

BRIGHT PAPER

# unstuck

## How Aspirational Thinking Improves Your Life and Leadership

Three executive coaching success stories - by Paul Batz



## All good leaders get stuck.

Good leadership attracts resistance, and resistance often drains our energy. On our worst days, the resistance creates a downward spiral of problem-hunting and finger pointing that chokes off time for dreaming and planning for the future. This Bright Paper tells three stories about how aspirational thinking can help you cut through three common scenarios for how leaders get stuck:

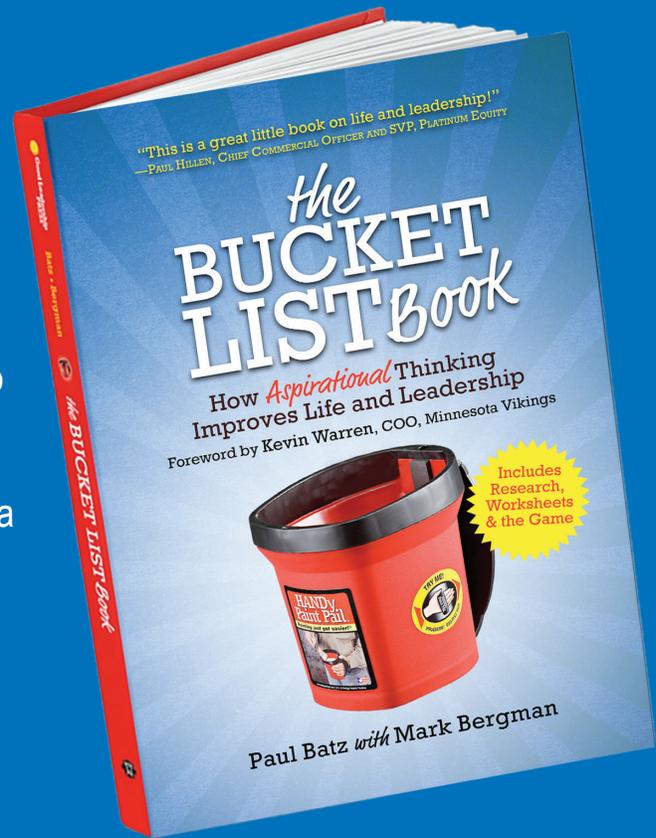
1. Worn down from too much fire-fighting
2. Bored and searching for “what’s next?”
3. Superhero efforts no longer effective

Each story has specific tools, techniques, and coaching advice to spark new growth and **help you get UNSTUCK.**

# Unlock the Aspirations Inside of You

The Bucket List Book by Paul Batz, with Mark Bergman is an excellent catalyst to bring alive what's possible for leaders.

"This is a great little book! Paul gives us a poke in the ribs to get out of our comfort zones and do something exciting with our lives."  
- Jeff Given, President, Bercom



**Excerpt from the *Bucket List Book*:**



## CHAPTER 7:

### What Does a Bucket List Have to Do with Good Leadership?

It's a reasonable question: What does a Bucket List have to do with good leadership? But the better question is: *Why should someone follow you?*

Ever heard the phrases "There goes a woman on a mission" or "That guy is going places"? These are expressions to describe leaders with vivid aspirations. Followers find aspirational leaders to be magnetic.

The opposite of an aspirational leader is someone who is "stuck." Who wants to give a full mind, body, and soul commitment to follow someone who is stuck? The Bucket List is an excellent exercise to stimulate aspirational thinking to create positive momentum when leaders are stuck.

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## THE BUCKET LIST BOOK

### Aspirational Thinking at Work

Scholar and business authority Jim Collins coined the phrase "Big Hairy Audacious Goal" in his blockbuster book *Built to Last*. His research concluded that organizations that endured the test of time were propelled forward by an audacious goal—something that could only be accomplished a minimum of twenty years into the future. The word "hairy" makes the concept visceral; it makes a goal feel real. But "hairy" also describes the emotional part of an audacious goal: If the goal is bold enough, it will cause the hair on your arms to tingle. Big. Hairy. Audacious. Goal.

Big, hairy, audacious goals (BHAGs) are part of what makes growing an organization so exciting . . . and BHAGs are also what make a Bucket List so exciting.

At age fifty-three, I'm still counting on *two* twenty-year time horizons for my Bucket List. Remember, my grandmother lived to be 103.

From the first day we started our leadership coaching firm, our coaches have been using aspirational and Bucket List thinking to stimulate positive momentum for leaders. And it works! Hundreds of clients know that creating an actual Bucket List will provide a tool for accountability and action to improve their lives and their leadership.

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**Order your book today:**  
[goodleadership.com/bucket-list](http://goodleadership.com/bucket-list)

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The first story involves a proven turnaround executive who has spent his career putting out fires.

## Too Much Fire Fighting

A proven turnaround man was being asked to do it again. Over the past decade, Greg Ashland had saved three separate companies from bankruptcy, securing his own financial future. With two kids in college and two middle school kids still at home, Greg and his wife had both been balancing parenting duties and careers for two decades. He was enjoying some much-needed time off when the phone rang.

The Board Chair of a company called Rogers Intell was on the phone asking him to step in and save them. Greg knew Rogers Intell from earlier in his career, so he decided to listen. After three months of courtship, Greg accepted the CEO role and assumed it would only be short term. He decided to commute weekly to the firm's headquarters two states over rather than moving his family – he wouldn't be living in a hotel for that long, right?

Six months into the job, the Rogers Intell financial metrics dramatically improved. The Board was happy, and customers were coming back to the firm. But one night he found himself watching football alone in his hotel room with a beer and a sense of dread. "Why am I feeling stuck?" he asked himself.

Looking back on his career, he saw ten years of putting fires out with very little time for building something special. The insight led Greg to why he was feeling stuck. "I'm tired of being known as the fire-fighting hatchet man," Greg told his wife.

## Four signs you may be stuck:

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| <p><b>1.</b> You find yourself making "to-do" lists of things you've already done, just to check those things off your list to feel successful.</p> | <p><b>2.</b> The words <i>whatever</i>, <i>should</i> and <i>shouldn't</i> creep into the daily dialogue in your head.</p>       |
| <p><b>3.</b> You catch yourself day dreaming about a new job, a move to a new city or starting your own business in meetings.</p>                   | <p><b>4.</b> You feel exhausted from putting superhero energy into your work, wondering "Why can't others step up and help?"</p> |

## Accidentally falling in love

But this company was different. He confessed his passion for Rogers Intell and wondered if he had the skills for sustainable growth. The workforce was young, talented and yearning to feel like winners. But with his family living in another state he felt stuck in the middle of two passions. If he was going to be his company's long-term growth leader, the two-state commute wasn't going to work.

At the recommendation of his coach, Greg and his wife Audrey wrote out their seven-year aspirations. A tool called the Personal Visioning Worksheet posed

both personal and professional questions. The assignment was to look back seven years--and then seven years into the future.

## Personal Visioning

Greg was surprised to learn his wife was ready for a change. Audrey had never stayed in one place so long, and the youngest two kids had yet to start high school. She was yearning for one more chapter in her travel journal. “Why not now?” she asked. Her excitement caused Greg to share: “I never really took the time before to think about what I really want...what would inspire me. It feels good to write down a goal to build a company, instead of just getting paid to be a firefighter.” After a long discussion, the couple decided to move – taking the family along to a new city to pursue Greg’s passion.

## Success Story

Ten years later, Greg Ashland was still the CEO of Rogers Intell – a company which became the gold standard in the contract intellectual property engineering space. Even though he had more than enough money, he still needed to pursue an unfulfilled purpose and act on his aspirations. With the decision to commit to a new passion, he became “unstuck.”

### Personal Visioning Worksheet Aspirational Questions

Thinking Seven Years Ahead:

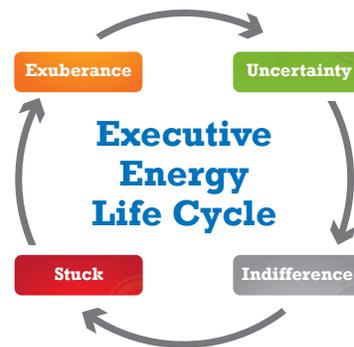
- How old will I be?
- Family status?
- My joys:
- My challenges:
- My personal aspirations:
- My professional aspirations:
- Do I imagine I will have the same job?

**The second story involves a mid-career executive professional stuck between personal and professional priorities with no clear path forward.**

## Bored and Searching

Sheila finally admitted to herself “I’m bored.” A lifetime A-student, she mastered her current role as the Marketing VP for a manufacturing company years ago. Her kids were thriving in their small suburban school, but she felt stuck in a dead-end job. At the end of every weekend, she had a serious case of the “Sunday Night Blues.” She was tired of dreading the Monday morning staff meetings, rehashing incremental metrics with very little change to keep her attention.

It was the EVP of Business Development job posting in another company that caught her attention. “This is my dream job!” she dared to say to her husband. But the role involved more than 50% travel, and the commute would be 90 minutes each way when she wasn’t on the road. Her husband pushed back hard because he was raised in this town and his heart was set on staying. “I’m not raising our children with an absent Mom,” he responded.



## Stimulating new possibilities

Sheila had experienced the full Executive Energy Life Cycle. She began with exuberance, full of fresh excitement about what was possible. Over time, that gave way to uncertainty, where unplanned resistance created hesitation. Continual problem solving eventually led to apathy, and indifference. Her indifference drove out new possibilities, leaving her stuck.

Sheila hired a coach who gave her new insights and courage to make change at work. They began with a simple Seven Fs<sup>®</sup> conversation about her satisfaction on faith, family, finances, fitness, friends, fun, and future.

The discussion about family and future stimulated a new question from her coach: “How can you create those same possibilities for your future in your current company?”

The first step was to share with her CEO she was searching for something new because she was feeling stuck. To her surprise, the CEO was also feeling stuck. He started the firm in his early 30s and was financially set for life. Now, 25 years later, he was wondering “what’s next for me?” He was also stymied by the idea of having the conversation with his team because he feared where the conversation might go. Sheila handed him three questions on a piece of paper to stimulate his own personal visioning:

1. If our company is still here 20 years from now, what will our impact be on the world?
2. What will our firm look like 7 years from now, and will you still be here?
3. What are the top three things on your Bucket List?

The CEO smiled with relief that someone other than he was sparking this conversation. Privately he had been asking himself these questions for years.

Sheila was given his permission to lead a Structured Visioning Process with the executive team, starting with those same three questions. Aspirational thinking was the magic elixir for the team. Half of the executives said they did not expect to be here seven years from now, and the CEO said he wanted to phase out within three years. As a result, the team wrote this 20-year vision statement:

#### VISION 2037

“Our firm is fiercely independent and we intend to stay that way. We will continue to provide custom manufacturing solutions our clients need and want, wherever they need them – because not everyone wants to buy the standard offerings from the big players.”

Sheila found a new spark in her leadership. She led the strategic planning process for the firm and established the Employee Stock Ownership Plan so the employees could buy the company from the founder. Her income and her career continued to grow in the sleepy little town her husband was hesitant to leave. And she is being considered for CEO.

**The third story illuminates the idea that sometimes the harder we work, the more we get stuck.**

### Superhero Efforts Wearing Thin

Victoria Adams thought she was ready for the “big job.” But just six months into her role of Regional Hospital President she already felt like a failure. Costs were spiraling out of control, and her team was frozen with fear. She had always exceeded expectations, so this tidal wave of confusion and self-doubt was troubling. Deep down inside she knew this was a “be careful what I wish for” situation. She would need to overcome her own fear of failure if she ever wanted to be considered for more responsibility in the future. “Nothing significant ever happens alone.” her coach counseled. “We all want you to succeed... but maybe you are feeling stuck because you think of yourself as a superhero leader who has to go it alone.”

The coach helped Victoria see how she was slowing down under the weight of her self-imposed obligations. Staying up late building plans and trying to solve the most difficult problems by herself was not only hurting herself but her family and her team.

“What are your goals, Victoria...why are you working so hard?” her coach asked. “If you share your goals with people who love you, they can help!”

Victoria wrote one personal, and one professional aspiration for the next three years:

- I want to enjoy raising my teenagers in this community.
- I want my family to be proud of how this hospital becomes the best in town.

Gazing at her two goals, she thought of the famous business axiom: “What got you here, won’t get you there.” And that meant she needed to re-think her leadership.

## Goodness Pays

In answering the question “Where is the goodness in this?” Victoria could see a village of people who were poised to help her succeed – at home and at work. For starters, she promised to stop second-guessing her husband’s parenting and home-care style – he was her best support system. By finding new peace at home, Victoria could channel her best energy into building better trust and collaboration within the hospital.

## Healthy Tension

Two simple changes created the breakthrough. First, she decided to get to know the personal lives of the people on her team who were trying to help. Then, she changed the dialogue in the hospital. Her coach helped her see that persistent negativity is the glue that keeps us stuck. So, instead of talking about “where we are failing,” she posed the question: Where can we see “healthy tension” that is making us better?

Victoria was energized by the transparency and honesty within her team. The healthy tension conversations were improving their relationships and business results. Because they knew she cared about them as people, the team was now working together to build plans and solve difficult problems. One day she felt the weight of her Superhero responsibility lifting from her shoulders. She was unstuck!

## The healthy tension conversations were improving their relationships and business results

Here’s how she described it to her coach: “Honestly, after 15 years in healthcare, I knew very little about how to build a high performing team – I’d never been on a great team. Looking back on my first 100 days, I was trying to earn respect by working super hard and making all of the decisions. When I took the time to learn about the personal lives of the people on my team, it was a huge step on our path to trusting each other and feeling like we could win together. I don’t feel like I need to be a superhero anymore, and I’m actually having fun at work!”

When followers begin to see and feel leaders building on these concepts, they begin to work together in remarkable new ways. Goodness pays, because goodness grows. It’s contagious.

## Leading with goodness brings out the best in others

When things get difficult at work, leaders often retreat to a selfish place where they only concentrate on their own needs. Asking the question “Where is the goodness in this?” often leads to an others-orientation, where leaders can find positive momentum in realizing he or she is surrounded with well-intentioned people who want to work together and help!



In that light we can see the Cornerstones of Goodness® by which to build momentum:

- Rewarding excellence
- Living generously
- Promoting fairness
- Spreading positivity

## Why Aspirational Thinking Works

Research proves the only thing that can help overcome our natural proclivity for negativity and hard to break habits are compelling goals. Aspirations are positive, compelling goals that bring out the best in human beings. The opposite of aspirational leadership is an inward-focused, heads down, problem-solving mentality. It causes people to lose sight of the horizon line of a better future. Aspirations are fundamentally based on hope and built on the belief in basic human goodness.

## Aspirational thinking accelerates development

At Good Leadership Enterprises we do not believe in the scientific method for developing people because the scientific method always begins with a “problem.” People don’t like to be labeled as a problem – instead of embracing development, leaders pull away and reject help. The better way is to help leaders stimulate their own aspirations. Then, the motivation for development comes from within.

## The Aspirational Framework

Good Leaders learn to communicate aspirations in a sequence of 20 - 7- 3 - 1 years. This framework helps people see and feel positive momentum towards their goals.

### 20 Years Ahead: The BHAG

Jim Collins, who wrote the classic business book *Built to Last*, articulates a twenty-year aspirational framework with the team BHAG. What is your Big Hairy Audacious Goal?

### 7 Years Ahead: Personal Visioning

Seven years is the most effective timeframe for personal visioning. Visioning is a powerful tool to stimulate action. Aspirational leaders ask themselves, “What will my life look like, by when?” The “what” is motivated by the “by when.” The seven-year personal visioning aligns very closely with the timeframe most people use for their Bucket List.

### 3 Years Ahead: Planning

A three-year planning window helps you identify personal and professional milestones over the next three years to make your seven-year vision come alive.

### 1 Year Ahead: Self Assessment

Finally, the “1” in the 20-7-3-1 aspirational framework is all about the here and now. It’s about making an intellectually honest assessment of the things that really count in life today: Your satisfaction with your faith, family, finances, fitness, friends, fun, and future . . . The Seven Fs! The literal connection to the Bucket List concept is that last F: future.

## Development Philosophy

Good Leaders grow through five specific phases:



### Aspirations

Who you want to be as a leader three and seven years from now.

### Insights

New learning from structured reflection, personality tools and coaching questions.

### Observations

Input from peers, friends, and colleagues who want to help you grow.

### Goal Setting

A vivid description of the next level of your leadership within a time frame.

### Step Up Challenges

Specific growth challenges to create confidence and momentum toward goals.

## Seven Fs Coaching Questions

**Faith:** How satisfied are you with your spiritual life?

**Family:** How satisfied are you with your loved ones, who share a common sense of home?

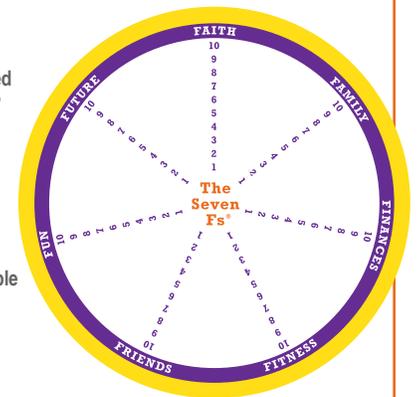
**Finances:** How well does your money fund your priorities?

**Fitness:** How satisfied are you with the health of your body?

**Friends:** How satisfied are you with the people who share your joys and disappointments?

**Fun:** How satisfied are you with the part of your life that is playful and joyful?

**Future:** How satisfied are you with the hope you have for yourself and others?



## Three myths about who gets stuck:

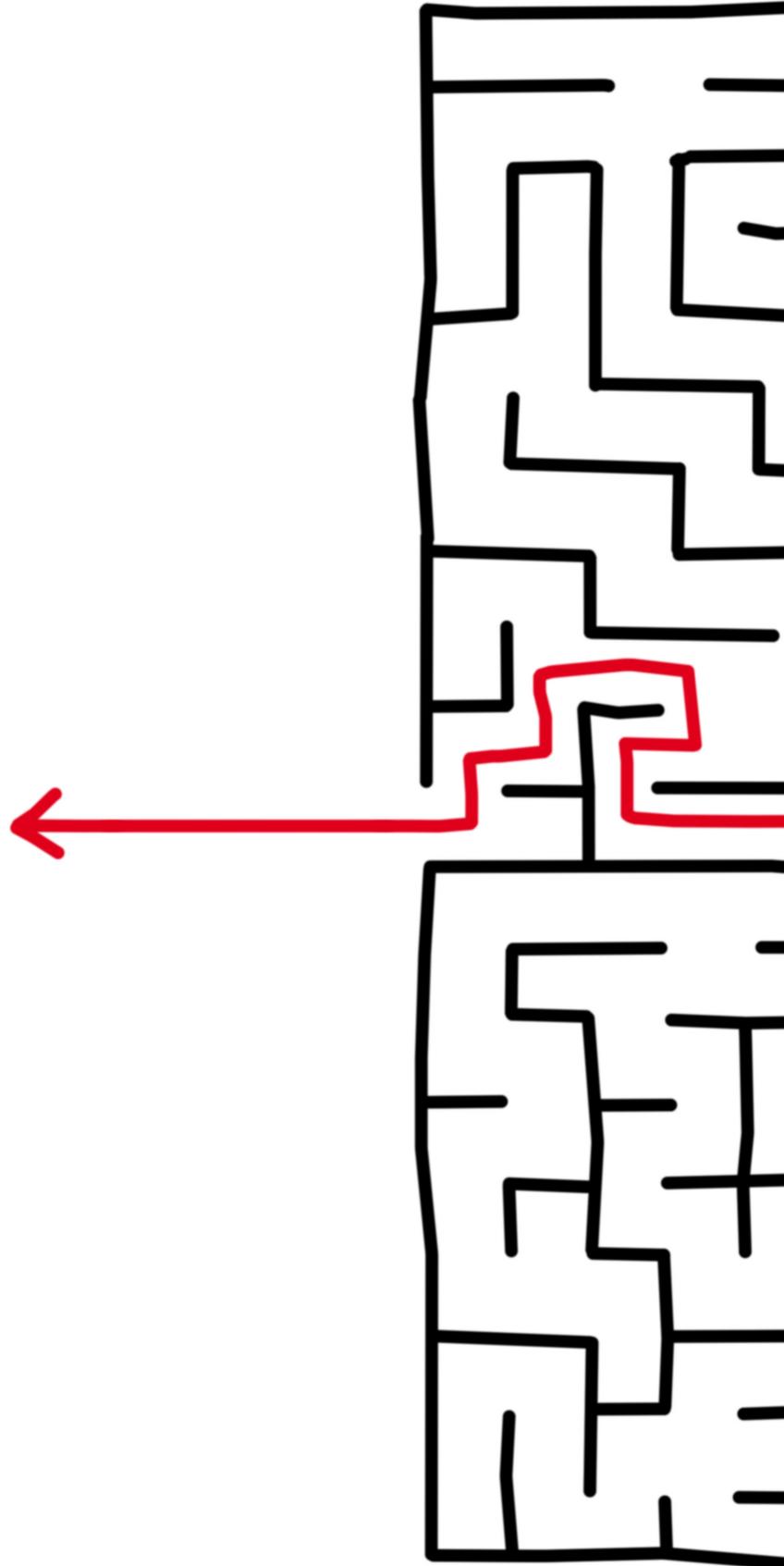
1. The more money you have, the less likely you are to get “stuck.” While money often provides options in life, high paying jobs can also be suffocating with heavy routines and responsibilities. Sometimes it just becomes too much.
2. You get “stuck” from a dead end job. Yes, that’s possible, but many leaders with healthy career options still get stuck when priorities shift—personally or professionally.
3. Getting “stuck” comes from failure. While feelings of failure can cause temporary trauma, many leaders reflect on specific failures as important pivot points in their career. There are countless stories of how getting “fired” can create a catalytic moment of insight that propels people to new success.

## Get unstuck.

Call or email to receive a free autographed copy of The Bucket List Book, and a telephone consultation about how a coach can help get you or your organization unstuck with aspirational thinking.

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 Paul Batz is CEO and founder of Good Leadership Enterprises, a firm dedicated to spreading goodness in leadership and business. Paul is an inspirational leadership coach, author, and speaker whose clients include many of the nation’s largest companies and organizations.



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