

WHAT IS A GRAND CHALLENGE?

The term *grand challenge* has dual meanings; it can be used to refer to an intractable, systemic social problem, as well as to any bold, multidisciplinary, systems-oriented initiative developed to tackle such a large-scale concern.

Einstein said that our problems cannot be solved with the same thinking that created them, but in an increasingly complex world, we may need to look through the lens of the problem in order to see more clearly back to its roots. Modern dilemmas have multiple causes, multiple symptoms, and manifold impacts. To set about slowing, preventing, or resolving the stubborn crises of our time, we must begin to see and think and communicate about them in entirely new ways. We must be willing to take a multidimensional, or *systems view*, and to embrace shared models for understanding and leadership.

And we have to be willing to ask ourselves hard questions and respond with hard truths.

■ *Are you attempting a legitimate Grand Challenge?*

When UCLA Grand Challenges began, their aims were unprecedented. Make Los Angeles 100 percent sustainable in water and energy by 2050. Cut the global epidemic of depression in half by 2050. These goals are clear, targeted, and time bound. They're ambitious and almighty.

Yes, the risks of failure are real, but the risks to humanity—should no one take on the risks—are much *realer*.

Grand Challenges aren't programs; they aren't small scale initiatives. They are legendary. Their stakeholders may be the whole of the human race.

It's critical to the success of your initiative to ask whether you intend to embark on a true Grand Challenge or a different kind of campaign. To generate an authentic Grand Challenge, an initiative must meet a few bold but

basic criteria. Not to meet them is to set yourself up to fail in a big way, and doing so may take down not only your initiative, but your organization. Failing along the way in a truly audacious Grand Challenge will be a natural part of the process of iterative learning. But failing to build an authentic Grand Challenge at all could cost you dearly in public good will, future donations, and professional and political capital.

A Grand Challenge will scare you, and it should. But it will also call to you, because it must.

Criteria of a Grand Challenge

01 A Grand Challenge is created to address a socially intractable problem.

Your GC will identify impact to a community of individuals—or perhaps to humanity as a whole. It will address the health (balance with landscape, self, or other) of said community and seek ways to bring these forces into balance.

The problem your GC seeks to address will present as intractable and systemic, and may also be referred to as a “wicked problem” (Rittel, 1967). Wicked problems are identified as having:

- multiple causes;
- multiple symptoms;
- multiple solutions;
- and multiple stakeholders (Wilber and Watkins, 2015).

■ *Systemic problems always require multiple disciplines to combat.*

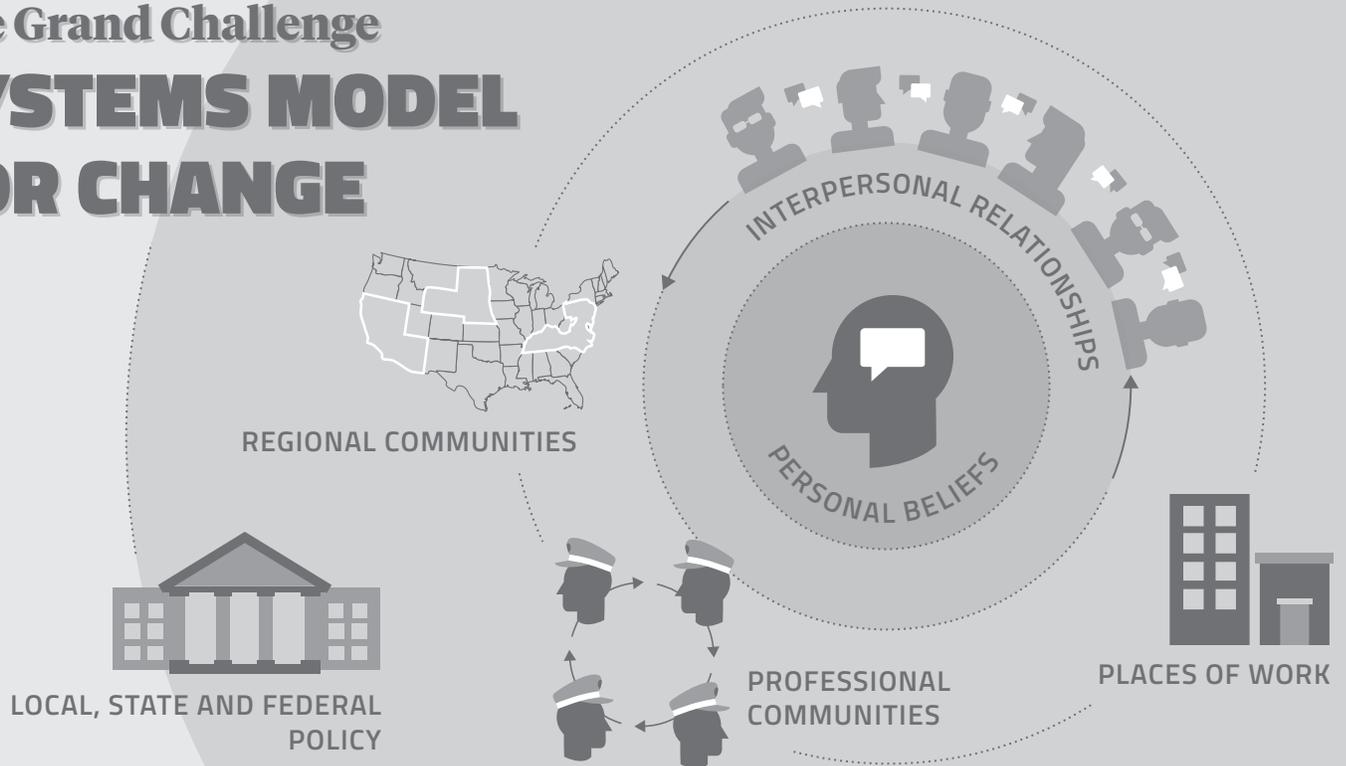
What is the consequence if this criterion is not met?



You may have created an important initiative with legitimate concerns, but if your aims do not adequately address a broad-scale, socially intractable problem, your initiative is

programmatic in nature, and will fail to meet the level of a Grand Challenge. It's both a question of scale and impact.

The Grand Challenge SYSTEMS MODEL FOR CHANGE



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02 A Grand Challenge aims toward a clearly defined, measurable, and time bound –but audacious– goal or goals.

These parameters usually keep our goals small; we like to succeed. But the goals of any sufficiently grand aim will be daunting. They may even seem insurmountable. If our world's systemic problems were solvable, they would have been cracked already. We attempt bold but arduous feats in order to chip away at human crises because we absolutely must—and because the shared leadership of passionate, intelligent, collaborative minds may be our only hope.

What is the consequence if this criterion is not met?

Without a clear goal—and a very big one (the kind everyone will tell you is impossible)—your program may sound nice, but it won't be the real deal. If you're raising donations and building public trust on the name alone, no matter how noble your endeavor may seem, you risk betraying that trust and alienating donors when your program fails publicly to meet the standards of an authentic Grand Challenge.

03 To launch and run a Grand Challenge successfully, you'll need a core team of shared, visionary leaders.

Competencies of visionary leaders:

Intentional Self-Transformation. Visionary leaders continuously seek to raise their capabilities and expand their influence. They recognize that results experienced in the present are grounded in current mental models, and know the way to increase their performance is to transform themselves. Truly great leaders make this an art form, planning new experiences that will catalyze deep and intentional personal growth and change.

Systems Thinking. A crucial leadership competency for the 21st century, systems thinking is the evolving capacity to understand and communicate about multidimensional, multi-disciplinary, systems-based models and the phenomena they generate. Recognizing how systems work, and how we work within them, allows us greater agency and sharper predictive and reflexive reasoning. Wherever systemic forces emerge, a problem will have many variables and overlapping interdependencies, which no single solution can solve. Instead, sets of potential solutions—perhaps a great many—must be brought to bear in new and original ways.

Trust Building. When you're working outside of a traditional command-and-control structure—where you ordinarily have control over personnel evaluations or the salaries of staff—you no longer possess the same sticks and carrots for exerting influence. In this new landscape, your best tools come down to trust—both in degree and quality, where the depth of each directly correlates with your success in the role. People will generally keep working with you on a Grand Challenge when they trust you to safeguard its mission.

Partnership Developing. Fluency in partnership development is vital because in any Grand Challenge space, the engagement of cross-sector partners from multiple disciplines—including academic, private, and public sector forces—must be brought to bear. Leaders must be able to offer arrangements that are mutually beneficial and compelling,

and then manage these relationships through the inevitable ups and downs required for success.

Real-time Learning. When considering any systemic problem, outcomes are unpredictable and ever-changing. These are not technical fixes, with prescriptions known in advance. Instead, they are journeys that reveal complexities as they unfold, and solution models emerge as understanding deepens. Grand Challenge leaders must be versed in real-time learning.

Advocating and Championing. Influencing others in today's complicated, networked environments requires new skills. You'll need skills in active listening; interpersonal and organizational engagement; and carefully leveraging the trust acquired in relationships toward your cause.

Framing the Crisis. Framing creates the context, which fundamentally changes how a crisis is perceived. It takes real art to describe what is often a shifting background and foreground in ways that communicate clearly to multiple stakeholders.

Communicating and Coordinating Action. In any complex environment, communicating information and coordinating action are primary. These skills replace the traditional carrot and stick approach to leadership. Communicating information that is emerging from different parts of a system to all partners working within the system makes possible *unified thrust*—i.e., at the same time, toward the same goal set, in coherent ways.

Tracking Different Measures. A nonlinear system requires multiple measures, all providing important feedback on the whole. Learning to adapt and utilize multiple measures, and to look at them simultaneously is key. This can be conceived the way multiple vital signs are read on a human body to gauge relative health or function, or the way a body tracks multiple but changing sensory cues from its environment in order to gauge the conditions of its landscape more accurately.



Visionary leaders are the collective tuning fork of any Grand Challenge. In other words, their mental models are conveyed across the system for better or worse. As a result they must possess both self- and other-awareness and the capacity for internal investigation, continually seeking to know how their personal frameworks show up in their Grand Challenge network. As systems thinkers, visionary leaders recognize that the system lives inside of them at the same time they live inside the system, bringing greater depth and insight to the work.

What is the consequence if this criterion is not met?

If your Grand Challenge is being led by a smart, capable, but rigid leader who is unwilling to share the stage or lacks key visionary competencies, your GC is at real risk of

collapse. The state of an organization's leader(s) is a litmus test for the state of the organization, and this extends equally to Grand Challenges.

Breakthroughs for Humanity

Never has a model required a more revolutionary approach to problem-seeing, problem-solving, or to leadership itself. And never has a model had more impact, generated more hope and held out the possibility of more effective breakthroughs for civilization's most urgent needs. *Grand challenges* not only highlight humanity's most dangerous and intractable problems, they also provide the bold, multi-disciplinary, systems-oriented approach that is needed to tackle these large-scale concerns.



About Seth Kahan

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*.

Contact: Seth@VisionaryLeadership.com



About Julie Jordan Avritt

Julie Jordan Avritt is a freelance writer, editor, and advisor for culture change agents, in-the-flesh thought leaders, startups, upstarts, and renegades on a mission to think bigger, bigger, BIG. A small sample of her work can be found in *Kosmos Journal*; *Spanda Journal* in collaboration with contemporary mystic, Thomas Hübl; and in the forthcoming graphic book, *Grand Challenge: How Leaders Grow their Businesses by Addressing the World's Most Intractable Problems* with stellar visionary and leading-edger, Seth Kahan.

Contact: jjordanavritt@gmail.com