

WHAT'S SHAKING YOUR LADDER?

15 CHALLENGES ALL LEADERS FACE

SAMUEL R. CHAND


WHITAKER
HOUSE

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WHAT'S SHAKING YOUR LADDER?: 15 Challenges All Leaders Face

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INTRODUCTION:

WHAT *IS* SHAKING YOUR LADDER?

The California mudslides of 2005 washed away homes, cars, and roads. In one case, a large boulder was shaken loose and rolled onto the highway, creating an insurmountable obstacle that stranded motorists on either side. A photo of the scene that appeared in the next day's newspapers illustrated the problem better than any article could. It showed the frustration of drivers who had not anticipated the weather or its outcome and consequently found themselves trapped by their circumstances.

WHAT'S BLOCKING YOU?

Is there one big "rock" in your life that's acting as a roadblock to your attaining a position of leadership? What is blocking you from the destiny that awaits you on the other side? Let me ask the question another way: What is your biggest leadership challenge? What is it that, if handled successfully, could move you to the place where God has called you to be? What is the "boulder" in the middle of your highway to leadership excellence?

When I present leadership seminars to any audience, I've found that all leaders encounter the same struggles. And over the course of my years of experience, I have identified fifteen common challenges shared by all leaders, from corporate CEOs to school principals, from megachurch pastors to army captains. In this book, we're going to examine each of these fifteen challenges in detail and discuss how to overcome them all.

CHALLENGES COMMON TO ALL LEADERS

1. Focus: Finding and maintaining what is important
2. Vision-Casting: Learning how to cast vision in a way that prompts people to respond
3. Communication: Saying it in such a way that everyone gets it
4. Decision-Making: Understanding how decisions are made so that you can make them better
5. Choosing the Team: Making critical decisions as to whom to recruit, hire, and so forth
6. Leadership Development: Growing oneself and others
7. Change Versus Transition: Intentionally planning transitions for smoother change
8. Conflict: Understanding the importance of health during conflict
9. Organizational Congruence: Aligning formal and informal structures with the vision
10. Financial Management: Seeking advice from knowledgeable counselors
11. Time Allocation: Distributing the resource of time effectively
12. Control Versus Delegation: Learning when to go and when to let go
13. Execution: Getting the job done
14. Future Thinking: Focusing on what comes next
15. Leaving a Legacy: Passing values on to future generations

I tackled these same fifteen challenges during the years I served as president of Beulah Heights Bible College (now called Beulah Heights

University). Each time I confronted one of these challenges, I thought, *Am I the only one who has ever had to face this before?* Now, as I talk to thousands of leaders each year in the role of leadership consultant, I've learned that leaders have more things in common than they have differences.

Leaders need to know that they're not the only ones facing the hurdles they encounter. They can learn to recognize the patterns that lead to either success or failure from others who have faced similar circumstances.

Leaders also need to keep in mind that these challenges aren't just a "phase" they go through once and never worry about again. Just because a leader figures out how to handle a challenge once doesn't mean he or she will never face the same challenge again. Instead, all leaders will continue to face the same obstacles throughout their personal and professional lives.

Just because a leader figures out how to handle a challenge once doesn't mean he or she will never face the same challenge again.

Think about it: how many of us have said, "If only I could get organized"? The implicit idea is that if we get organized once, we will never have to do it again. But that's just not true. We may temporarily control the clutter; but, as we take on additional responsibilities, we automatically inherit additional clutter. Whether that clutter is in our office (additional paperwork), on our schedule (additional meetings), or in our mind (additional distractions), the challenge will continue to occur.

In the same way, the fifteen challenges presented in this book are not like a rock in the middle of the highway that we go around once and never encounter again. If we're having problems dealing with a budget of \$2 million, imagine what it will be like to manage a budget of \$20 million. If we experience challenges with a staff of five, think about the challenges we'll have with a staff of fifty or even one hundred. Again, these challenges aren't rocks we avoid once and never meet again. They will continue to "rock" our world and require our ongoing attention.

THE LADDER ANALOGY

In my third book, *Who's Holding Your Ladder?: Selecting Your Leaders, Leadership's Most Critical Decision*, I developed the analogy of a ladder, representing a leader's vision, and a "ladder climber," or the leader in pursuit of that vision. But no leader can go it alone. To climb to the top of the "ladder" of his or her personal vision, a leader must have someone holding the ladder—a support staff.

So many readers found that analogy helpful that I decided to continue the analogy in my fourth book, *Who Moved Your Ladder?: Your Next Bold Move*. In it, I discuss such topics as how to respond when God starts to transition a leader from one "ladder" to another, whether that ladder is a vision or a physical place.

The analogy of a boulder blocking a highway, which I introduced at the outset of this book, can help us to identify the particular challenge that is blocking them; however, it doesn't effectively illustrate the ongoing nature of that and other challenges. That's why I chose to extend the ladder analogy to this book, as well. The title serves to remind us that the challenges we face aren't something we deal with once and then never have to worry about again. Instead, the higher we go on the ladder, the more the reverberations of these challenges will shake the entire ladder, from the bottom to the top.

Our job, as leaders, is to learn how to hold on to the ladder, even when it is being shaken. It is also our responsibility to figure out how we can prevent, or at least minimize, all such "shaking" in the future. Can we reduce the reverberations? Can we keep the top of the ladder from swaying? Can we secure the base better?

The key to securing our foundations and stabilizing our "ladder" is to understand the fifteen challenges common to all leaders. These challenges will continue to shake our ladders, but we can learn how to hang on tight, how to anticipate when the tremors are coming our way, and how to minimize the duration of the shaking.

TEACHING POINTS

Each of the fifteen challenges is addressed in its own chapter, at the end of which will be a list of “Teaching Points” designed to provide a short summary of the chapter and some practical suggestions on how to prevent that particular challenge from shaking your ladder. Once you have completed reading the book, the “Teaching Points” will serve as a quick reference for handling each challenge, as well as an outline should you desire to teach the material to your staff.

CHAPTER 1

FOCUS

Focus is reflected in the capacity to identify and devote the majority of your time and energy to the “critical few” objectives and issues, while still managing to deal with the “important many.”

—**Sam T. Manoogian**

Independent leadership consultant

Pastor Walker looks out the window of his church office, wondering what to do next. The night before, a respected deacon had presented an idea for a new evangelism program designed to reach businesses and homes near the church. That morning, the music minister had wanted to discuss the prospect of adding a second worship service with a different type of music to attract new people to the church. Both ideas could obviously reach new people. But the church is in the middle of a construction project—the building of a new sanctuary—and Pastor Walker must address the growing pile of related paperwork on his desk if the job is to be finished on time.

As he shuffles through the documents, he sees a business card and remembers the conversation he had with the man who gave it to him. The gentleman was a well-known Christian evangelist with a national speaking ministry that he was looking to expand, and he had asked Pastor Walker to join him as a guest speaker at his conferences. Pastor Walker was flattered by the invitation, but now he wonders whether it's the right time to accept it. As he weighs the opportunities and decisions before him, Pastor Walker feels overwhelmed.

Leaders often have so many opportunities before them that it's hard to focus on only one. Deciding on new products and services to add, changing a marketing approach, evaluating opportunities to expand—the choices can be overwhelming. How does a leader focus on the “critical few” while still managing to deal with the “important many”?

FINDING FOCUS ISN'T DIFFICULT; KEEPING FOCUS IS

The capital campaign at his church should be Pastor Walker's primary focus. He likely knows that but can't help being distracted. If a deacon has a great idea for a new outreach tactic, that's nice; but it still isn't the pastor's focus. If the music minister wants to start a second service, that's exciting; but it isn't his focus, either. The renovation project is his priority; it is his rock in the middle of the highway. When the new sanctuary is completed, then Pastor Walker can turn his attention to new outreach opportunities and additional services. But until the new sanctuary is ready, the other programs and projects won't reach their full potential because the pastor will always be distracted by construction-related issues.

When I was the president of a Bible college, people were always trying to give me something new to focus on—ideas for a new course of study or for a new direction that the school “ought to pursue.” “You need to offer a major in this field,” someone would tell me. “You know there's a real need in the marketplace for this service,” somebody else would say. “If you added such and such, I know it would draw a lot of support.”

The people we lead have their own agendas for us, meaning that focus is the biggest challenge facing leaders at every level of leadership. While others' ideas may be worthy of consideration, they can distract us from our mission. Every morning, we come to the office with a plan; but, if we're not careful, our plans will get shifted or even displaced by the plans of others.

*The people we lead have their own agendas for us,
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leaders at every level of leadership.*

We've all had days when we feel that we haven't accomplished anything. We feel like a Ferrari driving through a school zone; we can't give it our full power. We've given 10 percent to this project and 12 percent to that project, but we haven't pushed the gas pedal all the way down on any one project. We wonder how we can hope to accomplish anything.

That's just what the devil wants. Satan may never tempt us to rob a bank, sniff cocaine, or cheat on a spouse. He doesn't have to, if he can keep us from accomplishing anything for the kingdom of God. Rather than knock us out of our jobs through enticing us to sin, he can keep us in our jobs doing nothing. If we retain our position yet prove ineffectual, he wins. What he can't pollute, he will dilute.

GROWTH MULTIPLIES DISTRACTIONS

As the organizations we lead experience growth, the potential distractions grow, as well. When we start a new business venture, all we want is to get a few people to work alongside us to grow our clientele. We're not worried about office space, land acquisition, payroll benefits, or anything like that. Our sole focus is finding five people who are breathing and willing to help.

Five people soon grow to fifteen people. As the number of personnel increases, the work environment becomes more important. No longer can they work out of borrowed space; they need an office of their own. So, now, we've got people *and* place as our focus.

As the staff increases to twenty-five or thirty, we've got to have programs in place. Managing those programs requires systems and procedures. Suddenly, the focus isn't only on people. Now, we also have to consider place, programs, and procedures. Our focus gets diluted.

Next, the people inside and outside the organization want to know how we aim to grow. Now, we've got to have a plan. When there were only five people, our only plan was to try to get three or more of them together at the same time. That's no longer sufficient. Now, we've got to have a plan for today, for tomorrow, and for five years from now. When we started, we didn't even have a bank account; now, we've got

accounting issues, payroll deductions, and tax reporting. And it never ends. What started as a single focus has now become a smorgasbord of attention-demanding focus-stealers.

As we experience growth, we get distracted by the increasing number of needs of the 5 Ps: people, place, programs, procedures, and plans.

If we look around at our growing organization and see that the people are confused, before we blame them, we need to stop and ask ourselves, "How focused am I?" When we get out of focus, the people we lead are unsure how to respond and therefore unable to move forward.

Other signs of being distracted include the following:

1. *Marginalization.* Marginalization happens when our input and influence are reduced or limited to only a few areas. Other people make decisions without consulting us, or we attend a meeting to "vote" on an issue, the outcome of which has already been decided.

2. *Diversions.* When nonessential things occupy our time and thoughts, or when resources are spent on projects that aren't necessary, we've lost our focus. If Pastor Walker spends his time picking out songs for the new worship service rather than finishing paperwork related to the construction of the new sanctuary, he's been diverted from the important by the trivial.

3. *Attacks.* Resistance and overt attacks can remove our focus from the main issue(s). As I said earlier, it may not be a headlining sin that Satan uses to attack us but rather a whole lot of small distractions.

4. *Seductions.* When pleasing our allies becomes more important than staying on a difficult yet noble course, we're definitely distracted. For example, if Pastor Walker is afraid of upsetting the deacon and therefore encourages him to move forward with the evangelism project without giving it much consideration, the pastor has been seduced by the desire to be liked.

THE MEANING OF FOCUS

We know that maintaining focus is hard. You may even find it difficult to continue reading this book because of all the distractions you're facing right now. But if you stop reading every time your cell phone rings, a new e-mail arrives, or your favorite television program comes on, you'll never reach the solutions you are hoping to find. Keeping focus is difficult.

So, what is focus, exactly, and how do we keep it?

A pastor friend of mine gave me a great insight into focus. He told me that while he was praying, the Lord had helped him to understand the meaning of focus. He expressed it in the form of an acrostic:

F = First things first.

O = Other things second.

C = Cut out the unimportant.

U = Unify behind the vision.

S = Stick with it.

Isn't that a great definition? Focus requires that we put the important things first and relegate everything else to second place. If we can cut out the unimportant and unify behind the vision, we'll always maintain a proper focus. Of course, the most important thing is sticking with it.

To maintain focus in our business or organization, not only do *we* have to be focused, but so does everyone who works with us. We have to establish what they are to focus on as soon as we hire them.

Most leaders can do as many as eight things at once and do them all well. As a result, they often expect the same ability from the people who work for them, forgetting that multitasking is not everyone's forte.

Let's say that I'm the CEO of a company and I hire a new accountant named Bob. After he starts work, I soon learn he is a gifted web

designer. I've needed an updated website for some time, so I ask Bob to see what he can do to improve the company's site.

As the others in my organization hear about Bob's work on the website, they ask him to add information or pictures to their own section of the site. Before long, Bob is spending more time on updating the company website than on processing the payroll.

Leaders are accustomed to having to multitask, but we often place unrealistic demands on the multitasking abilities of the people we lead.

Again, we leaders are accustomed to having to multitask, but we often place unrealistic demands on the multitasking abilities of the people we lead. We may say something like, "Around here, everybody wears five hats." While it is true that there may be times when everyone needs to step up and wear as many as fifteen hats as the organization grows, we've got to bring in people who are singularly focused, and we have to allow them to maintain that focus instead of throwing distractions at them.

By requesting Bob to work on the website, I've essentially encouraged him to abandon his focus on accounting—the job for which I hired him. What happens at our next meeting when someone asks to see the latest financial report?

Bob will say, "I didn't do it because I was updating the company website."

Do I want to step up and say to the other employees, "Oh, by the way, thank you for funding this new accounting position we needed so badly, but I've got Bob doing something else right now"? No. I hired him to be an accountant because I needed an accountant; and I need Bob to do that job. The fact that he is fulfilling other roles is because I didn't define his focus clearly enough. The other people at the meeting won't judge Bob by his computer programming abilities; they'll judge him by his accounting performance alone.

Often, when we hire someone, we tell him or her, for example, “You’ll spend 30 percent of your time doing this and 70 percent of your time doing that.” It sounds good, and it may even look good on paper; but the main thing—what should be occupying 70 percent of the employee’s time—often becomes the thing that is most neglected. If the reason for that neglect is that we’ve been assigning other tasks to the employee, then he or she is not ultimately to blame; we are, as the leader, because we didn’t allow him or her to stay focused on the intended task. As leaders, we must help those around us to understand their proper focus and to stick to it.

And we must stick to our own proper focus. Sometimes, we’re tempted to step in and help those we lead to do their jobs rather than lead them by delegating. We know we’re gravitating toward doing the work ourselves rather than leading when we make statements such as these: “Here, I can do that for you.” “I’ll help you finish that; I’ve done one like it before.” “Let’s sit down and go over all the things you need for the project.” “Yeah, I’ve used that method before. Let me get some stuff out of my files for you.”

If everyone in the organization, including the leader, wears only one hat, then we can demand and expect to see higher levels of accountability and performance. Our focus should be on leading the people in our organization to the right hat and helping them keep it on their head.

FOCUS MUST FLOW FROM THE WHO

How do we find our focus? The acrostic-style definition I shared earlier gives us some practical tips for keeping focus, but what if we don’t know what our focus should be in the first place? We might think that grabbing a pen and a pad and making a list of the things we need to do will help to determine our focus. Then, we take the list of 18 jobs—or 118—and sort them into categories, trying to make a few big rocks out of a plethora of little pebbles. Next, we prioritize those rocks and pick one as our focus for the day. We think that making a list will bring about focus. But making a to-do list only shows us what we’re already focused on; it doesn’t allow us to select a proper focus.

What we focus on should always flow from who we are. Therefore, the starting place for finding focus should always be to ask of ourselves such questions as these: “Who am I?” “If I were to die today, what would I most regret leaving unfinished?”

The starting place for finding focus should always be to ask of ourselves such questions as these: “Who am I?” “If I were to die today, what would I most regret leaving unfinished?”

Once we have defined who we are, then we are equipped to identify the *what* of our focus, because the *what* must flow from the *who*. This is true for our entire organization, as well, because the organization is the reflection of the leader’s vision, or the *who*. Our focus—our vision—is *what* we do. And the members of our organization can’t pursue the *what* until they understand the *who*.

Strategic plans, initiatives, and other undertakings should flow from the leader’s vision for the company or organization. If an undertaking doesn’t fit the vision, you shouldn’t be doing it. It doesn’t mean it’s a bad undertaking; it only means that it isn’t for your organization at this time.

It is important to find our focus, but we also need to keep in mind that our focus is bound to change over the course of our lives. As we age, we reach a point where we decide that we want to devote more time to fewer things. Then our focus narrows even further. Over time, a leader’s focus may switch to something else entirely. But, regardless of *what* he or she does, it will always be a result of *who* he or she is.

FOCUS MUST BE COMMUNICATED

Once we have identified our focus, we need to communicate it throughout our organization. We’ll cover this process in detail in the next chapter, but there are a couple of points that should be made here. First, the actual process of succinctly communicating vision can help us sharpen our focus even further. We need to be able to communicate it

using small sound bites. If we can't condense the vision to a phrase that would fit on a T-shirt, are we really that focused? Or could we refine the focus even further?

Second, the members of your organization are more likely to work toward your articulated vision if they are clear on what it is. When we take the time to help our staff to understand *why* they are doing *what* they are doing, we give them a deeper understanding of their focus. By sharing *who* we are—our vision—and how *what* they do relates to that vision, we show them that *who they are* is also important.

The members of your organization are more likely to work toward your articulated vision if they are clear on what it is. When we take the time to help our staff to understand why they are doing what they are doing, we give them a deeper understanding of their focus.

Getting people to think at this level will increase the dialogue about focus within the organization. If we invite honest, open conversation, we may find that our staff members start asking probing questions. At first, this may make us uncomfortable, but we shouldn't feel threatened. Probing inquiries indicate that our employees are thinking at an organizational level. Participating in and encouraging this type of dialogue promotes better decision-making and more efficient management of time and resources.

If Pastor Walker doesn't know what to do next, imagine how confused his staff must feel. Our focus is our light. Diffused, it can still brighten a room. But when concentrated, directed into a laser beam, there is no leadership tool more powerful.

TEACHING POINTS

1. Finding focus is not difficult; keeping focus is.
2. Focus is the biggest challenge facing leaders at every level of leadership.

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3. What Satan can't pollute, he will dilute.

4. Growth multiplies our distractions.

5. Signs of being distracted include:

- ✦ Marginalization
- ✦ Diversions
- ✦ Attacks
- ✦ Seductions

6. FOCUS:

F = First things first.

O = Other things second.

C = Cut out the unimportant.

U = Unify behind the vision.

S = Stick with it.

7. Assign a focus to each person you hire, and remember that while the ability to multitask may look good on paper, it is often to blame for a loss of focus.

8. Be a leader who delegates, and avoid the temptation of doing others' jobs for them.

9. If everyone wears only one hat, you can ask for and expect higher levels of accountability and performance.

10. Focus isn't found by making a to-do list; it's found when we ask ourselves such questions as these: "Who am I?" "If I were to die today, what would I most regret leaving unfinished?"

11. Once we define *who* we are, then we can identify the *what* of our focus. The *what* has to flow out of our *who*.

12. Our focus will change over the course of our lives.
13. The focus of an organization must be communicated clearly and continually.
14. Don't get defensive when the people you lead start asking questions about the focus of your business or organization.
15. Focus needs to be as concentrated as a laser beam of light.