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With Your Host

Kara Loewentheil

Seth Godin: People say, I have a marketing problem. And I'm like, no, you don't. You have a strategy problem. Or they'll say, I am the victim of this or having trouble with that. And I'll say, well, let's look at the strategy in the system that's at work.

And what I found is that books by MBAs that are written for generals or fancy CEOs, they're not about strategy either. They're about depersonalized plans that help you win some game that's not that interesting. But strategy, strategy is our philosophy of becoming. Who do we want to be? And who do we want to change? And what's keeping us from doing that? Those are choices. And when we make choices about the future, that's strategy

Welcome to *UnF*ck Your Brain*. I'm your host, Kara Loewentheil, Master Certified Coach and Founder of the *School of New Feminist Thought*. I'm here to help you turn down your anxiety, turn up your confidence and create a life on your own terms, one that you're truly excited to live. Let's go.

Kara Loewentheil: Hello, my friends. All right, today's conversation, I feel like is going to be super interesting, partly because some of you listening to this podcast are going to be like, holy shit, this person's on the podcast. And some of you may never even have heard of him, because he is extremely well known in the kind of marketing and sales and psychology and kind of entrepreneurial world. And then some of you have never even heard of another entrepreneur other than me.

But all of you are going to want to listen to this conversation because we're not capping what we're going to be talking about to marketing or entrepreneurship, we're really going to be talking about strategy.

And I want all of you listening to this who are already thinking like, oh, I am not strategic or that doesn't apply to me or like I don't even know what that, you know, to just notice that there's a lot of social conditioning that teaches women that they are not strategic, that they are like workhorses or nice or lucky or whatever else. So I want you to go into this conversation with the like premise that you are a strategic thinker, and that this conversation is going to up-level how you do that.

So with that caveat out of the way, welcome Seth Godin to the *Unfuck Your Brain* podcast. And can you tell us about your legendary self?

Seth: Well, I might say I'm a workhorse, nice and lucky, because those things might be true on a good day. I'll give you two bios. The first one would be the one if I was pitching to the New York Times, which is I've written 22 bestsellers. I have one of the most popular blogs in the world, and I invented email marketing with 27. But the bio I care about is, I won the birthday lottery, I've been really lucky in my life, and I'm trying to take advantage of that to open doors, shine lights, and solve interesting problems.

Kara: I love it. Although I do think I invented email marketing is a pretty good bit of the bio. I would put that in both bios. That's pretty, not too many people can say that. So you have a new book out. Is that this is the 22nd book or the 23rd book?

Seth: This is the 22nd.

Kara: I mean, having just written one and it almost killed me, I really am extremely impressed by the fact that you've survived that many books. It's called This is Strategy. So you've written 21 other books. Why did you want to write a book specifically on this topic?

Seth: Nobody knows what it is. I mean, I don't do any coaching. But if a friend asks for help, I'll give it to them. And people say, I have a marketing problem. And I'm like, no, you don't. You have a strategy problem. Or they'll say, I am the victim of this or having trouble with that. And I'll say, well, let's look at the strategy in the system that's at work.

And what I found is that books by MBAs that are written for generals or fancy CEOs, they're not about strategy either. They're about depersonalized plans that help you win some game that's not that interesting. But strategy, strategy is our philosophy of becoming. Who do we want to be? And who do we want to change? And what's keeping us from doing that? Those are choices. And when we make choices about the future, that's strategy.

Kara: Why do you think it's so misunderstood?

Seth: OK, so the indoctrination of systems around us is real, and it's been going on for generations. So public school is an indoctrination system that started with a specific intent, but persists. And public school was invented to train compliant factory workers, because the people who paid for public school were running out of employees who would do what they were told.

And think about it, 12 or 20 years in school, they never ask you a question they don't know the answer to. That the entire exercise is about doing what you're told with the minimum amount of effort to get the maximum grade so you can move forward. And so most people are raised to believe if you do what you're supposed to do and you fit in, you will get a reward, which is, I don't know, a steady job, a Netflix account, and you don't have to worry.

But the world has changed. And it's changed so much that we all have choices, like should I use social media and what should I say if I do? Work from home, should I be on Upwork, should I be a freelancer, who should I

be connected to? These are all strategic choices that your grandparents didn't have to make.

And so it's easy to stare at what's in front of us and decide to give up or decide that we're a pawn in the system. But in fact, once you see the system, you can dance with it and you can make a difference. I like to say one of the hallmarks of a good surfer is they find good waves. And a surfer who's stuck on a lake and is complaining about the lack of waves has made a mistake. They should go somewhere where there are better waves.

Kara: It's interesting because, right, it's like the social contract has broken down, but the preparation system hasn't changed.

Seth: Correct.

Kara: So it's like you're getting taught the same attitude of just do what you're told, follow the path. But then the social institutions that support the path are no longer there.

Seth: Exactly. And then social media amplifies all of the class and social chasms. So we see that person who's pretending to live a certain life and we feel even worse. And social media does that on purpose because that's how they make money by saying. saying, people are talking about you behind your back. You want to see what they're saying. And along the way, putting ads in front of you that promise to solve that problem that society and systems cause if you just send them money.

Kara: Mm-hmm. Right, to solve that emotional problem or that feeling of safety or security that we want.

Seth: Exactly.

Kara: So, you just offered one definition of strategy, I think, which was a sort of set of choices about who you're trying to become, which I think is very different. Even if people were going to start that sentence with a set of choices, they would probably end with outcome you're trying to reach or goal you're trying to achieve. You talk a little bit about why you think of that definition that way or get a little deeper into that.

Seth: So if we're going to do more than just what we're told, then we are going to create change. And change is always going to cause tension because we're surrounded by people and systems that don't want to change.

So we have to engage in a bargain, an empathic bargain with other people who are voluntarily coming along. I'm going to cause this tension, but in return, this outcome is going to come from it. And when it works out, we aren't the same person who we were when we started, right?

So people don't say I gave a TED talk as much as they say I'm a TED speaker, because you are a best-selling author, not I wrote a book that became a bestseller, because that's what... What society does is it wants to put us someplace. And sometimes we want to be in a place. And then we get to tell ourselves any story we want about it. And you can tell yourself a story fille d with generosity and humility or not. But there's still the other thing of who did you become in the system that is looking at you from the outside.

Kara: I think that tension piece is really important because one of the things I end up coaching so much on since women are socialized to like get along, don't rock the boat, don't make anyone uncomfortable, is that they want to do something different. But then they want, understandably, but erroneously, everybody to agree and not be upset about it. And I did this too, like my listeners have heard some of them for before when I left, I was my last academic job was I was running a think tank at Columbia Law

School. I'd gone to Yale, I'd gone to Harvard Law School, I was like on the path of becoming a law professor. So it's very traditional path. And then I quit to become a life coach on the internet.

And I wanted everyone to understand that, like a proof of that choice, and think it was a great idea. And like, shockingly, the people who were law professors, or were my family, did not think that at first. And looking back, it's hilarious that I would have had that expectation. But when you are socialized to be so dependent on external validation to know if you're doing a good job, and women, I think, especially get that like, head down, be a good girl, and eventually someone will notice and you'll be rewarded. And like, don't rock the boat. Like getting comfortable with that tension seems like a really critical part of being strategic or making change.

Seth: Exactly. And the other half of it, which sounds weird in this context, is empathy. So people are going to make their own choices and their own expectations. We don't have to say they're fair or right or accept them, but they are going to do that just as we will do that.

So if you're a stand-up comic and you work very hard on your set, and you show up and you bomb, and it turns out that your agent puts you in a room of Italian tourists, none of whom speak English. Whose fault is it that you bombed, right? It's not the tourist's fault. They don't speak English. It's not your fault. You don't speak Italian.

It's the agent who had a mismatch there. So if we show up at the faculty break room and say, great news, everybody. I'm walking away from the career. You've sacrificed so much to have, and I'm going to do something else. And they don't think that's good. They're not going to think that's good because their version of their world, they can't acknowledge that you did the right thing because then what are they doing, right?

And so we have to choose our audience. We can't disappoint everyone all the time or we'll end up, you know, homeless and with nothing to eat. Sooner or later we have to engage with people who choose to engage with us and we can pick which people. We can pick which audience we're trying to please. So I don't know what's happened to you on Amazon since you had your sensational book, but don't read the reviews. And your reviews are astonishing.

Still, don't read the reviews. Because if you get a one-star review, it doesn't mean this is a bad book. It just means this wasn't the book for me. And reading why it's not the book for them doesn't make you a better writer, and you don't get to rewrite that book anyway. Instead, we need to bring our work to the people who need the work and avoid the people we can avoid because it's not for them.

Kara: Yeah, there's so much in there that I think is important. I'm just trying to remember, I remember the last thing I wanted to say was the first one from.

Oh, that empathy I think is so important because it also helps you detach from getting emotionally entrapped in trying to change the minds of people who are not coming along with you or who don't agree with you, right?

And to take it completely out of the professional sphere, I think I've talked about this on the podcast before. This was something I went through on a very personal level with my decision not to have children and the feelings of some of my family members about that. I was so resistant to that for a long time of being very upset that they had a different opinion about that or that they didn't like that or that they were upset about that, right?

And it was so, when I found coaching and started changing the way I think, it was so freeing to develop empathy for the perspective of somebody who has invested a lot in being a parent and in raising a child, specifically me.

Like, of course, right? Thinks that that was a good endeavor, and thinks that that's an important part of happiness and fulfillment. And like having the empathy to be like, oh, that's okay, we can have different perspectives about this. I don't need to take it personally, was so important.

And then the second thing that you just said about the audience, I think that like, whether of course, definitely never read your reviews. But even if you are like, you work in an office, and you have a project that you want to pitch, You have to understand who are the decision makers? Who do you need to ally with? That is being strategic. Right? It's like not fixating on what's Bob going to say because Bob always hates these ideas and he doesn't think employee morale matters or he doesn't think crypto is real or I don't know, whatever Bob is not going to be into your proposal about, but who can you talk to?

So what are your thoughts about how people can kind of put that into practice? There's so much of a negativity bias in the brain and so much of a fear of rejection. So we get so fixated on, like I see this in beginner entrepreneurs all the time, selling to the people who don't want what you are offering, and then you're ignoring the people who do want it.

Seth: Right. OK. So what we're talking about here is how do you create the conditions for change? Because the fact is, when Bob is the last person in the office who hasn't said yes yet, Bob's going to say yes. Because Bob's major dynamic is not he hates employee morale. His major dynamic is he doesn't like to go first.

And so we create the conditions for change when we surround people with the signals that for someone who doesn't like to go first, this is the time to go. And we begin by how we talk to ourselves about this because many people listening to this don't like to go first. So it's very hard to initiate because initiating means going first.

So I begin by differentiating between reassurance and feedback. of times we need reassurance. If you need reassurance that you're on to something, you should have a posse of people who you know when you say am I on to something, they will say yes. Don't ask them if you're on to something when you start taking heroin because that will get you in a lot of trouble, but they're reliable yeses.

Kara: Use your enablers wisely.

Seth: Exactly. But then feedback, like the number of people who are qualified that I trust to give me feedback on my books is less than five. So I will not show one of my books to somebody before it's done if there aren't one of those five people, because I don't need their encouragement and I don't want their feedback.

And so if I'm in an office setting, I know there are people in that setting who don't have power, who don't have authority, but can say, I can imagine that the person you need to get to like this will think that slide three is a challenge. And now you've gotten useful feedback before you went to see these people.

And then the other thing is how we create the circle around the person who has to be confronted with a fait accompli, right? So we walk in and the first thing we say is, Tracy and John and Franklin and Willie all think this is a good idea. I just came in to show it to you. Now we haven't even said what the idea is, but we've made it clear that we see the game and we understand that there's a strategy here to move it forward.

That at no point is this about a judgment of you. It's a judgment of what you made. And those are two totally different things. And if you can't separate those two, it's very hard. So the last part of my rant, sorry, is I think authenticity is a crock. I think authenticity is for friends, and consistency is for professionals.

Kara: Okay, we got to talk more about that. Hold on. I want more that. But I just want to say one thing about what you just said about feedback versus encouragement, because I actually think so many people get a lot of hurt feelings and rejection and like abandoned ideas when they don't know which of those things they're looking for. Right? So they ask for feedback.

And what they really want is encouragement. And then they get feedback. And then they're like, Oh, my God, it's terrible. So just even that for all of you, like , if you're going to ask them what they think about an idea, a project, your dress, whatever, just check first, what are you actually looking for and ask for that explicitly. And don't go asking for quote unquote feedback when what you really want is encouragement, or vice versa. Like there are people who will never even give you constructive criticism because they're so people-pleasing.

So don't ask those people for feedback, you're not going to get it. Okay, I would love to hear more about authenticity versus consistency because I think people on this podcast hear a lot about authenticity. So this will be a different take for them. So can you tell us more about that?

Seth: So the easiest thing to pitch on social media is authenticity. Show up as your true self. You'll be seen. It's affirming. We want to see people who aren't a fraud. Well, sure, because that's a really seductive way for the social media companies to get people to work for them for free.

But the fact is, if you need heart surgery or you're going to see someone in concert, you don't want them, if they have a headache, to be half of what they could be. you would like them to be the best version of themselves. If someone promises, as a contractor, to put in a spare bedroom for you, you don't want to hear about all their authentic reasons why they're behind. You want them, as a professional, to show up consistently. And the beauty of this is if you're rejected when you're being authentic, that's got to hurt.

But if you're rejected when you're being consistent, that's simply a mismatch between the role you announced you were going to play and what that person wants.

And so what we get to do at work is not bring our whole self to work. Work doesn't deserve our whole self, and the system doesn't deserve our whole self. We get to show up as a professional when we don't feel like it, right? Arielle Hochschild wrote about emotional labor 60 years ago. And she was talking about how flight attendants were forced to put on a smile when they didn't feel like it. And it has a long history of misogyny.

But now, it's a privilege, because you don't have to use a shovel. You don't have to break a sweat to do your job. You have to bring emotional labor, doing things as a professional when you don't feel like it, as opposed to being authentically in a bad mood or whatever you are authentically today. And if it's burning you out to do that, then you need a different profession. But if you can feel it the same way a great actor or actress feels it, that's your profession, right? Scarlett Johansson isn't actually a superhero. She just pretends to be one.

Kara: Yeah, that's interesting. I mean, I think that part of what you're saying requires that a person does know who their authentic self is and can be that person in private, which is when I'm talking about authenticity and the way that women are socialized out of it, what I'm really talking about is you not even knowing who you are, lying to those closest to you about what you think or feel, right? All of that people pleasing.

But yeah, I mean, I certainly in the world of entrepreneurs, it's like, you know, there sometimes is a dearth of, yes, you are a professional who needs to just show up every day. I mean, I think having a different career before this was helpful. You can't go to court and be like, sorry, judge and in prepare because Right, it was about nine.

Seth: So in the green room, when I used to travel to speak, it's fascinating because in the green room there's sort of an unspoken contract that we're going to be authentic with each other. And so people you know from the outside as being successful, you get to see who they really are, and friendships form as a result. But once you step out on stage, and the stage is a metaphor for any place you're getting paid to be, it's a different thing. You're a professional.

Kara: And I don't think it has to mean, I mean, you can tell me what you mean, from my perspective, it doesn't have to mean being sort of fake in the sense of pretending to be a person you aren't. I mean, I think one of the pieces of feedback I get all the time is that, like people meet me on the book tour, they see me speaking, they're like, oh, you're the same as you are on the podcast as you are in coaching.

But that's because I approach all those things the same way what you're saying, which is I show up and do my job. I don't lie about who I am. And I'm not pretending to be someone I'm not. But that doesn't mean that I'm right. I don't get on the podcast.

Seth: You just made a brilliant insight here, which is when you get to pick a profession, why not pick one where you can consistently be comfortable with who you are? So that's what I got lucky enough to do. I have a really limited attention span. I like solving interesting problems, and I like going on to the next thing. So there were all these opportunities along the way to get better paying, higher profile jobs where I would have to fake doing something else, and I chose to do this other thing, which rhymes with who I am most of the time.

And if you are backed into a corner where you're doing something that doesn't rhyme, that conflicts with who you want to be, you should stop. Because life is too short to eat away at your soul that way.

Kara: I like that phrase rhymes. So let's, I want to make sure we talk a little about long term versus short-term thinking, because I think that's such a human brain problem, so I'm not here.

Seth: Long-term thinking could be seven minutes, so let's be clear about this. We are not talking about building a 10,000-year-old clock. If you sit down with a three-year-old and make something disappear, they will say, I know how you did that. They will say it within two seconds because they cannot sit with the tension. They cannot sit with the feeling of wonder. They have to make it go away.

And if you have a credit card with a big enough credit limit and there is something in front of you that you can scratch that itch by buying it, you're going to pay for that for the next three years.

The kid down the street who I helped get into college had a choice between a college that would put his family \$250,000 in debt or a college that was free. And he picked the one that was \$250,000 because he couldn't sit four hours to think about it. That's long-term thinking.

The system makes an enormous profit from your short-term need to scratch an itch. That Citibank alone, their credit card division makes a billion dollars every few weeks in profit. And that is 100% about people who couldn't wait an hour for the feeling to go away. before they bought the next thing.

So long-term thinking simply says I'm part of a game. Games don't have to be fun and they don't have to be monopoly. Games are where people make moves and there are responses. And if you play any board game like chess and all you're focusing on is one move ahead, you will always lose. Because the people who are better at it than you are thinking three moves ahead or four moves ahead.

So when we think about a career, for example, I went to school with people who only interviewed with folks who came to the placement office and that's a short-term thing because it's easier to walk seven feet for a job interview than to go through the emotional labor of finding a company, setting up an interview, and traveling 20 minutes to meet with them.

But the payoff over time is enormous because the system is optimized to profit from short-term thinkers. So if you are the person who can wait just a couple extra hours, You get to see what the system's really doing, and the number of opportunities you have opens up enormously.

Kara: I think that's so important, and around here we talked about it as like learning to allow an urge in your body without acting on it.

Seth: Correct.

Kara: Right? And it's like the same urge to buy something as it is to yell at your kid or snap at your partner or punish someone or even to check your e-mail because you're trying to do some harder strategic thinking and you want a dopamine boost. And maybe there's a little like a squirrel, there's a little nut in there you can find to get yourself a little dopamine and not have to do the harder project, right? I mean, I watch my brain like all the time. I feel like when I was writing the book, I really was like, okay, I got to balance this. I got to get myself enough dopamine to be able to do this. What part of my wedding can I plan to like get enough dopamine to then be able to do this project?

But I think that like, I mean, we've talked in a couple of different ways about tension and learning to tolerate it, the tension between people, the tension between what your amygdala wants right now and what your prefrontal cortex can see is better for you, the tension between wanting to strike out on your own or do something different or upend your life, not even upend your life, change your life a little, like wanting everyone to come along with

you. And so much of this just boils down to what is your capacity to tolerate discomfort in in your body when that's happening.

Seth: So here's the nugget that I think gets to the heart of so much of what you teach, which is culture is invented by systems to defend themselves. Systems don't want necessarily to cause people to be stereotyped or to be unhappy. But in order to defend themselves, they invent things that create social strata or expectations, et cetera.

And if you can see that, you can still be a vibrant, youthful member of society without buying into whatever culture needs you to do right now to defend the system that invented it.

Kara: I think a lot of what we talk about on this podcast is like, how does personal self-development work link up with social change? And this is a perfect example, right? Anybody who has made a change in the world has been able to think strategically. And again, not maybe a 10,000 year plan, but able to see what the system is telling them, see that there's a different way, but speak to the right audience. If the social change you have in mind is something literally nobody else wants, then it's very hard to build a movement. To be able to figure out who's the audience.

I don't go out there and talk a lot to men's rights activists, or try to convince JD Vance to change it. That is not my audience. That is a waste of my time. My audience is people who have been socialized in a way where they do want to hear what I have to say, but they have some barriers to their full self-expression or to joining me in that movement.

So speaking to the right audience, tolerating the tension within that audience between me and maybe other people in my life or other institutions, between me and the way I was What is the tension between having been taught to value a certain kind of career or a certain kind of achievement, and then making a different decision.

And then being able to tolerate that tension of like, I mean, if you want to build a long-term business, you've got that discomfort of like, I have to keep working on this thing, which is not fun right now. I've got to show up consistently, even though I don't authentically feel like it. All of that is so crucial for social change and for any kind of change.

Seth: Yeah, and I think the beauty of that example also is I think one of the reasons that people kind of give up, either in their own lives or on global problems, is that, especially with social media and the current news media system, you're so confronted with the overwhelming problems that it's like, well, I don't personally have a strategic solution to global warming and the Middle East, then there's nothing for me to do.

And so being strategic doesn't mean you have the answer to the geopolitical problem writ large. It means what can you do in your community, in your sphere of influence. I don't go out there and talk a lot to men's rights activists, or try to convince JD Vance to change it. That is not my audience. That is a waste of my time.

So good. Is there anything else that you wish I'd ask you or that you want to share with people about the book before we tell them where they can get it.

Seth: So here's one practical mental hack, because I love the way you frame things. There's a circle of now and there's a circle of us. The circle of us is how big is the world as you think of it. A toddler has a circle of us equal to three, their parents and themselves. And it gets bigger as we grow, or sometimes not. And the circle of now is how long is now?

Is it one second from now? Is it an hour from now? Is it a week from now? And being strategic simply means make your circle of us and your circle of now bigger.

And the other tip I have is it's really hard to become strategic by yourself. That it's free to find a buddy, a partner, someone you're not related to, maybe not your best friend, who you will check in with once a week and honestly tell them what your strategy is right now. Honestly tell them the systems that you're seeing. Honestly tell them what you're doing to increase your circle of us and your circle of now. Because just knowing you have to get on a Zoom call with them will change how you spend your days because they're in your head.

And so that's why I wrote the book because it's much easier, as you know, to reach a lot of people with anything but a book. And what a book does is it's a testament. It says, here, touch this. It means something. And so every once in a while, I have no choice, but I have to make a book. So that's why I made it.

And talking to people like you is just such a treat. So thank you for doing what you do. You can find out about it at Seths.blog/TIS, which stands for This Is Strategy.

Kara: Amazing. So buy the book. And for those of you who feel fired up about this, I will say another good way to create that structure for yourself is obviously to get coaching to join a community of people who are working on this because people see all the time when people when the client center for coaching programs that they actually start improving the problem before they've even started because mentally in your mind you now are focused on making change as opposed to it's on this back burner of like someday I'm going to get to that I'm always once.

Seth: Once you pay for it the story you tell yourself is totally different.

Kara: Yeah, 100%. So you can also come join the Feminist Self-Help Society, but go order Seth's book. Obviously, with 21 books already to his

name, he knows what he's doing. And I think we could all use a little more strategy in our brains. Thank you so much for coming on the show.

Seth: Thank you for having me. Go make a ruckus.

If you're loving what you're learning on the podcast, you have got to come check out the Feminist Self Help Society. It's our newly revamped community and classroom where you get individual help to better apply these concepts to your life, along with a library of next level blow your mind, coaching tools and concepts that I just can't fit in a podcast episode.

It's also where you can hang out, get coached, and nerd out about all things thought work and feminist mindset with other podcast listeners just like you and me. It's my favorite place on Earth and it will change your life, I guarantee it. Come join us at www.unfuckyourbrain.com/society. I can't wait to see you there.