, which is fine, but not particularly interesting or world shaking. Or, it’s the result of tribes of people being organized, and connecting, and causing forward motion to occur.

And yet, this is the giant “and yet,” almost every nonprofit remains organized like a factory. Almost every nonprofit has this top-down mindset of, “Sure, there’s a funnel. Please dump some money in the top. We’ll get back to you one day, maybe.” As opposed to understanding that there’s a different model available here.
And it’s a model that says, one, we need to innovate faster because people are only interested in what they are interested in. And so if we’re boring, they don’t care. Two, we need to figure out what kind of interactions do we have, both with our donors and with our beneficiaries if, for free, we can interact with them all day long.

So what does it change about the nature of a nonprofit if they are working with the urban poor and they can have a webcam in the room of every tuberculosis patient, so that they don’t have to pay someone to go to that patient’s apartment to visit them twice a day? What does that do to their cost structure? What does that do to their leverage? What does that do to their speed?

If we think about a shoe store, until two years ago, no one would have used the word shoe store and a billion dollars in the same sentence. Bu Tony Hsieh built a shoe store called Zappos that he sold to Amazon for almost a billion dollars. Do you think that Amazon needed the shoes? I don’t think so. I think what Amazon was buying was the relationships, the connections, the fact that people had a series of expectations and understandings about what they were going to get when they picked up the phone and they called Zappos.

I think that what happens is you give people a chance to tell themselves this story, and they do. So Zappos organized to hire people who wouldn’t sit there waiting to be told what to do. Because what Tony understood is that if you are going to try to tell someone what to do, they’re almost never going to do the right thing, because you can’t be there all the time.

So if you are demanding that people become cogs in a machine, you better be prepared for them to act like they’re running a machine. And human beings aren’t going to respond particularly well to that.

And so I guess where I’m leading in this big circle is this: If you are stressed, it is probably because you’re trying to keep the factory part of your nonprofit running at the same time that the world is moving as fast as it can away from factories.

This leads to the second half of what I wanted to talk about, which is, after people see the opportunity, after they realize the power of the connection machine, there first question is, “Well, how do I bring factory reliability and factory deniability to this new space?”

And the answer is, of course, you can’t. That this space demands something else. It demands art. It demands human beings solving interesting problems in a way that has never been solved before. It involves real connections between real people in a way that we would miss you if you were gone. It demands low overhead and really fast time to market so that you can do the unexpected faster than your competition. Because it’s the unexpected and the personal and the artistic that will get you the attention of the people that you need to raise money from.

You cannot be more average than everyone else and expect to win. It’s really hard to imagine going home at the end of the day and saying to yourself, “It was a really good day. I fit in more and better than ever before. I fit in all the way, and no one even noticed I was there. I was beyond criticism. No one complained.”
If that’s the outcome, then you’re working in a factory. And the alternative, instead of trying to fit in all the way, is to understand how you’re going to stand out. And you are not going to stand out by doing some crazy gimmick or spamming someone that doesn’t want to hear from you. You are going to stand out by doing work that’s so powerful, that’s so important and so vivid that people contact you because they want to, because they can, because your story has spread.

And the reason this is hard has something to do with the reason why you went to work in a factory in the first place, particularly a nonprofit factory. And it’s this: We are afraid. All of us are afraid. And the factory era, the one that started when we were two years old playing Candyland. Let me tell you, for those of you who grew up under a rock, the rules of the board game Candyland.

The rules are pick a card, do what it says. Those are the entire rules. So we’ve been brainwashed since we were two to do that; to use a number two pencil, to fill in the little circles, to sit in straight rows, to do what we’re told, to not get sent to the principal’s office, to get an A or have a really good excuse about why we got a B.

And when we get to work and work says, “Great. We are ready for you to comply,” we say, “OK. I’m in. I know how to do that. I feel safe doing that.” But now work is saying, “You know what we need you to do? We need you to invent. We need you to be an artist. We need you to interact. We need you to fail.”

And this is the hardest part of all, because we don’t even have the guts to say the word fail. We look at the fundraiser who only closes two out of 10 sales calls and we say, “Oh, he’s failing 80% of the time. I wonder what he did wrong on that sales call. I wonder if we need to think about getting a new person.”

Whereas, the successful fundraiser says, “This is great. 8 out of 10 times I’m learning something interesting about what doesn’t work.” And what the person does when they are a successful fundraiser is they understand that their job is not to close sales, their job is to open relationships. And if the relationships get deep enough, and the product is good enough, and the story is true enough, then and only then does it turn around and turn into something that actually becomes a donation.

If you just show up and say, “We’re working really hard. Can we have a share of the money you’re going to give away this year?” of course your whining about the fact that the economy isn’t good, and of course you’re not getting a bigger share of the shrinking pie, because you’re boring. And we don’t fund organizations that are boring, because there are other alternatives that are more interesting.

Because the reason that people give money to charity has very little to do with the Baco or the cost of helping one person accomplish one thing. And it has a lot to do with what our peers think of us, with what we think of ourselves, with the stories we tell ourselves, with the stories we tell other people, with the relationship we have with you.

And so, as I wrap this up, here’s what I hope...if you’re going to just write down one thing, and I hope you haven’t written down too much, because we take too many notes in our culture, is the Internet just lined up to make your job 1,000 times more powerful. Not because you are going to spam more people
with the same stuff, but because you are going to organize a tribe, a tribe of people—beneficiaries, employees, donors, government people, whatever tribe you need, a tribe of people that would be lonely if they weren’t in it, a tribe of people who can connect with each other all the time for free. A way of launching projects, a way of making decisions, a way of making a difference that has nothing to do with your building, or your truck, or your annual fundraising letter, or, God forbid, the stupid, stupid fundraiser at the Waldorf with the banquet.

Those are over. We don’t need those anymore. And the organizations that depend on them will not continue to get the growth they want, because the people who are happy to line up and support you aren’t interested, because the Internet has trained them to not be interested.

What they are interested in is where do they belong, what are they part of, who do they believe in, where is the hope, what is the difference they are making in the world? Those are the questions I think you need to ask yourself every morning when you start doing the super important work that you’re doing right now.

So I used up all my time, because I do have a watch. And so now I’m going to let Katya or someone else drive.

Katya Andresen: Thank you Seth. This is Katya. I want to thank you for two reasons. First I want to thank you for the book. I think it’s meant a huge amount to so many people in the nonprofit sector. I can tell you I’ve dog-eared far more than 40 pages of it.

And thank you so much also for your generous time and mental energy today. All the things that you are saying are so deeply important to our sector.

I’d like to dive in a little more into the topic of generosity, which I thought was one of the most powerful concepts in your book. And you have this wonderful few lines about halfway through the book where you say: “It’s difficult to be generous when you’re hungry. Yet, being generous keeps you from going hungry, hence the conflict.”

Could you talk a little bit about the role of generosity? As you point out in our nonprofit factories, we’re very focused on what we need and the funds we’re hungry for. How should we switch around and why should we switch around to a more generous mindset?

Seth: Well first, thanks for that, and it’s a great question. Let me backtrack a little bit. If you read about the history of art and the history of gifts, what you discover is that for 50,000 years, human beings were tribal people. 150 people in a typical tribe. And it was unheard of to charge interest on a loan to someone in your tribe, the same way you wouldn’t charge interest on a loan to your sister.

It was unheard of that if you had food and your neighbor didn’t, that you would say, “Go to the government welfare office and see if you can get an unemployment check.” You shared. If you go visit villages in the developing world to this day, there is a great deal of happiness, and contentment, and comfort that comes from knowing the people who are around you and being close to them.
And it was only the artifact of television and the factory that led to this alienation and division among people who ordinarily would be much more connected.

So what happens in that culture is we say: “Come play golf and then maybe you’ll buy insurance from me.” Or, “I’ll go to your fundraiser if you’ll go to mine.” Or, “Why should I do that Katya? You’re not paying me to give a talk. What’s in it for me?”

That mindset is very new, and it’s based on scarcity. Scarcity says if I have something and I give it to you, then I don’t have it anymore. So I’m not going to give it to you.

Abundance, on the other hand, is this mindset that says, “The thing I need the most of is connection. The thing I need the most of is closeness. And it turns out, the more generous I am, the closer I get to people.”

So, in fact, it’s not a scarce resource, it’s an abundant one. And what we see is that if you are willing to share with the people you need to be close with, expecting nothing in return, you are way more likely to earn respect and probably, but this is just an aside, a donation. But that’s not the reason you are doing it. You are doing it because being part of the community is a benefit in and of itself.

And I’ll give you a very simple example from an industry; not yours. There’s a coffee shop in London called Proof Rock. And they compete with Starbucks and stuff, but they are on the high end. They have one of those frequent buyer cards where if you get 8 stamps you get a free coffee.

The thing is, he doesn’t give you a stamp every time you come to his coffee shop. He listed his 8 biggest competitors on the card. And you have to go to his 8 biggest competitors, drink a coffee at each one of them, and then, if you come back, he’ll give you another coffee.

Now the first question is: Do you think he called up his competition and said, “Is it OK if I do this? Will you do it for me too?” Well of course not, because then it wouldn’t be a gift. Then it would be a manipulation. He just did it because he loves coffee, and he loves the people who roast coffee, and he loves the people who drink coffee.

And the generosity on his part to say to his best customers, “Here. Go visit my competition” brings him closer to them. And it’s that closeness that he’s building a business on, not the fact that he’s saying, “I have beans and you don’t, so you better pay me money.”

Katya: Wonderful. Thank you. Another way you talk about generosity, Seth, is when you talk about the Internet as a gift system, which I think it’s a wonderful term, because you’re right. We think about online outreach as nonprofits and we get very focused on what we can get out of it rather than looking at it as this gift system.

Could you talk a little bit about how some of the concepts you were talking about at Proof Rock, for example, extend to the Internet and our thinking about social media?
**Seth:** Well, you know, back in the Pacific Northwest, native cultures in the 1500’s and before, there was a concept of potlatch. And potlatch, which was eventually banned because it got out of hand, would be a system where individuals would show their power by giving away all of their belongings.

So the chief would give someone everything he owned, including all of his clothes. And the reason he could do that was because, of course, he was powerful enough that he had no trouble getting more. And when we look at the way the Internet works, it is bringing back some of these elemental pieces of what it means to give and to have connections. Not with a keeping score the way we do with money, but in terms of respect, and dignity, and sophistication.

So now there are people who are always there for you and are always directing and always connecting. And we just take it as a matter of course that those people must be ethical and those people must be trustworthy because, after all, they are always here doing something for us.

This mindset is not something that can be easily manipulated, though people have tried, but it is something that can be easily leveraged. Because when we see people like Google inventing a car that can drive itself, what’s the financial element there? There isn’t one. But what they gain from it is a respect from the community so that when they have something to say in the future, we’re more likely to listen to them.

**Katya:** I’m going to ask a follow-up to that, actually, from one of our listeners today, from Donald. He says he read recently that even in the Internet age, we truly connect with only about 150 people, which he puts it: “The size of a Neolithic village.”

How do you see Internet to reach multiple groups, or you might want to use the word tribes, of 150?

**Seth:** Yeah, that’s called Dunbar’s Number. It’s fascinating; you can read about it online. Dunbar’s Number has been proven in many situations, and Twitter and Facebook are really busting it open. And that’s causing a lot of people to become stressed.

You know, one way I think about that number is there’s probably 150 people who, if you got invited to their wedding, you would go, but not 1,000 people. And when you have 1,000 friends on Facebook or you are following 2,000 people on Twitter, you don’t know whether they are wedding-worthy or not. So we get stressed about how to have those sorts of interactions.

The answer is it doesn’t scale. You cannot have the same quality relationship with 1,000 people that you have with 100. And so, we still come back to the fact that we are human beings. The choice you have is deciding who are you going to do this art for? Then you get to decide who are you willing to take risks for? Where are you willing to fail?

And what we know is that if you do it on a first come, first serve basis, you are probably not going to be doing the work you need to be doing. So I’ve advised several nonprofits who had a chance to go on Oprah not to do it.
And the reason is that if you show up on Oprah, you touch 10 million people, and a whole bunch of them show up in your box with a $20 donation, which is great. But then three months later, you have nothing, because that’s a Nile perch. You know, it’s a shiny object that distracts the whole organization but doesn’t scale, because you can’t build a foundation out of it.

And so the challenge is where, in terms of you making the dent you want to make in the universe, you making the impact you want to make, where do you need to build your tribe? Who’s in it, and how can you take sufficient of them and with them that they will help you go to where you want to go?

**Katya:** Great. I have a few people on the phone who are aspiring Linchpins who are very emboldened by your book, but I think they’re finding they’re encountering quite a bit of resistance within their organizations.

Melissa writes and asks you: “How do you become a linchpin in the organization that’s doing things the old way without ruffling too many feathers?” She says she’s in a place that’s very wedded to the same old, same old and not very appreciative of new methods, including social media and technology.

**Seth:** Well, I start with, “Well of course your boss won’t let you.” You go to the boss and say, “I want to do this, this, and this. If it succeeds, I get credit. And if I fail, you’ll take the blame. OK?” Well, why would she say yes to that? That would be insane.

You’re not going to get any of these things to work with complete deniability with cover from authority figures. It doesn’t happen that way. The way this will happen is by ruffling feathers. The way this will happen is by doing small, free interactions that may fail on your own. And if they succeed, give your boss all the credit. And if they fail, quietly fix the problem and do it again.

All of us have way, way more flexibility at work than a coalminer in Chile does, or than a guy plucking chickens at Tyson Chicken has. No one is watching what we do every minute of the day. The fact that you’re listening to this call is proof of that.

So you only get to work for another 60, 70, 80 years and then you’re done. Why waste it? What I’m saying is, if you really care about the mission of your organization, you are going to stop playing politics, you are going to go to fewer meetings, and you’re going to start making a lot more mistakes.

And the best thing that could happen to you if you do all those things is people will notice it. And the worst thing that will happen is you will get fired and you’ll get to do it somewhere else, which is not the end of the world.

So when I look at people who are doing heroic work in the nonprofit space, and I would certainly put my friend Sasha Dichter on that list at Acumen, and I encourage all of you to go read his blog, when you see the things that people like Sasha are doing, what they are not doing is, A, saying, “Oh, I’m into social media! Follow me on Twitter! Look at me on Facebook!” Because that’s just busywork. And B, what they’re not doing is getting their boss to give them written approval for everything they’re doing.
What they’re doing is saying, “This is a revolution. I will not waste it. And the nature of revolution is that no one knows what’s going to happen next, except for one thing, which is it’s going to be different than it is now.

**Katya:** Well that’s exactly right. So let’s talk a little bit about failure, because you’ve written much about it and spoken much about it, and how while we might fear it, it’s something that is a necessary part of being a linchpin.

Julie was wondering, “When you do fail, how can you fail publicly or fail in a way that’s productive or that can enable others to learn something from the experience?”

**Seth:** Well, my first year as an entrepreneur I got 900 rejection letters in one year. I’ve started dozens, maybe hundreds, of projects, almost all of which have failed. That’s the way it works. As my friend Zig would say, the pilot takes off heading from La Guardia to Dallas, and three minutes after he takes off a gust of wind hits the plane, and so now they’re off course.

Does that mean the pilot flies back to La Guardia and starts all over? Well of course not. What the pilot says is, “This isn’t a failure. I’m just off course.” Then they rearrange the angle of the plane and continue. And they’ll be off course almost the whole flight until they get to Dallas, and then they land.

And so the point here is to say, “Which tribe am I going to lead? Which issue is going to be mine? Who am I going to be connected to? Where does my generosity lay?” And then you do these things over and over again, failing or succeeding, recalibrating, and moving forward.

Just to use a simple example. If you look at the people who build successful blogs, like Beth Cantor, or the people who build successful online media companies, like the Huffington Post, they got in early when everyone said it wasn’t going to work, and they just kept doing it. They failed, and they failed, and they failed, and now everyone says, “Oh look, an overnight success!” It’s an overnight success that takes five years.

**Katya:** Great. Seth, I have a very basic question, which is, could you talk a little bit about what, in your mind, most defines a linchpin? I’m going to ask you to also, in talking about that, reflect a little bit about what it means to be a linchpin in a nonprofit, which tends to be a culture of consensus, the typical nonprofits, a place where it can feel hard to be a leader. And it can also be challenging to manage linchpins. So can you talk a little bit about it, what it means to be a linchpin or manage a linchpin with our sector?

**Seth:** Yeah. I don’t think nonprofits are cultures of consensus. I think they are cultures of deniability. And there’s a very big difference. I think that most of the people I’ve worked with at most of the nonprofits are looking for cover. Because they didn’t sign up to work for a nonprofit because there was a chance they could get in trouble. And this idea of trouble is fascinating to me.

Troubleshooters are always linchpins, because you can’t shoot trouble with a manual. If there was a manual, someone would have already fixed the problem and it wouldn’t be trouble. So troubleshooting,
this idea of fixing something that’s broken in a way that no one knew how to fix, is one of the elements of a linchpin.

Linchpins do work that matters. We would miss them if they were gone. They work without an instruction book. They do work that wasn’t done yesterday over and over again. Most people would like to say they are linchpins, most people are not. No one is a linchpin all the time.

But the opportunity to be a linchpin means accepting that you will fail, doing art, putting yourself on a limb, and never ever seeking deniability. Because the minute you can say, “That’s not my job” or, “I can’t do that. My boss won’t let me,” then you’ve opted out and you’ve said, “I’d rather be a compliant cog in the system.”

And what attracts me about nonprofits, besides the fact that the work is so important, is that because the work is so important, you have permission to be a heroic element in the system. That if a wastebasket starts on fire in the office, you don’t have to fill out a TPM report and get permission from someone to put out the fire. You just put out the fire. That’s accepted.

And my point is, if your nonprofit is important enough for you to be asking anyone for money, I’m hoping something’s on fire. And if something’s on fire, I’m hoping you care enough about putting it out that maybe, just maybe, you’re willing to ruffle Donna’s feather or some other boss’s feathers to get something done.

Katya: That’s great. I hope that’s a shot of bravery for everyone on the call. I have a question from Kelly, who I think your comments about how much of what we do is boring are troubling her. She says: “Can you give us some concrete examples of what makes nonprofit communication boring or interesting?”

Seth: Well, sure. The typical nonprofit communication that goes to someone like me, who’s on lists because I have given money to charity, goes something like this: “Dear MailMerge insert first name here, Here is the first paragraph of the letter we’re sending to everyone on this list. Here is the second paragraph, including a photo or two, or perhaps an interesting anecdote about something we did last month.” Then three or more filler paragraphs, and then it ends with a paragraph that says, “By the way, your money means more to us this year than ever before, because the economy isn’t very good. Please, please, please go ahead and put a check in the enclosed envelope.”

And all of us have gotten letters like that, and some of you have written letters like that. And the question is, if I hadn’t gotten that letter, would I have missed it? Would I have called up the nonprofit and said, “Where is that letter? I didn’t get it.” Probably not.

Well, there goes my definition, right? My definition is: we would miss you if you were gone. My definition is: anticipated personal and relevant messages people want to get about stuff they’re interested in. I don’t want that.

On the other hand, if I get an email from Anai, who’s in the field helping D-lite market it’s lanterns and hydrobaths [sp] and it’s to me, I’ll read it. Why wouldn’t I? If it got caught in my spam filter, I’d miss it.
Now, it would be impossible 20 years ago for someone like Anai to write, by hand, a letter individually to every single one of the 100 people he needs to keep in touch with and put a stamp on it and wait three months for it to get here.

But in an email and connected world, what’s the point of all these buffers and all these people in red-soled shoes walking around in high heels not doing the work, just sort of being a buffer between the person with the money and the person who’s going to spend the money? That model is a factory model, and it’s going away really fast.

So what’s available here, and cable TV, unfortunately, tends to be the conduit for it. Cable TV shows up in Haiti, it’s urgent, it’s emergency, people can see it, they believe it, and the Red Cross’s phone rings. You can count on that. You don’t want to count on that. It doesn’t scale. But it sure works.

One reason it works is the Red Cross didn’t send some boring Clark Kent guy in a gray suit to your house. The Red Cross was the middleman because there was a camera and an emergency. And what I’m more interested in, and I think most donors are more interested in, is not this endless, ceaseless emergency, but how do nonprofits spend the huge amount of money they’re getting to actually solve problems once and for all, and how do they build communications to move to that end?

Katya: That’s so important. Let’s talk some more about that. Because it struck me when I was reading about the powerful culture of gifts in your book, and you said what people delivering gifts really seek is respect. And that really struck me that because we treat so many of our donors the way you just described when they do support us, at the end of the day it’s not even respectful, much less productive or helpful, or the basis for a strong, intimate relationship with the people who give to us.

So what do we need to do to do more of what you’re saying?

Seth: Well, I think we need to start by saying this isn’t necessarily about treating everyone we contact the same. It’s about treating different people differently. And then it’s about understanding what their world view is. Why is it that they’re even talking to us instead of making yet another trade on Wall Street or instead of buying yet another flat screen TV or big jar of pickles at Costco?

There’s lots of ways that money can be spent. But money’s a fairly recent thing. The human psyche is not. So I think we need to understand, what is it that people want? Some people probably want you to be boring and dependable, and they’re going to send you the same check year in and year out. But I don’t think you can grow from those people.

The second thing is that I think we need to think about rather than always trying to get new people, how do we turn around and get the existing people we’ve got to interact with us in ways that benefit them and benefit us? And that’s a really interesting opportunity.

Yesterday, Squidoo, the company I started, gave $275,000 to five charities to celebrate our fifth anniversary. And when I think about the nonprofits that have worked with us, and I think about the way we’ve worked with our core group of people, it turns out the top one, or two, or 3% that you work with often account for 40, or 50, or 60% of the benefit. And yet we treat people the same.
As opposed to saying, “What would happen if I wasn’t allowed to ever get a new donor? What would happen if I wasn’t allowed to ever call on a prospective donor? So all I have is the donors I have now and their willingness to talk to my friends on my behalf.” If that’s all you had, how would you spend your day differently?

Katya: That is such a great point. I think everyone should frame that question and put it over their desk! [laughs] What would we do if we weren’t allowed to go out and get any new donors and we only had the donors that we have? Because I think you’re right, we spend a lot more time worrying about the people who aren’t giving than thinking about the people who are giving.

I’m going to shift gears here. I’ve gotten quite a few questions about social media. McKyle [sp] says, “What do you think about organization leaders getting on social media to increase their visibility and build the brand?”

Seth: Yeah. I’m famous for not having drunk the Twitter flavor aid. I think that some people have certainly benefited dramatically from having tens or hundreds of thousands of people who are interested in small bits of pithiness or interesting links.

I think more common are boring people posting boring stuff that no one want to see because they are afraid of embarrassing themselves. And these boring people spending increasing amounts of time working on it because there’s a number next to it and they want to make the number go up.

And I’m not seeing that that’s a scalable, predictable way to transform a nonprofit. Yes, there’s no question there are outliers like Scott Harrison at charity: water. But in general, I think it’s not worthy of the amount of time and money many senior people in the nonprofit space are spending on it. I would rather have them figure out how to get other people who aren’t on the payroll to be using these tools to spread ideas that they care about.

I think what Pepsi had done is nasty and annoying, but incredibly powerful in the short run, which is enlisting tens of thousands of people to spam each other so they can get a grant from Pepsi for their charity.

It shows you how manipulatable this world is and how powerful it is compared to what you get from running one TV commercial. The thing we need to look for, though, is, is this an asset you can scale? Is this something that if you invest in it today, you’ll be glad you did three years from now?

I find that a blog with a thousand loyal readers is probably more effective than a funny or a humorous Twitter account with 30,000 off and on readers. Because the number isn’t as important as who it is and what they’re going to do after they read something.

Katya: Right. So actually, Amanda has a good follow-up question to that. She says, “My nonprofit is great at community building.” So she’s sort of working in this passionate core that you’re talking about. She says, “We’ve refined our email communication, have great panel discussions, have engaging events, and get love letters all the time. The problem is our community is difficult to turn into donors. What’s your advice?”
Seth: Why should someone donate? People donate because there’s something in it for them, and it’s probably not a mug, right? What we find in organizations where donations actually happen is that there is an expectation and a world view that a donation is part of the deal.

My grandfather used to tell a story about one year he ran a volunteer fund drive. And the way that they hit their goal was the 10 biggest, fattest fat cat lawyers in town got together one night for dinner, mostly under duress, and he announced how much he was giving and then made everyone go around the table and say how much they were giving.

And inevitably, everyone had to top the guy before them, because that was who they were. They couldn’t bear to be in this circle of judges and lawyers and be the one who walked out giving the least.

You look at that manipulation and you say was that a good thing or a bad thing? Well, I don’t think anyone there did something that they didn’t want to do. They did it because it matched who they were.

Go at the other end of the extreme, a charity like Mocha down in Nashville. Mocha Club has an entertainer, a musician stand on stage when there’s 1,000 screaming people in the music hall, and the entertainer says, “I have the CD that no one can buy. But if you sign up for Mocha Club, you can have one for free.”

Well, in that moment, in that place, surrounded by friends, giving whatever that is, $30 a month, seems like a really natural thing to do.

And there isn’t a lot of stuff where people are saying, “Show me your IRS report about the efficiency of this fundraising technique. And explain to me how money spent this way is different than money spent that way.” Because that’s not why they’re giving it. They’re giving it because of what it means to them.

So if this community you are building has an expectation that being part of the community means it’s going to cost you cash, then raising the money won’t be hard. But if we get distracted and do nothing but build a community that talks to one another but doesn’t take action, then it’s not going to work.

And I think that if you are looking for a great example of how it works when both happen, look at somebody like Habitat for Humanity. Because Habitat for Humanity isn’t all about “give me cash.” Habitat for Humanity is also about, “Come down to Atlanta. Here’s a hammer and a saw. Let’s work together to build this thing.” Because cash in that case, on that particular day, isn’t as important as labor and camaraderie.

So one of the things we do when we reinvent our nonprofits is we say, “How could this nonprofit work better if it was more about people spending time and energy and less about people spending cash? I think we could do, just to pick a simple example, we can go a long way to fixing schools in some cities if we could connect active, interested tutors electronically with kids who need tutoring. I mean if we got 50,000 people doing that instead of them giving us cash, just giving us their love and attention, not every problem is going to be solved that way, but some can.
Katya: Right. And actually, Kate just wrote and said, “It sounds like we need a corollary to the agile manifesto of our own: ‘We value genuine interactions with donors over the tracking and control of those interactions.’” What do you think about that?

Seth: I love that. She needs to write a book.

Katya: [laughs] Great. Mary says, “What about some of us who serve nonprofits…” So she’s like a consultant. She says, “I tend to earn their trust through baby steps and then push them into uncomfortable territory. But the fact remains they hire us for expertise, but often fire us when we provide it. How can we avoid this?”

Seth: That’s absolutely correct. If we look in the MBA Fortune 500 world, McKenzie commands a fee five times higher than what former McKenzie employees command. So you’ve got exactly the same people. One’s getting paid five times as much as the other. Why?

And the reason is because you hire McKenzie so you can go to the board of directors and tell them what you were going to tell them all along and just put McKenzie’s name on it.

But consultants are very rarely hired to find the right answer. And they’re almost always hired to cause change that the hiring person, usually the Executive Director, has in mind all along.

And so, a key part of being a successful consultant, which is why I don’t do it, is you have to understand the world view of your client and figure out either how to change it, which is difficult and painful, or how to supply a tool or a lever to help them accomplish what they set out to do before they even met you.

Katya: Great. Christine has a good question for you. She says, “I’m overwhelmed by everything to fix, and shift, and prioritize. Everything’s important right now. So how do I keep my neck from hurting?”

Seth: Yeah! I hear you. I feel your pain. Doing a mediocre job on nine things is going to guarantee that you will be mediocre. So it’s better, I think, to not do six of them. Just acknowledge up front that you are not going to do six of them. The world will not end.

That’s the main reason I don’t use Twitter. Because if I use Twitter, I’d have to spend two hours a day to do it well, and what would I do two hours a day less of? So instead, I said I won’t do it at all. “I won’t go to that meeting,” you could say. “I will not participate in this project. You will have to make that decision without me. This part of our agenda will not happen.” But on the other hand, because I just set those lifeboats free, this is all I got left and I’m going to make it magical.

Katya: Well, great advice...

Seth: Well, let me interrupt myself for a second. I don’t think it is great advice. I think that I am saying things that are making people uncomfortable, and I hope I am. I’m trying to give revolutionary advice, not great advice. I think that in the short run, great advice is, “Work harder, keep your neck in gear, and don’t get fired.”
But that’s not going to help you take advantage of a revolution. I’m trying to make you really uncomfortable, because the fact is, the people who are succeeding and, ultimately, really happy are the ones who have done something that made them really uncomfortable first.

**Katya:** OK. So I’ll call it revolutionary advice.

**Seth:** [laughs]

**Katya:** But in all seriousness, [laughs] it is so important in our sector, because we are so used to operating on a shoestring and doing a lot of things with under resource. So I think we are very comfortable and accustomed to doing a lot of things at a mediocre level. So I really appreciate what you’re saying and I think it’s something that’s really important to focus upon.

I loved your term “stomping roaches.” You know, are we spending all our time stomping roaches or are we thinking about the really important things and pursuing those few things well? So I think that’s a great challenge to our sector.

I have a question from Jennifer, and I think it’s going to be maybe our second to last question, or last question, depending on the time you need to respond.

Jennifer has an intriguing question. “Can the organization have too many linchpins?”

**Seth:** Well, a factory can for sure. Factories need cogs. They need people to sweep the floor or to empty the lard out of the lard vat. And they need them to do it in ways that aren’t necessarily creative or innovative. That doesn’t mean you have to do those jobs, but factories need them.

I think that when an organization like IDEO comes along that isn’t really a factory, I would argue that just about every person I’ve ever met who works at IDEO takes the position of being a linchpin; that they are not waiting for specific instructions on how to solve a problem, because that’s what IDEO does, is they solve problems.

So when organizations evolve to move away from a mindset of factory and toward a mindset of problem solving, the percentage of linchpins has to go up, and up, and up.

I am not saying that the linchpin gets to be the Spike Lee, crazy creative all day long. Part of making a difference, part of doing that interesting work is reliably and consistently doing the essential work.

If you’ve ever been to a great sushi bar, you know that a California Roll made by a linchpin sushi chef is a great California Roll. It’s still a California Roll, but you can depend on it. It’s just a little bit better than you had any right expect.

So I’m not saying any of these is easy. You still have to be able to present yourself, and do the work, and spell properly, and show up on time and all those other things that are a grind. But I think if you are lucky enough to have plenty of linchpins, I’m hoping your organization will evolve to use them all.
Katya: Thank you. And I actually want to pass on a couple of comments about how great this call has been. One is from Christina, who says, “Thank you. I’ve seen my past failures and look forward to applying and playing with the new and refreshed knowledge.” So I wanted to pass that on to you.

I love the words you have in the summary at the end of the book when you say: “If I’ve succeeded, then you now know that you have a gift to give—something you can do to change the world or your part of it for the better. I hope you’ll do that, because we need you.”

I think you’ve succeeded in that today for all of us on the call, and my heartfelt thanks for that. We really appreciate you joining us today Seth.

Seth: Well, thank you Katya. You raise my game every time I talk with you.

Katya: [laughs] Thank you. And thank you everyone who joined us. For everyone out there trying to be a linchpin against all the odds, don’t give up. Keep going. And reread Seth’s book whenever you need some encouragement, because I keep turning back to it when I do. It’s such a wonderful thing for all of us to have.

Some of you said you were missing parts of the call. We’ll have a link to this presentation up by tomorrow so that you can revisit it. And we encourage you to join us for our next call, which is about how to increase attendance and fundraising results for your next event. You can register for that webinar and find out more at nonprofit911.org.

So that’s it for today. Seth, thank you again so much for joining us.

Seth: Thanks! See ya!