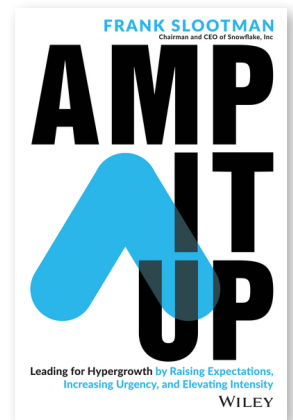


Amp It Up

Leading for Hypergrowth by Raising Expectations, Increasing Urgency, and Elevating Intensity

by **Frank Sloatman**



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THE SUMMARY IN BRIEF

“Amp it Up” was a popular LinkedIn article whose main premise was that organizations have considerable room to improve performance without making expensive changes to the talent, structure, or fundamental business model. The advice was to keep playing your game but amp things up dramatically. Raise your standards, pick up the pace, sharpen your focus, and align your people. You don’t need to bring in reams of consultants to examine everything that is going on. What you need on day one is to ratchet up expectations, energy, urgency, and intensity.

That article triggered thousands of responses online and a flood of incoming requests to learn more about the Amp It Up philosophy. Author Frank Sloatman wrote *Amp It Up: Leading for Hypergrowth by Raising Expectations, Increasing Urgency, and Elevating Intensity* in order to summarize his convictions, observations, and beliefs about how to lead a mission-driven high-performance company and share them in an efficient, scalable way. Whether you are CEO or a leader at any level, whether at a startup, a big company, or a nonprofit, you can engulf your organization with energy, step up the tempo, and *Amp It Up*.

IN THIS SUMMARY, YOU WILL LEARN:

- How to raise your standards.
- Why your culture and people should be aligned.
- How to sharpen your focus.
- Why you need to pick up the pace.

Raise Your Standards

Make Your Organization Mission Driven

Being on a mission is a visceral experience, not merely an intellectual one. When your organization has a well-defined purpose, you feel it down to your bones. You feel energized when you start the workday, and you feel good about whatever progress you've made toward the mission when you shut down for the night.

Being on a mission unlocks the X factor: an intangible that can drastically elevate performance as people set out to achieve greatness—together. It makes your working life not just more productive but also more fun.

Conversely, you're not on a mission if you feel like you spend most of your days checking off trivial to-do items, passing the buck to other people, reading and forwarding email, and covering your ass so you won't get in any trouble.

Showing up every day at a “good enough is good enough” company is the opposite of fun and energizing. Just trying to get through each day is a depressing way to spend a career. And if most people at your company feel that way, the enterprise is in grave danger.

A clear purpose was common a few decades ago, but these days more and more companies are fuzzy, if not hopelessly confused, about why they exist. The mission clarity that used to be the norm has now become more of an exception—which gives leaders who get it right a competitive advantage.

There are three criteria for a great mission: big, clear, and not about money.

- **Big:** It massively exceeds in scale and scope what any company has tried to do in the same space.
- **Clear:** More defined and intense missions are easier for everyone to focus on.
- **Not About Money:** Financial targets are milestones along the way to your true mission of bringing good things to the world and improving the lives of customers and employees.

How to Nurture the Mission

Once you have your mission in place, you get everyone to embrace it and make it real through four key areas: applying focus, urgency, execution, and strategy.

Focus: If people don't focus on the mission, they are not really on a mission. We concentrate our resources and

bandwidth on the mission, and we avoid distractions. That takes discipline.

Urgency: Time is not your friend. Time introduces risks, such as new entrants. The faster we separate from the competition, the more likely we are to succeed. Urgency is a mindset that can be learned when it doesn't come naturally.

Execute: Missions must be executed via an organized, orchestrated, and resourced set of activities. We have no chance of accomplishing it without a drive for world-class execution, which includes high standards and efficient use of resources.

Strategy: Strategies don't change day-to-day, only when there is a demonstrably better way to do things or if something isn't working, unrelated to execution failure. Everyone needs to feel confident that our strategy is in line with the goals of our mission.

Mission driven is not just about what you believe, it's how you make decisions every day about your time and effort and resources. It's about delivering on your most important promises, not racking up style points. It's about making choices during every meeting and every interaction. Grinding away toward your mission, day in and day out, will absolutely pay off.

Align Your People and Culture

Hire Drivers, Not Passengers

To be amped up, you have to hire drivers, not passengers, and get the wrong people off the bus. Passengers are people who don't mind simply being carried along by the company's momentum, offering little or no input, seemingly not caring much about the direction chosen by management.

They are often pleasant, get along with everyone, attend meetings promptly, and generally do not stand out as troublemakers. They are often accepted into the fabric of the organization and stay there for many years.

The problem is that while passengers can often diagnose and articulate a problem quite well, they have no investment in solving it. They avoid taking strong positions at the risk of being wrong about something.

Passengers are largely dead weight and can be an insidious threat to your culture and performance. They inadvertently undermine the mojo of the organization. They sap the animal instinct and spirit you need in business to thrive.

Drivers, on the other hand, get their satisfaction from making things happen, not blending in with the furniture.

Drivers, on the other hand, get their satisfaction from making things happen, not blending in with the furniture. They feel a strong sense of ownership for their projects and teams and demand high standards from both themselves and others. They exude energy, urgency, ambition, even boldness. Faced with a challenge, they usually say, “Why not?” rather than “That’s impossible.”

These qualities make drivers massively valuable. Finding, recruiting, rewarding, and retaining them should be among your top priorities. Recognize them privately and publicly, promote them, and elevate them as an example of what others should aspire to.

That will start waking up those who are merely along for the ride. Celebrate people who own their responsibilities, take and defend clear positions, argue for their preferred strategies, and seek to move the dial.

Getting the Wrong People off the Bus

When hired as a new CEO, at any level of a company, the first order of business is sorting out the valuable people from the dead-weight. Then you have to do what Jim Collins described in *Good to Great* as moving the wrong people off the bus and putting the right ones on the bus, in the right seats. In that order.

Parachuting into a new company or business unit is hard. Everybody is on edge, waiting to see what you’re going to do. But you can’t let anxiety slow you down from immediately assessing your people.

Don’t surrender to the temptation to go into wait-and-see mode, hoping that time will reveal everyone’s true value. You need to make things happen, not wait around and hope for the best. You have to practice sizing up people and situations with limited and imperfect information—because that is all you are ever going to get.

If you don’t act quickly to get the wrong people off the bus, you have no prayer of changing the overall trajectory. We often believe, naively, that we can coach struggling teammates to a better place. And sometimes we can, but those cases are rarer than we imagine. At a struggling company,

you need to change things fast, which can only happen by switching out the people whose skills no longer fit the mission or perhaps never really did in the first place.

The other advantage of moving fast is that everyone who stays on the bus will know that you’re dead serious about high standards. The good ones will be energized by those standards. If others start looking for greener, less-demanding pastures because they don’t want to meet those standards, that’s fine too.

This philosophy may come across as harsh. But what’s even harsher is not doing the job you were hired to do as a leader. If you can’t find the backbone to make necessary changes, you are holding everyone else back from reaching their full potential. Leaders who do not act will soon find out that their leadership is in question.

Finding the Right People

Getting the wrong people off the bus is only half the challenge. The other half is finding and recruiting the right people for the right seats, which is much harder. This is not a process that can be rushed. The cost of a misfire in time, money, and reputation is huge. Leaders are expected to have well-developed networks, the ability to recruit, and the sharp critical eye to judge talent.

It’s hard to maintain an active recruiting posture. That is often the reason why we tolerate mediocre performance—because it is so hard to relaunch a recruiting effort. We want to always have a list of prioritized candidates for each critical role. Candidates who we would seek to engage as needed.

It starts with knowing who is in the field, how well they are regarded, and keeping tabs on their ongoing status. Have some sort of ongoing relationship until the time comes to actively engage.

Do not rely on acute sourcing tactics such as recruiters and LinkedIn. You will only see the active job seekers, who are unlikely to be the candidates you really want. In high growth companies, functions and individuals can easily get overrun, as the expanding needs of the organization exceed their capacity. So you must staff ahead of need. Recruiting never stops.

Ultimately, leaders are only as good as the people they surround themselves with. Once you get good at both hiring and firing, you are well on your way to great results and a thriving career.

Align Culture with the Mission

Culture matters more than you think, and it is not optional. A strong culture can greatly help organizations and become an enduring source of competitive advantage. But a weak culture can easily destroy organizations from within.

An important question here is, to what aim do you direct your culture? All platitudes and high-minded principles aside, the culture needs to serve the mission of the enterprise. While there is nothing wrong with good intentions, we need to align the culture with the mission.

Culture is not about making people feel good, per se, it's about enabling the mission with the behaviors and values that serve that purpose. It is essential that leaders grab a hold of culture and start driving it to a desired state. Culture can become a force multiplier, but it doesn't just happen with good intentions.

Sharpen Your Focus

Put Analysis Before Solutions

Business tends to be “solution centric.” We spend most of our time discussing solutions rather than diagnosing problems. We race to conclusions about what's wrong and what to do about it. We pattern match, reacting to situations based on our individual experience rather than studying the specific situation in front of us from a broader perspective.

It's easy to be irrationally confident in our judgment and anxious to move forward with implementing solutions. But if we are wrong in understanding the problems, our solutions won't work. It behooves us to slow down and critically examine situations and problems before settling on an explanation, never mind a solution.

This requires intellectual honesty—the ability to stay rational and set aside our biases and past experiences. Consider the full range of possibilities, not just the first one that jumps out at you. Seek council outside of your direct environment.

Align Incentives for Customer Success

Declare and constantly reinforce that customer success is the business of the entire company, not merely one depart-

ment. This means that when a problem arises, every department has a responsibility to fix it. Everyone's incentives should be fully aligned with what's good for customers.

Customer grievances are best solved by establishing proper ownership, reducing internal complexity, and removing bureaucratic intermediaries. The product developers and salespeople who work directly with a customer should never surrender responsibility for that customer's well-being, which directly affects their career progress as well as the company's results. That way, everyone's incentives are aligned.

Pick Up the Pace

Ramp Up Sales

There's no simple answer to when to ramp up sales, but there are additional questions that can help to draw a conclusion:

- Are you happy with your current sales productivity metrics? If not, how can you improve productivity before adding more sales headcount?
- Are you happy with the metrics of your lead generation pipeline? If not, how can you improve it?
- Are you being realistic in your timeline of sales targets? Are you projecting too much too soon, or too little too late?
- Are you being aggressive enough and thinking big enough to outpace your competition?
- Is your sales team buying into your targets and timeline? Are they owning the goals and fully committed to hitting them?

Trying to staff a whole sales team prematurely is a very common managerial mistake. So is failing to figure out what distinguishes top sales performers from weak performers before ramping up headcount. And so is hesitating to invest major resources to scale up your sales effort after all the conditions are in place.

Putting gasoline into a car's tank won't matter if the engine isn't working. Likewise, you can hire all the salespeople in the world, but they won't pay off until you've figured out your product, your market, your demand and lead generation systems, and the kinds of selling motions that will convert prospects to customers.

If you have a sales force that's stuck in the mud, ask lots of questions to figure out what's wrong. Then take bold steps

Your mission as a leader is to figure out how to hand on to your early-stage dynamism and avoid the lethargy of mass and bulk.

to mitigate the problem as soon as you understand it. You can't simply take a "wait and see" posture.

You have to aggressively manage nonperformance, cut headcount if appropriate, or add headcount wherever you have the highest probability of converting sales potential to sales yield.

Grow Fast or Die Slow

"Grow Fast or Die Slow" is the title of a 2014 study by McKinsey & Co that examined thousands of software and services companies between 1980 and 2012. It concluded that growth trumps everything else as a driver and predictor of long-term success.

The study found that when evaluating a young company, growth matters even more than profit margin or cost structure. Increases in growth drove twice as much valuation increase than equivalent improvements in profitability. No correlation was observed between cost structure and growth.

Relatively few leaders make growth as big a priority as it should be. One major reason is that too few leaders truly grasp the importance of growth. They have the misguided belief that their mission is to reach profitability as quickly as possible, and that growth can follow profitability. But that shows a misunderstanding of how value is created and how investors think.

Once a start-up begins to show profits, investors conclude that either it doesn't know how to invest in further growth or that it has run out of growth opportunities. They won't expect profitability yet; investors know that growth is a ferocious consumer of resources.

It's often impossible to assess the true limits of growth. It's not just plugging numbers into a formula; it requires human judgment and insights. That's why we have to keep leaning into it.

Leaders should focus on challenging the assumptions that add up to the current growth model. Very often, challenging those assumptions will lead you to conclude that your growth target is too conservative.

When in doubt, push the model to set a more ambitious target. It is better to ratchet up growth expectations and fall short than not even reach for it. Behavior is informed, if not driven, by expectations.

Fast growth separates great companies from their competition. You can psychologically leave everyone else in the dust when you outstrip their growth rates by considerable margin. It's intimidating and demoralizing to your rivals. Growth tends to slow down when you are starting to become well penetrated and saturated.

Most companies lose their original scrappiness as they get bigger. But the most valuable leaders are those who can combine the scrappiness of a start-up leader with the organizational and diplomatic discipline needed in a big company.

Those who can scale up or down as required. Those who can set aside experience when necessary, apply first principles, and think through situations in their elementary form. Your mission as a leader is to figure out how to hang on to your early-stage dynamism and avoid the lethargy of mass and bulk.

The Amped-Up Leader

Amp Up Your Career

Are you happy with your upward progress in your career? Could you go faster? Probably. Most people manage their careers in a haphazard fashion, jumping from role to role as new opportunities pop up.

Being more purposeful about your career can amp up your forward momentum. The most common reasons for career stagnation (or worse, self-destruction) can be instructive.

As professional people, we are products. So try to product manage yourself. Develop your product through education, training, and experience. Your resume is your shingle. Buff and polish it. Make sure it carries some punch. In this marketplace, the question isn't whether you're qualified; it's whether you're better qualified than other candidates.

A rigorous academic education is necessary to develop liter-

acy, numeracy, and general capacities to learn, observe, and analyze. But this degree doesn't need to be from an elite, Ivy League, or otherwise name brand school.

Further, it's popular to go back to get an MBA after a few years in the workplace. Yes, an MBA from a good university looks good on a resume but there can be a huge opportunity cost to getting an MBA and not only from the salary you'd be giving up for two years. Your time away from your field will put you behind on experience compared to your peers. Education matters some, but experience matters more.

The longer you are out of school, the more employers will favor meaningful experience over more education. Grad students are much less attractive than people who can point to a record of tangible achievements at a company. So think twice before pulling the trigger to get any kind of master's degree.

Aptitude Matters Most

Aptitudes are your God-given talents, whatever you are innately good at. Employers can give you experience, but they can't give you aptitude. Experience can help reveal your aptitudes, but hiring managers often don't try hard enough to understand and discern them.

If you are light on experience for a role you want, redirect the conversation to aptitudes. Why would you be great in this position? Smart managers will usually pick someone with less experience but more aptitude. But bad managers become hung up on checking off the boxes on experience, in a futile attempt to minimize career risk to themselves. They make safe choices, not optimal ones.

Hiring decisions are always fraught with risk and uncertainty. Extremely well-credentialed people can crash and burn in short order. That's why many hiring managers will trust their gut instinct on someone light on experience but strong on aptitude and potential. In those situations, personality often breaks the tie. People who are hungry, humble, and express a "can't fail" level of determination are often a good bet.

One often neglected skill set that can boost your career is your ability to communicate well, in both speaking and writing. An efficient, get-to-the-point writing style will help you at every stage of your career.

The spoken word is another big deal for anyone on the management track. Your career can easily stall out if you can't speak well, or at least competently, in front of groups large and small.

Career Doldrums and Career Killers

Sometimes your career may get stuck at a certain plateau, no matter how hard you've been working to move up. For good people, career doldrums are usually a function of not being in a growing industry and/or a thriving company.

In companies and industries that are dynamic and on the move, people with talent often get promoted even before they are fully ready for the new role. But if you find yourself in the opposite situation, you will have to take initiative to change the trajectory.

When asked what makes a great CEO, people expect a series of adjectives such as intelligent, charismatic, collaborative, eloquent, and so on. Of course the answer isn't so simple.

There are many different paths to superior outcomes in business. You will have to find your own path, one that suits your temperament, disposition, and natural aptitudes. Don't try to copy or emulate other leaders. That will only slow down the process of finding your own path.

Instead, make the most of your unique aggregate of experiences. Apply those experiences, and the insights discussed in this CEO guide, to become a truer, more honed, more effective version of who you already are. Finding your own path, however long it takes, will unlock your personal power.

At the end of the day, great leaders at any level have great outcomes. You can be the most empathetic, charismatic, and popular leader ever, but none of that will matter if your business falls short. And when it does, there will be nowhere for you to hide.

No one will care about your legitimate explanations, let alone your excuses. No one will care about the unlucky breaks that were completely beyond your control. It isn't fair, but it's the world we live in, the world we have to accept as leaders.

The good news is that if you persevere over long periods of time, if you focus intensely on delivering value for your customers, and if you build a disciplined culture for your employees, it will all pay off in the long run. You will drive great outcomes for your organization and reap the rewards.

It's hard to beat any leader who combines great resolve, persistence, mission focus, and clarity about what is and is not important. It's hard to beat any leader who truly amps it up.



Snowflake CEO Frank Sloatman is one of the tech world's most accomplished executives in enterprise growth, having led Snowflake to the largest software IPO ever after leading Data Domain and ServiceNow to exponential growth and the public market before that. In *Amp It Up*, he shares his leadership approach for the first time.

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