

Michael Bungay Stanier

BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *THE COACHING HABIT*

HOW TO BEGIN

THIS BOOK STARTS NOW. Right here, on the cover. You know why. You know that you have more to contribute. You want to shake things up and make a difference, for yourself and for the world. You want to learn and grow. You want to be a force for change. You're ready to begin. **OPEN THE BOOK AND START DOING SOMETHING THAT MATTERS**

This is an excerpt from Michael Bungay Stanier's book, *How to Begin: Start Doing Something That Matters*.

You can pick a copy of the book anywhere you buy books.

You can access bonus material at HowToBegin.com.

ALL SERIOUS DARING STARTS

FROM WITHIN.

EUDORA WELTY

**BEGIN
HERE**



Strictly Ballroom is the only movie where the rumba meets gold lamé intrigue meets the Australian suburbs. Our hero is Fran, and her *cri de coeur* is “a life lived in fear is a life half lived.” It’s brilliant.

DON'T REGRET A LIFE HALF LIVED

WHEN MY LAPTOP STARTS UP, IT DISPLAYS

A DATE: SEPTEMBER 15, 2043. IT'S A

DESTINATION: MY DEATH.

Kevin Kelly created the Death Date, the end point of a “countdown clock” that tells you your theoretical moment of demise, based on actuarial tables.

Kelly believes we can do one “big project” every five years. So, first publishing this book in 2022, and assuming that my Death Date is about right, I’ve got time left for *counts on fingers* about four big projects.

Do something that matters

You might be noticing the passage of time too. Maybe you're just starting off, or mid-career, or wrapping things up... and you feel the stirrings of new ambition. Maybe you're outraged by an injustice in society, or frustrated about the ways things are done in your organization, or restless about playing it safe. Maybe you're noticing that your life is full enough... but not as rich or as meaningful as you'd hoped.

Whatever your itch, I'm really glad you're here. The How to Begin process in this book will help you get going on a project of your own, something that matters.



MICHAEL BUNGAY STANIER

Mostly known as MBS... but obviously not the Saudi MBS, who is another kettle of fish altogether.

WE UNLOCK OUR

GREATNESS

BY WORKING ON

THE HARD THINGS.

SHALL
WE
START?

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Visit MBS.works for more information
about Michael Bungay Stanier's work.

TELL ME, WHAT IS IT YOU PLAN TO DO

WITH YOUR ONE WILD AND PRECIOUS LIFE?

MARY OLIVER, "THE SUMMER DAY"

IN THIS CHAPTER

THE THREE ELEMENTS OF A WORTHY GOAL

1

FIND YOUR FOCUS

Setting the standard

“Set a *Worthy* Goal.” Sheesh. Worthy is a *big* word. It can feel a little . . . earnest. Perhaps a little high and mighty. You might be thinking, “Who am I to be measuring things on a level of *worthiness*?” But “worthy” is less about an abstract moral rating and more about whether it’s worthy enough for *you* to be committing to it.

Worthy becomes more accessible as a standard when you understand its three different elements: Thrilling, Important, and Daunting. They’re the primary colours that allow you to paint the picture of your ambition. If you have all three of these in a goal or a project, you’ve got something intriguing on your hands.

Thrilling

The idea of taking this on gets you going. You're *excited* about this, not just in theory but in real life. *Thrilling* means something to you. It speaks to your values and lights up your receptors. It makes you rub your hands together and think: "YES! This!" You'd be proud to do this. It's cool, fun, bold. It's an adventure you want to have.

Thrilling is a countermeasure against a sense of obligation. The tendrils of expectations—others' and our own—can keep us rooted to the spot. "I *should* be doing/wanting/achieving/claiming this..." is a heavy stone that many of us carry.

Important

In Jacqueline Novogratz's wonderful book *Manifesto for a Moral Revolution*, she lays down the challenge to "give more to the world than you take." *Important* connects to that. It's a project or a goal that's for a bigger win than just self-satisfaction or self-gratification. The stakes are higher than your life.

Part of the power of Novogratz's phrase comes from its scalability. You're giving more to the world than you're taking if you're working on a key relationship at home, cracking that challenging work project, starting a book or podcast, going back to school, starting a neighbourhood group, beginning as a solopreneur, protesting against injustices, inventing technologies, or a thousand other Worthy Goals.

Important is a countermeasure against selfishness.

I'm all for investing in yourself, personal exploration, and growth, but for the most part, "self-help" is not sufficient to create a better world.

Daunting

With *Daunting*, when you think about taking this on, there's a flutter in your heart (or ← your stomach, or your shoulders, depending on where you show tension). It doesn't feel utterly impossible, nor is it immediately obvious how you're going to get going on this or finish it. If the thought of taking on this goal makes you just a little bit sweaty, then you're nudging up to *Daunting* in an interesting way.

Daunting is a countermeasure against the comfort zone. Endless influences encourage you to grind it out, play it safe, and keep it small. *Daunting* helps banish those by inviting you back to the learning edge.



I jiggle my right leg when I'm feeling under pressure. I can trace it back to the experience of learning piano with Mrs. "Knuckle-Rapper" Birmingham.

Two out of three?

What if your Worthy Goal ticks only two of the three qualities? Isn't that close enough? Well, it might be. But like a three-legged stool with one leg shorter than the others, it's probably usable but slightly precarious.

There's a helpful tension between Thrilling and Important. They're two hands stretching a rubber band. In that state, there's dynamic potential. But let one of them go, and the potential is lost.

Here's how the interactions play out:



I first heard this metaphor from management writer and artist Robert Fritz.

Important and Daunting but not Thrilling

This Worthy Goal will feel a little too *obligated*. It's worthy work that stretches you and contributes to a better world, but it doesn't nourish you and isn't interesting enough to sustain you. There's the danger of burnout here.

Thrilling and Daunting but not Important

This Worthy Goal will feel a little too *self-centred*. It's exciting work that will stretch and grow you, but the "why" of the work is for you rather than also contributing to others. Don't write off small, more intimate, personal projects... but do find a way to connect them to the wider world. There's a risk of "Why bother?" here.

Thrilling and Important but not Daunting

This Worthy Goal will feel a little too *comfortable*. It's solid work and might have once stretched you, but now you're in cruise control. You might start to stagnate if you stay here too long.



DON'T SETTLE FOR TWO OUT OF THREE

Three dimensions

With Thrilling, Important, and Daunting established as the base, you're ready to look for your Worthy Goal. Now, you may already have your Worthy Goal sketched out. You've just been waiting for a nudge and permission to get going. That's great... and even though you might be tempted, don't skip this section. The very worst thing that happens is you confirm you've totally nailed it.

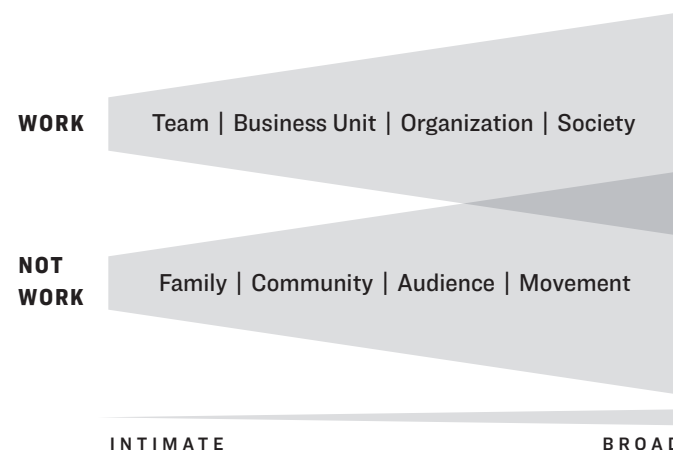
And a more likely outcome is you'll refine your Worthy Goal and make it even more compelling for you.

But if you're a little more uncertain, where do you start? Here are three different but intersecting dimensions—sphere, scale, and class—where you might shine a light and explore.

Sphere: Work & Not Work

A simple way to begin is to split the world into two spheres of possibility: Work and Not Work. If it's something to do with an organization (big or small), or being an entrepreneur, or part of a team, or thinking about a product or service, it might fit in Work. If it's about a relationship, or creating and/or launching something, or studying something new, or a social cause, or a contribution to a neighbourhood, or serving your tribe in some way, it might be Not Work.

Don't get overly hung up on the language. I know there are other ways to cut this cake, and that there's not always a clear distinction between the two. I also know that it doesn't *totally* matter what you put in one bucket and what you put in another. For instance, if you're a student, and you want to put your performance at school into Work, or into Not Work, the choice is yours. It's just a lens that can help you see options and opportunities.



Scale: Intimate to Broad

Within the Work and Not Work spheres, you can engage in different levels of scale. You might choose to narrow your attention, focus on something intimate, and work close and tight. Or you might sweep more broadly and dream more expansively. Neither one is better or worse than the other. Thrilling, Important, and Daunting remain the measures that matter.

Scale in the Work sphere

For Work, one way of mapping the scale from intimate to broad is:

- The *team's* leadership, projects, commitments, and interactions within the team and between other teams.

- The *business unit*'s leadership, commitments, and interactions with other business units.
- The *organization*'s strategy and culture.
- How the organization meets, influences, and serves *society*.

Scale in the Not Work sphere

For Not Work, an intimate-to-broad scale might be this:

- How the *family* nurtures and loves and evolves.
- What's required for a *community* to be inclusive and resilient and resourced.
- The creative work that can move an *audience*.
- A *movement* that transcends geography and/or community and/or audience.

Class: Projects, People & Patterns

Infused throughout Work and Not Work is another framework. You can choose, within whatever context is calling you, to focus on Projects, People, or Patterns. (The three are of course completely interconnected. You're just choosing to put one particular class into the foreground.)

Projects. The most common type of Worthy Goal. A project is something that needs to be done, and it typically has a start and a finish, a sense of done or not

done, a number of steps to move you from here to there, and success or failure. You'll be getting dirt under your fingernails, even if it's just digital dirt from working the keyboard. Project-class Worthy Goals have a primary focus on Doing. ←



David Allen's book *Getting Things Done* first introduced me to the power of projects. Bottom line: get the thoughts out of your head and into a system you can trust—and, where you can, make them a project.

People. We are always “in relationship.” It's impossible to imagine someone who exists outside a web of connections. We're shaped by who we love and by whom we're loved, who we lead and who we follow, who we transact with and with whom we play. Sometimes the Worthy Goal is to bring your focus to one or more of those relationships—to be a better and different brother, manager, friend, partner, daughter, client, founder, caregiver, vendor. It's you and that other person. People-class Worthy Goals have a primary focus on Interacting.

Patterns. This is when you hold up the mirror and interrogate how you're showing up in the world. Are your current patterns of behaviour still serving you well? Do you need to leave behind an old way of being and doing that doesn't fit your ambition? It doesn't always feel as though you can connect Patterns to Important, but breaking through to be the next-best version of yourself really does give more to the world than it takes. Pattern-class Worthy Goals have a primary focus on Being.

BRAINSTORM SOME POSSIBILITIES

If it's helpful, you can sketch some initial possibilities of a Worthy Goal in this chart. I'd encourage you to put down two, three, or more possibilities (even if you're pretty sure what your Worthy Goal will be). Seeing the options will help you weigh up choices.

How long will this take? Probably about 10+ minutes.

SPHERE	WORK	NOT WORK	
SCALE	INTIMATE	• • • • • • • •	BROAD
CLASS	PROJECT	PEOPLE	PATTERN

SPHERE	WORK	NOT WORK	
SCALE	INTIMATE	• • • • • • • •	BROAD
CLASS	PROJECT	PEOPLE	PATTERN

As ongoing examples for you, I've added two of my own Worthy Goals, which I'll be working through the How to Begin process. I'll explain more in a few pages.

SPHERE	WORK	NOT WORK	
SCALE	INTIMATE	• • • • • • • •	BROAD
CLASS	PROJECT	PEOPLE	PATTERN



MBS's Worthy Goal 1

Create a new, top-notch podcast

As you can see, I've circled Not Work for the sphere, a dot close to Broad for the scale, and Project for the class.

SPHERE	WORK	NOT WORK	
SCALE	INTIMATE	• • • • • • • •	BROAD
CLASS	PROJECT	PEOPLE	PATTERN



MBS's Worthy Goal 2

Stop being CEO of Box of Crayons

This Worthy Goal is in the Work sphere, the scale is fairly Intimate, and, for the class, I've circled both People and Pattern.

This is true of every first draft

I'm not the first to say it, but I can attest to its truth:

the first draft is *always* crappy. The first time I write anything, it's thoroughly mediocre. It's tepid and confused. It's overstuffed and underbaked.

It's too specific and too vague, all at once. "Funny" but not in a way that's at all amusing. It's overloaded with metaphors, like a sausage about to split its casing, or a circus with a surfeit of clowns, or a hamster playing drums. It goes on and on trying to make the point, never knowing when to stop, hoping that one more phrase will make it better. This paragraph is a case in point.

The same is true when you begin to claim a Worthy Goal. It's almost impossible to nail it first time around. There are any number of reasons. We fumble after the right language.

We diminish our own ambition because it's easier to write down something small. Or the opposite happens, and we overwhelm our ambition by writing something too abstract or overblown: "Find happiness."

But we have to start somewhere, and when we start with full permission to write down a crappy first draft, it's something. Actually, it's more than something—it's a significant and critical first step.

You might be hesitating. Yes, it's awkward. No, it won't be perfect. But take your best guess. It will set you up for the next step, where we'll take what you've written and make it stronger and better.



I first heard "shitty first draft" from the brilliant Anne Lamott. Brené Brown suggests "stormy" as a gentler adjective.

WRITE A CRAPPY FIRST DRAFT OF YOUR WORTHY GOAL

Don't overthink it. You'll have a chance to redraft it shortly. How long will this take? Probably up to five minutes.

I'm along for the ride

Look, I don't want you to do anything I wouldn't do myself. I'm going to work through my own process with two real Worthy Goals for me. Why two? Because I want you to see two different types of Worthy Goals, different in focus and scale and type. My examples always follow the invitation to do your own, so you don't get unduly influenced, though you're welcome to look ahead and steal/adapt/borrow anything you see in my work for your own. There are also two other case studies in the Pilot Light (the book's appendix), completed by real people from the MBS.works community who've been kind enough to share their process with you.

Turn the page for my first drafts.

EXERCISE

SPHERE	WORK	NOT WORK				
SCALE	INTIMATE	•	•	•	•	BROAD
CLASS	PROJECT	PEOPLE		PATTERN		

Here's my crappy first draft of a Worthy Goal that's real and alive for me as I write this (early 2021):



Create a new, top-notch podcast

When I showed a first draft of this book to my inner circle, I got a bunch of comments about how this didn't feel much like a Worthy Goal for me.

After all, I've launched podcasts before. I was accused, nicely-ish, of wimping out and playing it safe.

Here's why it's a Worthy Goal. First, it's not a Work project. I want this to be something that's fulfilling for me creatively, not just a marketing side project. Second, I want this podcast to be successful and different. I don't want to just "phone it in" by doing an interview with some interesting folk. I want this to be a serious upgrade. I want to become a masterful podcaster.

Most importantly? You're the final judge of what is and isn't a Worthy Goal for you. Feedback is not the truth. It's potentially helpful, but not necessarily so.

SPHERE	WORK	NOT WORK				
SCALE	INTIMATE	•	•	•	•	BROAD
CLASS	PROJECT	PEOPLE		PATTERN		

Here's my crappy first draft of the Worthy Goal that was my top priority in 2020:



Stop being CEO of Box of Crayons

I started Box of Crayons almost 20 years ago. To my delight and surprise, it's now a successful learning and development company with 20 employees and a client roster that includes Microsoft, Salesforce, and TELUS. I was an accidental CEO, and while I wasn't terrible at it, I wasn't that great, either. I knew, for the company to continue to flourish, I had to step away.

That's daunting on a number of levels. First, most transitions from Founder to new CEO fail. So, first, how do I ensure I don't screw over Shannon, the CEO-to-be? Second, I have 20 years of identity invested in Box of Crayons. How do I detach from something that is a source of deep meaning and status and purpose for me? Without wanting to go all *L'Étranger* on you, how do I manage through my own existential crisis?

ABOUT MICHAEL

MICHAEL BUNGAY STANIER distills big, complex ideas into practical, accessible knowledge for everyday people so they can be a force for change. Ironically, his surname—Bungay Stanier—is anything *but* simple, which is why he often goes by the moniker MBS.

Michael's books have sold over a million copies, and *The Coaching Habit* was a *Wall Street Journal* bestseller. He has been featured on the blogs and social media platforms of thought leaders including Seth Godin, Tim Ferriss, and Brené Brown; has appeared on ABC, BBC, CBC, and innumerable podcasts; and has been featured in various publications including *Harvard Business Review*, *Forbes*, and *Fast Company*. His TEDx Talk on Taming Your Advice Monster has been watched more than a million times.

MBS is the founder of Box of Crayons, a learning and development company that helps organizations transform from advice-driven to curiosity-led action. They have trained more than half a million people for clients including Microsoft, Salesforce, TELUS, and Gucci. You can start a conversation with them at BoxOfCrayons.com.

Before he established Box of Crayons, MBS's accomplishments included publishing an academic article on James Joyce and at about the same time a Harlequin-esque short story; playing small roles in helping invent Pizza Hut's stuffed crust pizza and creating "one of the worst single-malt whiskies in existence"; and spending 20 minutes dashing off what has remained GlaxoSmithKline's global vision for more than 20 years.

A Rhodes Scholar, MBS is an Australian who lives in Toronto, Canada.

You can join others who want to be a force for change at MBS.works.

You're awesome and you're doing great.

Hi, I'm Michael – the author of How to Begin.

Thanks for reading that chapter. I hope it's got you curious and hungry for more. Yes? I've got some options for you...



“Piercingly frank, funny, gorgeous, vulnerable, and ultimately really damn helpful.”

Julie Lythcott-Haims,
New York Times bestselling author of
How to Raise an Adult

Pick up a copy here

Buy How to Begin

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Show me the course