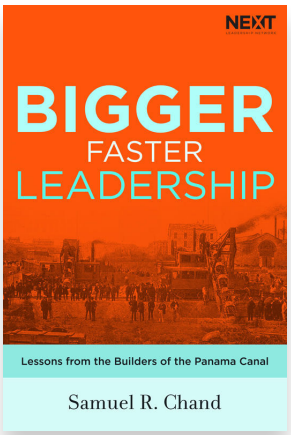

Bigger Faster Leadership

THE SUMMARY

Thomas Nelson - NEXT - Harper Collins 2017

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. Samuel R. Chand
Dr. Samuel R. Chand is an author, speaker and leadership consultant.

Introduction

Bigger and faster. Business executives, pastors, and leaders of nonprofits all want their organizations to have greater size and speed. They need to understand the fundamental principle that drives more rapid growth. It's a principle I discovered a few years ago on a surprising afternoon.

I had never been to Panama City, but I was invited to speak at a conference there. Some friends took me to see the sights, so we stood in the pleasant sun on an observation deck, watching some of the biggest ships on earth entering and leaving locks whose gates looked like skyscrapers. The hulls of the ships were only a few feet away from each side. I instantly realized this was an engineering marvel—a wonder of the world.

Then they took me to the museum that told the amazing and complex history of the canal. As I absorbed the way the canal was built, it dawned on me that I was looking at one of the most important leadership principles I'd ever discovered: the size and speed of the ships are completely controlled by the systems and structures created by the engineers and the workmen.

Published by Study Leadership, Inc. 872 New Britton Rd, Carol Stream, IL 60188

Convene

Bigger Faster Leadership

Wherever I go, leaders in churches, nonprofit organizations, and businesses tell me privately, "Sam, something is missing, but I can't put my finger on it. There must be something more." They feel vaguely discouraged that their organizations aren't growing bigger and moving faster, but they can't find an adequate solution to their dilemma. That day at the Panama Canal gave me a dozen fresh insights about leadership. I jotted down a lot of notes as I stood on the observation deck and walked through the museum that afternoon. I realized more passion isn't the answer, and bigger dreams aren't always the solution. Every leader is asking two questions. How can we grow, and how can we grow faster? The only way organizations can grow bigger and move faster is by accelerating the excellence of their systems and structures.

The history and effectiveness of the Panama Canal is a metaphor that gives us a fresh way to think about leading our organizations. The most important issues that determine real success are always about systems (including the processes of the budget, building, programs, manufacturing, and marketing) and structures (the people in the organizational chart who implement the processes).

Chapter 1: How Do You Define the Need?

In any business, church or nonprofit organization, a clear definition of the need is essential to produce a compelling motivation to succeed. Entrepreneurs notice a gap in the market they can fill by creating a new company or a new product. Pastors are gripped by the reality that a segment of their community hasn't been reached with the gospel of grace. Visionary leaders are moved with compassion to establish nonprofit organizations to meet the needs of distressed people. In each organization, success is defined simply and succinctly. If it's too complex, it can't capture the imaginations of staff teams, employees, and volunteers, and it won't touch the hearts of those they're trying to impact.

Leaders of organizations often tell me they're not happy with their size and speed, but they keep doing the same things repeatedly, hoping the results will magically change the next time. Instead, they need to step back to analyze their systems and structures. If they improve these, size and speed almost inevitably follow.

Systems aren't just buildings, programs, products, and budgets. They are *processes* that create and use buildings, programs, products, and budgets to facilitate growth and change. The systems include the organization's platforms, communication tools, and training devices to impart vision, inspire hope to meet the need, and enlist passionate involvement.

The structure is the organizational chart of people who work together. We don't just fill in boxes on a chart. We find passionate, skilled people who see the system as an essential tool to meet the compelling need and make the vision a reality. The explorers and traders of the world desperately wanted a route across the narrow Isthmus of Panama to cut almost eight thousand miles off the path from New York to San Francisco, but the need and the vision went stagnant for more than three hundred years.

Bigger Faster Leadership

Long seasons of stagnation can be mind-numbing. Instead of trying harder with the same systems and structures, I recommend conducting a thorough analysis. Clarify the need and the vision so you're captured again by the what, and the why, and then spend plenty of time figuring out how you can reconstruct your systems and structures so they can support more size and speed.

Chapter 2: How Do You Handle Colossal Failure?

Following the successful digging of the Suez Canal, which reduced the water route from Europe to Asia by months and thousands of miles in 1869, the French began construction on a canal across the Isthmus of Panama in 1881. The construction plan, however, was fatally flawed. In the rainy seasons, the tranquil river became a raging torrent, washing away everything in its path. Mudslides buried equipment and men. Stagnant pools of water bred clouds of mosquitoes and more than twenty-two thousand workers died of malaria and yellow fever. After eight years, the funding was spent but the canal was only 40 percent complete, and the project went bankrupt.

When the numbers turn down, or unexpected setbacks happen, or conflict ravages an organization, some leaders immediately try to put the best face on it. They say, "Everything's fine," but plenty of people know it's not the truth, so the leader begins to lose an organization's most valuable commodity which is the people's trust. Whenever you experience organizational disappointments, speak the truth without any spin. Your people know when you're hedging the truth.

Along with rigorous honesty about the present, the leader needs to be prepared to at least begin the conversation about a better future. The question isn't, "What went wrong?" but rather, "What can we do now to move forward?" It's human nature to try to avoid any responsibility for failure by passing it to anyone and everyone, but good leaders assume more responsibility, not less. The disappointment may not be their fault, but it's their responsibility to help the team interpret the situation through the lens of hope and work together to make progress. Leaders need to express again and again, "We can do better. We have what it takes. We have great ideas, and we have the right people to turn the corner and make progress. We can get to where we need to go."

The French effort to dig and build a canal across Panama proved to be a colossal failure. For years, the scarred landscape lay silent, with only an aborted attempt by the French to renew the work. Finally, they admitted they couldn't do it. A new vision was needed, with a new source of energy and enthusiasm.

Chapter 3: Where Do You Find Fresh Passion and Purpose?

Not long after he became president, Theodore Roosevelt realized American military and industrial strength would be greatly enhanced by completing a canal across Panama. In a speech to congress in 1901, he asserted, "No single great material work which remains to be undertaken on this continent is as of such consequence to the American people."

Within months Roosevelt took action. When negotiations with Colombia stalled, Roosevelt instigated a revolution in Panama. Within hours the "battle" for Panama was over, and on November 3, 1903, Panama became a nation. The new Panamanian government signed a treaty with the United States, and the Canal Zone was created. The grand project was on again!

Where others saw defeat and doubt, Roosevelt saw opportunity. The French failure in Panama didn't scare him. He had complete confidence in American capabilities to go anywhere, face any challenge, and overcome every obstacle. Like every great leader, Roosevelt never employed the word "enough"; for him, there was always "more."

When we experience significant setbacks, we may wonder if the dream is dead. We need to dig deep to find that blend of optimism and tenacity. We ask ourselves, "Is the need still there? Is the vision still alive? Can we find a way to fulfill it?" Halfhearted statements won't do. The people around us need to see in our eyes and hear in our voices affirmation that we still believe. We believe the need must be met, we believe we are the people who can lead the effort, and we believe in the people around us.

Recasting the new vision is usually more challenging than casting the original one. The disappointment is a harsh reality, but it doesn't help to focus on the past. A fresh picture of the future is needed. The leader must deconstruct the new vision in a dozen ways, describing what fulfilling the vision will mean to the people who are touched by it. A clear picture of the future helps people stay positive, and it soothes their recurring anxieties.

At the same time, the leader needs to be honest about the cost and the loss. All change involves loss. The leader must patiently explain how changes in the systems and the organizational structure will affect each person, giving clarity and offering hope that the change will be worth it.

Chapter 4: How Do You Craft the Right Plan?

A big vision usually starts with the primary leader, like Roosevelt's bold commitment to succeed where the French had failed. A compelling vision, though, remains only an inspiring strategic concept until the leader involves competent people in the tactical planning to make it happen. The leader often has a good idea of the what, but he usually doesn't have a good grasp of when, where, who, how, and how much. The planning phase must be pushed down to the level where many skilled, passionate, creative people give their best efforts to craft a comprehensive plan. But even then, it's always flexible enough to be changed when new challenges and opportunities present themselves. The leader articulates the need and the big idea of meeting the need, but he enlists others to create plans to identify the size and the speed, and then to create the systems and structures to achieve those goals.

Leaders may ask too quickly, "Is this big idea realistic?" This question needs to be asked at the tactical level. If it's asked too soon, it short-circuits the essential process of dreaming big dreams. By their nature, big dreams don't seem realistic at all! But on the other side, if a vision isn't keeping a leader up at night, it's not big enough. A dream should be so challenging that it inflames the leader's deepest passions and demands the best ideas.

Then to begin the planning process, carefully choose a team of wise, optimistic, experienced, creative people. The members should have diverse perspectives—not so radical that their demands will burn the house down, but different enough to produce sparks that will ignite the best discussions. They need to be forthright about both the obstacles and the possible solutions. I want people who feel the freedom to poke holes in other's ideas but who can also affirm good ideas when other people come up with them. I also want people who know how to implement the plans we craft. They can't just be dreamers. They also need to be doers.

Chapter 5: What's in Your Suitcase?

I have a picture of a giraffe in my office. It reminds me that this amazing creature sees farther out into the African savanna than any other land animal. It's not the most beautiful, and it's not the most graceful. It has a limited food source, and it can thrive only in a certain type of geography. To be honest, the giraffe looks as though it came from a Dr. Seuss book. From a distance, it can see hungry lions lurking in the tall grass or leopards in trees, and it can spot waterholes and trees full of nourishing leaves. All great leaders see *farther* than others, and they see challenges and opportunities *sooner* than others. I want to be that kind of leader.

When I pack for a trip, I look at the weather report at my destination. If I'm going to Chicago in January, I pack very differently than if I'm going to San Antonio in August. Someone who opens my suitcase might not know my exact destination, but the contents would make it clear what conditions I anticipate. If I unpack your organizational suitcase, what will I find? Are you packed for where your organization has been since the nineteenth century, are you packed for where you are today, or are you packed for your future?

In any suitcase we find the skills and vision of our leadership team. We dig down farther and pull out the systems. Are they the ones that have brought us this far and can take us no farther, or are they the systems that can take us to the next level of growth? In your communication, how much time is spent analyzing the past? How much is spent focusing on the present? And how much is devoted to anticipating the future? In the church we have a rich and storied history we want to cherish, but we don't want to be captives of our history. The reason it's rich and storied is that bold men and women saw into the future and made dramatic decisions that changed the world. I find too many leaders who don't even consider the weather report at their destination. They're too busy making their current systems and structures work to even think about the future beyond the coming weeks and months.

Chapter 6: You Didn't Expect This, Did You?

As work began in the Canal Zone, the engineers faced daunting logistical problems, but the engineering problems weren't the only issue in Panama. Disease stalked every person every day. The living conditions were deplorable. Thousands of workers lived in rotting shanties on stilts over swamps covered in green scum, with no sewage facilities except the water below. The stench was overpowering, and the water held the perfect breeding ground for insects of all kinds. More than 85 percent of workers were hospitalized at some point.

Roosevelt soon realized sanitary conditions at the canal were of utmost importance. In June 1904 he assigned Colonel William Gorgas to fumigate the Canal Zone. Every swamp, every stagnant pool, and every ditch had to be sprayed regularly to kill mosquitoes and their eggs and larvae. Gorgas asked Congress for the astronomical sum of $1 million for the equipment and manpower to cover almost five hundred square miles of jungle and swamp.

By August 1906, the monthly number of yellow fever patients was cut in half, and in September only seven new cases appeared. On November 11, the last victim of yellow fever in the Canal Zone died. Malaria was more difficult to control, but by 1910, the death rates from this disease would drop to less than 1 percent. Roosevelt and Gorgas had faced the greatest threat to their work in the form of tiny but lethal insects, and they found a way to accomplish their mission.

Leaders have mosquito problems too. We face seemingly insignificant "bites" of setbacks and opposition that can turn healthy environments into sick ones. In every organization, "mosquitoes" are more than annoying; they create fear and distrust, distract people from their tasks, and can wreak the whole endeavor. No one is immune.

Some of the most common mosquitoes I've seen in organizations include passive-aggressive behavior, unresolved conflict and resentment, gossip and secret alliances, poor communication, lack of accountability, failure to meet deadlines, "Yes, but" resistance, jealousy, and unhealthy competition. The leader's challenge is to notice the mosquitoes, and the carriers, before they can infect others. Don't be surprised when your boldest, most carefully considered plans result in a swarm of mosquitoes. Anyone can be a carrier. But if we notice soon enough, this kind of sharp-eyed leadership solves a lot of problems before the eggs hatch.

Chapter 7: How Do You Handle Opposition?

Roosevelt's first chief engineer, John Wallace, expected the US government to provide for every need speedily, eagerly, and generously. Soon he experienced the frustrations of having to deal with delays caused by Congress, which tried to micromanage the project from thousands of miles away. When he complained to Roosevelt, his implied resignation was accepted.

John Stevens was immediately selected to replace Wallace and he made remarkable progress. Roosevelt visited in November 1906, and left with the utmost confidence in Stevens. But two months later Stevens wrote a long and impassioned letter to the president, complaining that he felt subject to attack from "enemies in the rear" meaning certain members of congress. Roosevelt accepted his implied resignation.

Two gifted, dedicated, experienced chief engineers broke under the oppressive constraints and delays caused by government officials they had expected to give them all the help they needed. Wallace and Stevens thought members of congress would be their allies, but they became their enemies.

Sooner or later, every grand, bold vision encounters significant opposition. We may assume that opposition is always destructive, but it can be a powerful force that crystallizes our imagination, focuses our plans, and drives us to succeed. Every leader has a target on his or her back. It comes with the job. The bigger the vision, the more people sneer, mock, condemn, and accuse, and the more at least a few of them try to get in the way to block progress.

Wallace and Stevens were exemplary engineers with backgrounds that equipped them for their roles to lead the work at the canal, but they couldn't handle the resistance and ridicule from Congress and officials from the Isthmian Canal Commission. When we're under the strain of resistance and ridicule, we often choose exactly the wrong solution which is doubling down on all these behaviors because they feel so logical and right. We need a better and a very different answer. We need to take time to step back, gain some perspective, realize we're digging the hole even bigger by these actions, and go deeper into our source of security and significance. Instead of putting our heads down and running over people who disagree with us, we can walk away for a while, talk to a friend or mentor to get a fresh perspective, and then wade back in with a powerful blend of humility (we don't know it all), love (those people may be acting out of their own insecurities too), and strength (I answer to God, and he will see me through).

Chapter 8: How Can You Make Your Systems Hum?

Roosevelt wanted a chief engineer with the same brilliance and dogged determination he had. He needed someone who wouldn't wilt under pressure, who had engineering expertise, leadership skills, and a steadfast commitment to overcome any obstacles. Some historians have surmised that Colonel George Washington Goethals was selected because Roosevelt wanted the army to control the effort at the canal, but it's more likely he was searching for a man of unquestioned dedication to the task and that man happened to be a respected officer in the army.

We could identify quite a few differences between Goethals and his predecessors, but let me point out a few of the most important differences between military and civilian cultures. Military culture

moves quickly, has a clear chain of command, values quick decisions, has little patience with delays, little talk and much action, training before the task, usually motivated by duty and honor, and is quick to replace incompetence.

Civilian culture, on the other hand, moves slowly, often has a complicated chain of command, values slow and methodical analysis, expects delays, engages in much talk before action, supplies training during the task, is often motivated by self-interest, and slow to replace incompetence. Churches, businesses, and nonprofit organizations aren't the armed forces, but it may serve us well to at least look at the strengths of different cultures to see what we might learn from them. One of the principles we might learn from military culture is that turning a blind eye to incompetence or a bad attitude inevitably leads to disaster down the road.

I'm not insinuating that leaders need to clean house and fire every person on their teams every few years, but I'm recommending that leaders evaluate the capacity of each person on the team from time to time. Every staff member needs to know: "If you don't grow, you've gotta go."

It's never a mystery who needs to be let go and replaced in any organization. When I meet with leadership teams, I often ask this question: "If you could walk into the office tomorrow and fire one person and there would be no consequences at all for you or the organization, do you know who you would fire?" I have yet to find any leader who didn't instantly say, "Of course!"

Chapter 9: How Can You Utilize People with Different Talents?

Many leaders value diversity, but they haven't clearly articulated its value to their people. Some assume diversity is skin color, ethnicity, nationality, socioeconomic status, or age but real diversity is found in the multicolored hues of how people perceive and think. Our perceptions share what we value, how we analyze challenges, how we pursue opportunities, how we relate to others, and how we communicate about all these things.

It's easy to get hung up on superficial differences and fail to tap into the insights of those who appear to be different from us. Most of the leaders I know would insist, "I value diversity! It's not a problem at all." But when I talk to some of their young staff members, I hear a different story. The question isn't whether leaders *want* to be inclusive and *want* their teams to be diverse, but whether the people with different ideas *feel* valued. When leaders respect their teams, keys members know it. We all have our antennae finely tuned to sense the messages that are coming to us every minute of every day. We pick up genuineness and phoniness, and young people have especially sensitive receptors.

Leaders need to communicate creatively, fully, and often to be sure every person on the team grasps the value of diversity in perception. Differences can be a team's greatest strength if a leader explains the power of unique contributions, or they can create silos and divisions. The leader is responsible to create a positive environment where ideas are freely shared without demanding agreement.

How do we select people for our teams? In our organizations we need to have some criteria for selection. As we've seen, if we value diversity, we'll need at least a few people who have perspectives and backgrounds that are different from our own. What makes them valuable? Look for men and women whose eyes light up when you talk about the need and the vision, people who have confidence in God and in themselves and people who aren't afraid to ask hard questions and explore new ways of getting things done.

Years ago, as I was speaking on the importance of alignment, I wrote on the board, "Proper People Placement Prevents Problems." After I spoke, someone in the meeting handed me a piece of paper. It read: "Poor People Performance Prevents Prosperity." I laughed, but it's true.

Chapter 10: How Can You Produce Creative Tension?

I've walked into a few offices of organizations that asked me to consult with them, only to have the leaders smile and confidently tell me, "Sam, we don't have any conflict here. We live in perfect harmony with each other." They think I'll be impressed, but this statement tells me one of two things about the leader and the team. Either they've all been inhaling chemicals and they're in a coma, or they have such low goals that they don't have enough passion to generate different opinions about how to get things done. If we're alive and trying to do anything significant, tension is inevitably created.

When I talk to leaders and know they've had an important meeting with their team or board, I ask, "How was your meeting?" Some of them respond by shaking their heads and saying, "Not too good. It was tense." I want to shout, "That's great!"

People are afraid of tension when they assume it will hurt them, but wise leaders use tension in ways that aren't limiting, judgmental, or condescending. They never use it to categorize or marginalize. One of the traits of a dynamic, healthy organizational culture is that people are unafraid to share their ideas. In this environment, creative ideas flow like the waters at Niagara.

This kind of culture doesn't happen naturally. It must be modeled, cultivated, and nurtured by a leader who welcomes disagreement and doesn't insist on having the right answer or the last word. In this atmosphere, leaders can share a bigger vision for more size and speed, and the people feel the tension without being afraid. In fact, they're inspired by the description of the pressing need and the scope of the vision to meet it. Leaders always create tension. If your intention in widening your canal is to create a tension-free zone, you can forget it. You won't create a canal that moves the masses; you'll only build a swimming pool where people relax while they do nothing.

The ability to embrace and use tension is one of the biggest tools in the leader's toolbox to widen the canal to provide more size and speed for the organization. Tension is an enemy only if we are afraid of it and we let it poison relationships. If we teach our people the benefits of creative disagreement, we'll stimulate creativity and uncover more opportunities. It's well worth the time and effort.

Chapter 11: Does It Ever End?

The Panama Canal operated beautifully after it was opened ten long years after Americans arrived on the isthmus, but it required constant maintenance. Heavy rains caused minor mudslides, so dredges were constantly busy clearing silt from the bottom. The engines that opened the gates at the locks needed continuous maintenance to be sure the gates opened smoothly and completely. In 1977, President Jimmy Carter negotiated a new treaty with Panama, giving up control of the Canal Zone in exchange for a guarantee of neutrality. Now scheduling the ships in the canal and performing routine maintenance are Panama's responsibility.

Some emerging leaders believe that if they can ever achieve their grand plans for growth, they can then hit the autopilot button and coast to ever-higher levels of size and speed. Wiser leaders know it doesn't work that way. When they hit their highest goals, they certainly celebrate, and they may take a few days to relax, but they're soon back at the job because their work never ends. The forces of entropy, the tendency toward disorder, operate in every sphere in nature, and they operate in organizations too. If we're not diligent, things will begin to unravel, sometimes with alarming speed.

Many leaders strive for stability and consistency, but I would argue that these aren't the right goals. Too often they lead to stagnation and eventual erosion. In the seasons of an organization when we consolidate growth, we need to be vigilant to keep the operation running smoothly. Our commitment is always to excellence. Then, when the time is right, we will be ready to launch the next new initiative.

Sometimes leaders need to inject a fresh vision into the life of the organization to jump-start a new wave of growth. The completion of a project or the fulfillment of a goal gives leaders and their teams the confidence to try something new to inject a new wave of instability into the organization. New ideas and bigger visions aren't seen as threats but as the next wave in a never-ending pursuit of *what might be* instead of settling for *what already is*. New products are envisioned, new groups to be reached are identified, new strategies are considered, and new leaders are enlisted.

Chapter 12: What's the Next Big Dream?

When the nation of Panama took control of the canal on the last day of 1999, the newly formed Panama Canal Authority faced a serious problem. In recent years nations had been building larger cargo ships that couldn't fit in the locks of the canal, so they were losing business. After more than a year of planning and negotiations and a $5.25 billion referendum, construction began on new locks that were designed to be 1,400 feet long, 400 feet longer than the ones that had been used for almost a century. The new locks were designed to be 180 feet wide instead of 110 feet. While the largest of the ships that previously fit in the locks were called Panamax ships, the new larger size specifications now allow for what are called Neopanamax ships.

Convene

Bigger Faster Leadership

The people of Panama are counting on the new and improved canal to bolster their economy. They made a big bet on the success of expansion. So far, shippers are lining up to make the transit with larger ships. The true impact of the new construction won't be fully known for a few years, but the canal will continue to pay an enormous role in the world's transportation of commerce and military resources.

We might look at the recent expansion of the Panama Canal and conclude these leaders waited too long. Shipbuilders had been constructing larger ships that couldn't get through the canal for years.

So why do some leaders wait so long to launch a new wave of growth? There may be many reasons. Some simply don't realize their organizations are eroding in front of their eyes, others are afraid of the pushback they'll undoubtedly feel if they launch a new initiative, and a few are simply exhausted and lack the energy to lead the charge. Whatever the reason, these leaders and their organizations miss the opportunity to increase their size and speed because they fail to revitalize their systems and structures.

But are true leaders ever satisfied? Is a certain level of size and speed enough? Are there not more mountains to climb and no new lands to discover? Is incremental growth acceptable, or is it time to launch something that will propel the organization to a higher level?

In our organizations, our task is to bridge the divide between what is and what might be, to bring meaning to those to have lost hope, to bring value to people who want a better life, and to make human connections richer and more meaningful. Our work as leaders is no less than this, and our challenge is much like the one faced by those who looked at the jungles of Panama and wondered, "Can we really do this?" They answered, "Yes, we can."

That's our answer too.