

Grand Challenges

Grand Challenges galvanize members for the greater good

by Seth Kahan



Ending childhood obesity. Preventing a Zika epidemic. Combating the devastating illness of depression.

These are big, messy problems with lot of moving parts. No one industry or organization controls all the contributing factors. No single “owner” can step up and take action. No obvious solutions or quick fixes are in sight. Throwing money at an awareness program here or a targeted initiative there only squanders resources and resolve.

The sheer complexity of such daunting issues makes them perfect Grand Challenges. A Grand Challenge is an audacious goal that addresses an intractable problem.

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Tufts University has the audacity to tackle a growing health crisis. **ChildObesity180** marshals the expertise of public, nonprofit, academic, and private resources to reverse the trend of childhood obesity.

Entomological Society of America has the audacity to take on one of the world’s deadliest animal species. It is developing collaborative control options to combat the mosquito that transmits the Zika virus, dengue, and other diseases.

UCLA has the audacity to declare they will eliminate depression by the end of the

century. The **Depression Grand Challenge** unites scientists, scholars, and other stakeholders to cut the burden of depression in half by 2050 and ultimately eradicate this life-sapping illness.

Each of these groups are bringing the like-minded and the openhearted together to work out entrenched, systemic problems that are usually relegated to the “too hard” pile.

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These problems are too hard - if they are addressed with the limited vision of just one organization or one sector or one discipline. A Grand Challenge is an intensely collaborative and inclusive undertaking. Building vibrant coalitions is essential.

Not every leader is up to a Grand Challenge. It requires an advocate and champion willing to apply a different set of skills. Most executives can identify an area of great public interest related to their organization. They can frame the crisis. However, what must happen next is



radically different from the standard operating procedure of: Identify, Attack, Measure, Move On.

Systems leadership brings forth different strengths than organizational leadership. Attracting, guiding, and inspiring a Grand Challenge requires a leader willing to commit the time and patience it takes to:

- Invest in science-based research.
- Seek and develop committed partners.
- Build trust across diverse groups.
- Think in terms of systems.
- Balance varying metrics and ways of measuring progress.
- Share leadership.
- Allow transformation of beliefs and relationships.

That is a lot to ask. However, a Grand Challenge has the powerful potential to elevate an organization's value in the eyes of members and the public.

Members see contributing to a noble cause as energizing and meaningful - and this relevance is particularly important to the next-generation workforce. A greater goal creates opportunities to demonstrate initiative, connect with like-minded experts, and take pride in sharing expertise. The public sees a Grand Challenge as a responsible and constructive contribution to a shared problem. Overall, the association benefits from more engaged members, new learning, new partners and supporters, and a higher profile.

Associations up to a Grand Challenge have an opportunity to stretch and grow. They can directly promote the wellbeing of members themselves, such as the **Healthy**

Nurse, Healthy Nation efforts by the American Nurses Association, or provide the scientists to work hand-in-hand with local communities on environmental solutions around the world, such as the **Thriving Earth Exchange**, powered by the American Geophysical Union.

As Winston Churchill observed, "The first quality that is needed is audacity." And as his countrymen Lennon and McCartney added, "...I get by with a little help from my friends."

Are you ready to take on a Grand Challenge?

- Can you identify an audacious, intractable, systemic problem that your membership has the skills, knowledge, and resources to help solve?
- Can you afford to allocate time, attention, and resources to this intensely collaborative effort for at least 2-5 years?
- Can you develop partnerships rooted in authentic dedication to finding solutions?
- Can you move beyond high-control, organizational leadership skills to develop collaborative, systems leadership skills based on new beliefs, relationships, and approaches?
- Can you commit to serving as a personal ambassador who represents the Grand Challenge to various stakeholders: in government, education, and in the public and private sectors?



A Design Summit generates the energy a Grand Challenge requires

You have identified an intractable problem. You know your membership can bring passion and clarity to the search for a solution. So how do you get started on a Grand Challenge?

Don't start alone.

You must reach out to people and organizations that can bring imagination and action and help you build momentum. These key partners and supporters will amplify and extend your resources and bring more visibility to your Grand Challenge.

How this outreach happens is critical to your success. In working with associations undertaking a Grand Challenge, I developed the daylong Design Summit. This event combines the best aspects of a memorable party and an inspiring think tank. A well thought-out Design Summit generates enthusiasm about the possibilities and the energy to move forward.

The first action item is to create a guest list that goes beyond the usual suspects (i.e., existing partners). You are making a bold move and your guest list should reflect that. Aim high. Include celebrities, government officials, innovators, CEOs, educators from top institutions, and thought leaders. Ask them to recommend additional participants. As you gain commitments from intriguing people, share those names to create a buzz.

Make it clear to participants that this gathering will be an exploration shared by

like-minded people. It is an exchange of ideas, not a presentation or sales pitch. The goal is to bond and then draw on the perspectives, talents, and resources of an eclectic group to "crowd source" definition and direction for the Grand Challenge. The steering committee and a plan of attack are still TBD; this summit establishes the shared agenda.

Design Summits feature three key activities:

Introductions and icebreaker. These activities reveal the talent in the room and establish a comfortable environment in which everyone can think aloud, ask questions, and contribute.

TED-style talks by participants, followed by group discussion. These short talks, no more than 10 minutes each, frame the situation, the potential, and the resources needed. Most importantly they spark the conversations that creates a common understanding.

Collaboration on the way forward. This set of exercises determines who else needs to be involved, how efforts will be coordinated and communicated, and how to measure progress.

A Design Summit gets you well way to undertaking a Grand Challenge from a position of shared strength.

The inspirational power of such a meeting of minds is tremendous. I witnessed this firsthand at the Design Summit that launched the American Nurses Association Healthy Nurse, Healthy Nation Grand



Challenge. More than 30 people participated and the creative spark was undeniable. Our participant from Harvard University even commented, "Of all the many conferences and meeting I've gone to, this is by far the coolest!"

The journey of 1,000 miles begins with one step. A Design Summit gives you a roadmap that ensures you move in the right direction, without losing that precious, powerful momentum.

Nurses Share the Health

I am honored to be helping the American Nurses Association (ANA) launch the Healthy Nurse, Healthy Nation Grand Challenge In fall 2016. Their goal is to increase the personal wellness of more than America's 3.4 million registered nurses and by extension the country.

This effort to improve the overall health of the nation's nurses will also benefit their patients, co-workers, families, and communities. Healthy nurses make more credible and respected role models, advocates, and educators. Most importantly, they are healthy themselves.

Dr. Marla Weston, PhD, RN, FAAN is championing the Grand Challenge, with the

support of the entire ANA executive leadership team. "Nurses know a lot about health. We are going to help them fill the gap between knowing and doing," says Weston.

Thirty participants attended the Design Summit that initiated the Grand Challenge. This included executives from CVS Caremark, the U.S. Army Nurse Corps, Harvard University, Catholic Health Initiatives, Clinton Global Initiative, Institute for Healthcare Improvement, Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine, Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine among others. Together, partners are creating tools, methods, feedback, and recognition to create a social movement to change behavior and encourage positive lifestyles.

Seth Kahan has worked with over 100 leaders on large-scale change, innovation, growth and strategy. He is a designated Thought-leader and Exemplar in Change Leadership by the Society for Advancement of Consulting®. He speaks to 1000s of executives every year on the topics of change and innovation. Seth is the author of the business bestseller, *Getting Change Right*, and *Getting Innovation Right*. His next book is a collaboration with Julie Jordan Avritt, *Grand Challenge: How Leaders Grow their Businesses by Addressing the World's Most Intractable Problems*.

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