

Breaking Through Plateaus

*How to Get Your Business Back On
a Double-Digit Growth Curve by
Creating a Culture That
Automatically Produces It*

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Wired To Grow

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Breaking Through Plateaus: How to Get Your Business Back on a Double-Digit Growth Curve By Creating a Culture That Automatically Produces It

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ISBN-13: 978-0615614038

Printed in the USA by Celeritus Press

www.BreakingThroughBook.com

Dedication

To my one and only, my wife, Jacquie – who still rocks my world, loves me unconditionally, leaves me breathless, tolerates my unbelievably long list of idiosyncrasies, and makes me want to be a better man. After almost three decades of marriage, I am still hopelessly, heels-over-head in love with her!

Introduction

If you've been stuck on a plateau for any length of time, my guess is that you've already tried a lot of different strategies and tactics to get your business (or organization) off the plateau you're on – and yet, despite all your best efforts, nothing seems to have worked.

You've brain dumped, you've brainstormed, you've read books, you've gone to conferences, you've bought programs, you've probably even tried coaching or consulting or a peer advisory group – and yet you and your business (or organization) are still stuck.

You've probably been told that the “secret” to getting your business back on a growth curve is to do something “simple” like raise your prices. Or add more upsells or cross sells. Or start using social media. Or upgrade your services. Or create a “blue ocean.” Or develop more “raving fans.” Or begin using pay-per-click advertising. Or systemize your referral process. Or ...

And while all of the above are great ideas, they haven't worked for you. You've tried what has seemed to work for “everyone else” (after all, the testimonials you've read are killers), but none of the standard ideas/strategies/tactics/solutions seem to work for you.

If that sounds like you, then you're going to love this book. Why? Because for the past several years I've been wrestling with the following question, “Why is it that a strategy or tactic that seems to work so well for one business, doesn't work so well for another?”

My conclusion is that the discrepancy is caused by a series of drivers that reside behind the application of a strategy or tactic that accelerated growth companies possess, that plateaued companies simply don't.

In other words, there is a culture in growth companies (especially accelerated growth companies) that makes the implementation of a tactic or strategy more effective. On the other hand, if you take that same strategy or tactic and apply it to a plateaued company, because the right drivers aren't present in that company's culture, the strategy or tactic simply doesn't work (or doesn't work as effectively).

Now, while that statement may not feel like a very positive observation if you're leading a plateaued company, it really is. Why? Because the good news behind the drivers of growth companies is that they can be learned. Your company's culture can be changed. That means that, once you get a handle on what the growth drivers are, you can begin to adjust your company's culture to reflect that driver.

Then, once your company's culture is adjusted, you'll find that the very same strategies and tactics that you've tried to implement in the past that haven't worked – now will. Why? Because culture matters more than you think. It's not just the strategies and tactics themselves that matter; it's the culture that lies behind them that matters as well.

Which, of course, leads to one very important question, "So, what are the drivers that need to be a part of my company's culture?" I'm glad you asked. Because if you want to break through your company's current plateau and get back on a growth curve so that you can build a bigger, better, faster, and more profitable business (or organization) you're going to want to keep reading! The ten "secrets" that lie in the pages ahead can radically change everything for your company. Even better, the sooner you apply them, the sooner you'll be back on a growth curve (and wondering, "Why didn't I do this sooner?").

Also, as you begin reading this book, may I encourage you to read it in chunks – i.e. take one driver at a time and implement it. Plus, feel free to read this book in any order you desire. You don't have to start with Driver #1 and then move on to Driver #2, #3, #4, etc. Go ahead and scan the table of contents. Find where you think you have the greatest need and start there.

Finally, I designed this as an application-oriented book (why else take the time to read it). However, that also means that you could easily get overwhelmed if you tried to read it from cover to cover and apply everything all at once.

To avoid that feeling, may I encourage you to keep this book on your desk (or a nearby bookshelf) and return to it frequently because every one of the issues it addresses, is an issue you'll have to address over and over again for years on end.

So make friends with this book. Refer to it often. Apply the lessons within. And if you will, I'm confident that this book will become a trusted companion for you on the incredible journey in front of you!

To your accelerated success,



Bruce D. Johnson, President
Wired To Grow

P.S. Before you get started I want to remind you of one of life's irrefutable laws – which is, "What you put in, is what you get out!" Therefore, as you read through this book, I want to encourage you to not only read it – but to interact with it! Mark it up. Underline key phrases. Create your own notes. Star important ideas. Talk back to me (by writing in your margins) – especially if you disagree.

But mostly, make sure you do the application sections at the end of each chapter. After all, the value of a book is found, not in you completing the reading of it, but in what it changes in you and your world. Therefore, if you want to reap the most value possible from the ideas contained in this book, make sure you continually focus on this key question, "What can I apply from this ____ (chapter, paragraph, idea)?" If you do that consistently, this book will truly be both a business and life-changing experience for you!

Final Introductory Note: As you read through this book and encounter the ten drivers of accelerated growth, I want to encourage you to never let yourself think, "I know that." Why? Because whether or not you "know" something is irrelevant. The only relevant questions, whenever you're learning something are, "Am I doing that?" If not, "Should I be doing that?" And if you're doing that, "Am I maximizing that?" to which the answer is always, "No!" Why? Because no one maximizes anything. Everything can be improved.

"There are basically no companies that make good slow decisions. There are only companies that make good fast decisions."

Larry Page (Co-founder of Google)

Chapter 1

“Move Faster, Succeed Sooner.”

Driver #1: Speed of Implementation

How fast are you and your team at implementing an idea? For example, when you finish a meeting and a decision has been made, how fast do you and your people execute that idea? Right away? Within a day? Within two? Within a week? Within a month? Or is it longer than that? If your business is plateaued, my guess is that you responded toward the longer side of those options – and that’s a problem.

Now, while I’m not a huge fan of ordinals as in, “The number one thing you need to do is ...” when it comes to the question of, “What is the single, most important driver of fast growth companies?” I have to break my rule. This is number one. While the remaining nine drivers aren’t in any specific order, this one is.

Speed of implementation is unquestionably the single greatest differentiator between slow and fast growth companies. In simplistic terms, it’s the difference between, “Ready, Fire, Aim!” and, “Ready, Aim, Fire!”

Google could easily be the poster child for this principle. The past several years have proven that they have no problem at all with coming up with an idea, putting it out in the world – in imperfect form – and then tweaking it in response to the feedback they receive from their users/customers.

For example, when Apple came out with the iPhone, Google had no problem at all getting Android out quickly – even though it wasn't even remotely comparable to the iPhone. Google Chrome has undergone multiple revisions since its release. Google Catalog has been in development for years and often returns data from catalogs several years old. And Google Answers has never caught on.

Yet, Google still continues to be a highly profitable and fast growth company. Why? In part, because they've created a culture where it's okay to fail. Where it's okay to get something out fast and let the market determine whether it's a winner or a loser. Where it's okay to not hit 1.000 every time you're up to bat. And it is differences like this one that continues to drive the rapid growth of Google.

So, why is it then that more businesses, especially small and medium-sized businesses (SMBs) don't do this? Answer: because most SMBs have fallen victim to the slow growth disease of, "Analysis paralysis." Rather than acting fast, they tend to ponder, revisit, discuss, debate, and then postpone until they can, "work everything out."

I'm continually amazed at how long it takes many of my clients to implement ideas that they know could make a positive difference – that could help grow their business faster, allow them to lead it more effectively, create less stress in their lives and make them more money. Which raises an important question, "Why?" What is it that drives analysis paralysis?

In my work with owners and CEOs of SMBs, I've come to the conclusion that there are four main causes/issues that drive most organizational or personal tendencies towards analysis paralysis.

1. **Fear**

For some people, the primary driver of analysis paralysis is their fear. It could be the fear of success or the fear of failure or the fear of rejection. But what stops them from taking action on what they "know" could help is a negative expectation about a future event. That's what fear is, isn't it?

For example, if you believe that hiring a new sales rep could significantly add more revenue to your company but aren't willing to pull the trigger, you ought to ask why? If you're like a lot of business owners and CEOs it may be because you're thinking, "What if it doesn't work out?" "What if they don't produce?" "What if all I end up with is a huge expense and no

additional revenue?" If you're thinking like that, what's holding you back is fear – fear of failure.

Note: This doesn't mean that you should go out and hire an additional sales rep. But it is a very real world illustration of what fear is. It's a "negative expectation about a future event." You (or I) could just have easily thought, "Boy, having an additional sales rep working full-time on generating more leads and converting more of them into sales will surely make my life easier – and make us a whole lot more money than just having me give a small portion of my time to marketing and sales." Either thought could be valid. However, one leads to action while the other doesn't.

While discussing fear may appear to be a "soft" issue, it does have a very "hard" impact on most businesses. In fact, I'm continually amazed at how large a role fear plays in most businesses – especially plateaued ones – and how it keeps them from doing the things they know they ought to be doing to grow.

2. **Personality**

There are certain personality types that are more action-oriented while others are more given to analysis paralysis. For example, in the Myers-Briggs typology, one of the four main categories of personality types is "SJ" (a type which accounts for 40% of the entire population). SJs, by nature, have an incredibly difficult time acting fast on something new because they want to do things right – which is the dominant driving force of an SJ.

On the positive side, SJs are great workers. When they have a system or know exactly what's expected of them, they'll follow through and make it happen better than most other types. But, on the negative side, they have a difficult time taking action when something isn't clearly spelled out or there's not sufficient proof that a course of action is the right course of action.

Now, this doesn't mean that an SJ can't overcome analysis paralysis. Typologies are descriptive, not prescriptive. An SJ can overcome his natural tendency, just like an introvert can overcome his tendency towards isolation and solitude and learn to network at large networking events. The change just needs to be done intentionally. Unfortunately, if someone has a tendency

towards a certain behavior, in this case, analysis paralysis because of their nature, and they don't do something intentionally to overcome it, they'll never change – which, in this case, means never becoming a fast acting leader of a fast growth business.

3. **Beliefs**

The third reason why many leaders of SMBs have a tendency towards analysis paralysis is because they have a set of beliefs that anchor them there. For example, if you're one of those people who believes that something has to be perfect before it goes out, then you'll probably continually fall victim to analysis paralysis and you won't take action. Or if you believe that, "Doing something quickly is bad because when something is done quickly, mistakes are made," then you'll probably remain stuck in analysis paralysis. You won't execute fast.

Remember, all behavior is driven by beliefs. So if you or your business has a behavior that isn't working for you (in this case, not executing quickly), then you need to discover what the belief is behind that behavior – and then change it).

For example, if you discover that the reason you don't implement quickly is because you believe that something has to be perfect before it goes out the door, then you've got to change that belief – or your business will never be a fast growth business.

One of my favorite lines for those who struggle with perfectionistic tendencies comes from Tom Peters who so succinctly says,

"Do it right the first time is stupid." Tom Peters

No one does anything perfectly the first time. Perfection doesn't exist this side of heaven. It's unattainable. So let it go. Instead, pursue excellence, which is simply doing the best you can with what you have in the amount of time you have to do it. That is attainable!

4. **Structural issues**

The final reason why a number of businesses and business

leaders get stuck in analysis paralysis is because the systems they've set up in their businesses make it difficult for anyone to act quickly. For example, some organizations and businesses are set up with a committee structure where a committee has to approve a decision before action can be taken – which, by definition, hinders execution. Or others are set up with a checks and balances structure where multiple people have to sign off on a decision before it can be executed. Again, this hinders quick execution.

But the one I find most frequently in small or medium-sized businesses is the one where the owner or CEO has become the bottleneck. In other words, too many entrepreneurial leaders struggle with letting other people in their organizations make decisions (especially big ones) without their approval. In essence, they end up creating structures where they, the point person, have to sign off before any significant action can be taken – which clearly hinders their business' ability to grow rapidly.

What's interesting about these kinds of leaders is that they're often proud of the fact that their companies don't have lots of "structure," or "committees," but in fact they do – it's just a structure or committee of one! What they often don't see is that they've become the bottleneck who's hindering their people from taking action (and therefore, their business from growing).

Now, while plateaued and slow growth businesses are marked by analysis paralysis, fast growth companies are marked by the opposite. And four of the main contributors that help them create a fast growth culture are as follows.

- 1. Few layers of bureaucracy**

Few things hinder fast execution more than having to go through various approval channels. At the same time, having employees act without some kind of checks and balances is a recipe for disaster. So how do fast growth companies compensate for this?

Answer: they anticipate the potential pitfalls and create systems that guide individuals to make right choices (and avoid making the wrong ones). For example, a common problem in a lot of small businesses is that staff members will often make expense

decisions without ever checking cash flow. To avoid this, most small business leaders have very low dollar amounts that their staff members can expense without approval. Yet, interestingly, the Ritz Carlton empowers their cleaning staff with the power to fix any problem up to \$500 without approval. Isn't that amazing? I know a number of leaders who won't let their college-educated top team members make a \$500 decision without their approval.

But more importantly, what does the typical small business CEO do when they see a large expense item? Exactly! One of the first things they do is check cash flow. And the second is they check the YTD budget figures for that staff member's area. So let me ask you, "Why can't a staff member do those same two checks themselves?" If they did, they would save you both the time and effort from doing so and enable you to stay focused on the projects you need to be focused on.

In other words, what fast growth companies do to ensure fast execution is make sure they've set up all the systems and guidelines necessary to guide their individual staff members to make the right decisions – without having to continually check with other people. By removing all of the hindrances to action, they've, by definition, sped up the process of taking action.

2. Empowerment

Following on the heels of number one, fast growth companies are very proactive about empowerment. They're driven, not by the need to control, but by the desire to leverage their people for the greatest impact possible. This is why they always delegate both authority and responsibility to their people. One without the other makes no sense.

However, in slow growth and plateaued companies, we see exactly the opposite. Slow growth leaders tend to delegate only the responsibility, not the authority, which is why their people have to continually get approval from those above them to take new action or to make big decisions. Why? Because, if they're honest, slow growth leaders don't really trust their people. If they did, they'd transfer both the authority and the responsibility hand-in-hand.

Fast growth leaders, on the other hand, trust their people and believe that they'll do the right thing – which is why they have

no problem at all with delegating both authority and responsibility. It's all about trust!

3. **Modeling fast action**

Leaders of fast growth businesses know that the phrase, "People do what people see," is just as valid today as it has been throughout history. That's why they make sure they're continually modeling fast execution in their own lives.

Nido Qubein, the President of High Point University, who has built and sold several businesses, is also the chairman of Great Harvest Bread Company, sits on the board of BB&T, consults several companies, does 40 outside speaking engagements per year, teaches a class on campus each semester, and coaches speakers. How? By taking fast action.

Nido breaks his days down into five minute "units." If you ask him, "Can we get together for an hour?" he'll say, "That's twelve units!" Nido gets things done. And that modeling has caught on. In his first six years at High Point, Nido has lead a \$550M renovation and expansion of the campus that is truly remarkable (on the way to a \$2.1B renovation). It's a transformation that has turned a small Methodist college into US News & World Report's number one up and coming college in the South. Things happen fast at HPU. Why? Because they have a leader who models fast action every single day.

4. **A culture of action**

In fast growth companies, it's not just the leader who models fast execution, it's the entire organization. It's almost visceral. The entire culture of the business is organized, not around debate and delay or CYA, but around empowerment and fast execution. Fast growth companies are always seeking to narrow the gap between the inception of an idea and its execution.

John Masters, a Canadian Hunter, puts it this way.

"This is so simple it sounds stupid, but it is amazing how few oil people really understand that you only find oil if you drill wells. You may think you're finding it when you're drawing maps and studying log books, but you actually have to drill."

John is right. Though his advice sounds so obvious, it's amazing how few businesses or organizations actually practice it. In fact, I've found very few organizations that have a culture with a bias towards fast execution. Yet, if you want to break through your plateau and get back on a growth curve, you've got to create a culture of execution where everyone knows, "We get things done fast around here."

So, how can you go about creating that kind of culture? Well, here are a few ideas to help you increase the speed of implementation in your business (or organization).

1. **Reward quick action.**

As the old saying goes, "What gets rewarded gets done." So create a series of awards for people who act fast. You could give awards on the spot for fast execution (maybe a gift card to John because he left the meeting on Tuesday and acted on his assignment immediately). Or you could create a monthly award for the person who generated the most activity. Or you could ... Be creative. Have fun. But make sure your people know that speed matters!

Note: You don't have to do this forever. You might choose to create a six or twelve-month campaign to increase the speed of implementation in your business and then move on to another issue.

2. **Reward risk-taking and fast prototyping**

If you want to create a fast executing organization, then you've got to eliminate or minimize the fear of failure your employees possess.

One of my favorite quotes of all-time comes from an Australian businessman, Phil Daniels, who reduced his philosophy of management down to six simple words,

"Reward excellent failures. Punish mediocre successes."

I love that! In fact, in my previous career, I used to say to my staff and lay leaders frequently, “Listen, if you’re willing to go out and try something bold and risky – and it fails miserably. Don’t worry. I’ll be the first in line to congratulate you for taking a risk. However, if you’re not willing to do that and instead choose to play it safe and nothing goes wrong, don’t expect me to come running up and say, “Great job!” Because I won’t. In fact, I may get on your case because you chose to play it safe.”

Another great line on this subject comes from David Kelly, the creative CEO of IDEO, who once said,

“Fail faster. Succeed sooner.”

3. Simplify and eliminate any policies, procedures or processes that hinder speed.

Every organization has them. They may be old systems. They may be checks and balances systems. They may be industry standards. But you do have them. Inefficiency is present in every organization.

The problem with this, as you learned in science class years ago, is that whenever you have drag/friction/inefficiency, the speed of an object in motion always slows down-which means that as soon as you remove whatever’s causing the drag, you’ll immediately increase the speed of that object (through your system).

4. Keep pushing authority and responsibility down the chain.

One of the primary responsibilities of leadership, which we’ll come back to in the next chapter is leverage. But you can’t leverage your people well if your people don’t have both the responsibility and authority to act – especially apart from your approval. So if you want to create a fast growth culture, then you’ve got to keep pushing authority and responsibility as far down the chain as you can.

In addition, when someone with whom you’ve delegated authority and responsibility to comes to you and asks for your opinion – you’ve got to resist the temptation to weigh in – or you’ll keep reinforcing a slow growth culture. Whenever anyone

to whom you've delegated authority and responsibility comes and asks for your approval, make sure you say, "Hey, I gave you the authority and responsibility to make the call, you make it!"

Note: this doesn't mean you can't ever voice your opinion or mentor your people. What it means is that you don't want your people to remain dependent upon you. You don't want them to slow down the process of implementation until they can check with you. Nor do you want to create a leader who's afraid to make tough calls on their own.

So use your best judgment. And stay aware. Most of us like to voice our opinions (after all, we are the senior leader), but we rarely think about the consequences of doing so. If you want your people to execute fast, then make sure you keep empowering them to make the tough calls by refusing to weigh in yourself.

5. Set time limits on discussion

In order to create more ownership and buy in (or because of fear or lack of confidence), a lot of leaders will allow a lot of executive discussions to go on for way too long (weeks, months, and sometimes even years) rather than force them to decide and execute.

A simple, quick, easy-to-use practice that can help you avoid that problem is to set time limits on discussions at the beginning. For example, let's say you're discussing a new marketing strategy, "Should we add an offline direct mail campaign to supplement our online Google Adwords campaign?" While some companies would discuss this for weeks/months, you might start out your meeting by saying, "Okay, we've got 30 minutes to discuss this today after which we're going to make a decision." Simply by making that one change you'll immediately increase the speed of implementation in your business.

6. Review how you personally contribute to slowing down implementation.

Remember, "People do what people see." If you don't like what you see out there (meaning in your people or in your organization), then you always want to start by taking a look at the part you play.

If you don't get your assignments done between staff meetings, how can you get frustrated with your staff members who don't get theirs done? Or if you don't return your phone calls or respond to emails quickly, how can you be frustrated when your people don't either? Or if you don't hit your deadlines (or better, beat them), how can you be upset with your people when they don't hit theirs?

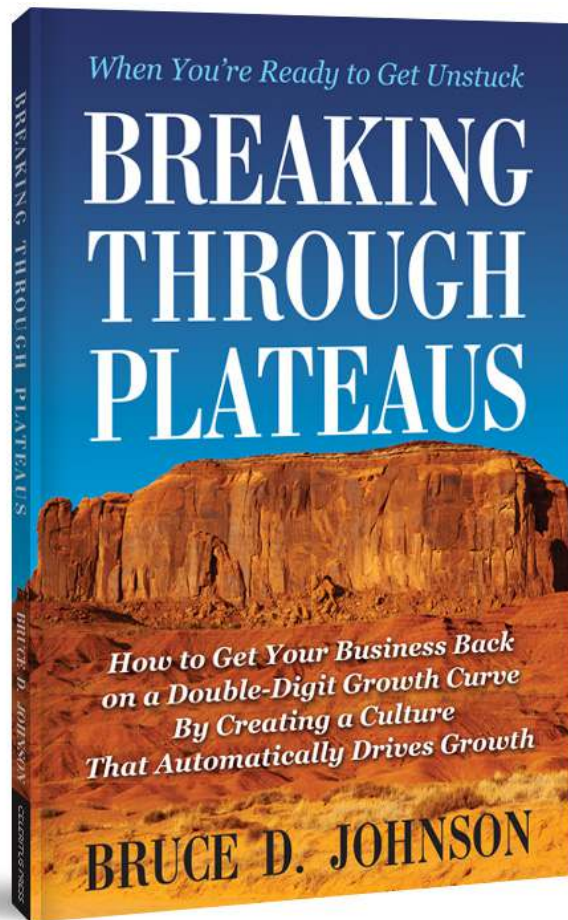
In other words, if you want to create a fast executing organization, then you need to model fast execution in your own life. The sooner you do that, the sooner your people will change and, in fact, the entire culture of your organization will change.

So, if you'd like to break through your plateau and build a bigger, better, faster and more profitable business, then I'd encourage you to start right here with Driver #1: Speed of Implementation. Of all the drivers, this one truly is number one for a reason. If you want to grow faster, you've got to implement faster. Period. There are no ifs, ands, or buts available. It just is.

Applying Driver #1: Speed of Implementation

1. On a scale of 1-10 (high), how would you rate your business (or organization) on its speed of implementation? _____
2. On a scale of 1-10 (high), how would you rate yourself on your speed of implementation? _____
3. Which of the four causes of analysis paralysis are you and your business most affected by? And what have been the impacts those causes have had on your company?
4. What is one thing you can do to decrease analysis paralysis?
5. Which of the four contributors to fast execution do you need to focus more attention on?
6. What can you do to ensure that that contributor increases your speed?

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Click on the following link to order your full copy, complete with all ten drivers that can get your business (or organization) on an accelerated growth curve. Plus, when you order through this link, I'll give your three FREE bonuses (13 templates, a six-part video course and an emergency time guide). So don't waste any more time, grab your copy by clicking on

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