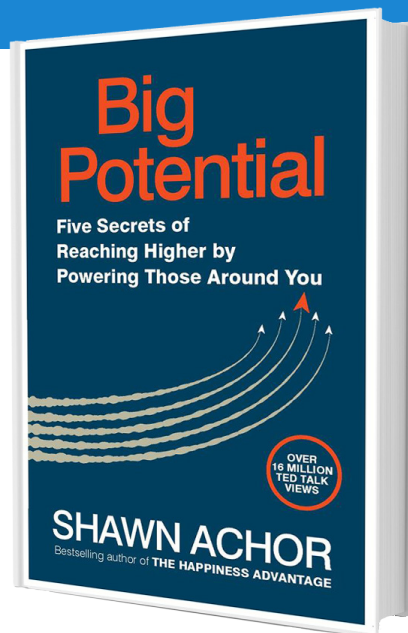


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UK edition

EXCERPT OF **BIG POTENTIAL** BY SHAWN ACHOR

CHAPTER 1

THE POWER OF HIDDEN CONNECTIONS

The creation of a thousand forests is in one acorn.

—RALPH WALDO EMERSON

THE MIRACLE OF THE MANGROVES

When dusk slowly crept upon a mangrove forest lining a river deep in a jungle in Southeast Asia, a biologist far from his home in Washington State looked out over the lush, alien landscape lining the snake-infested waters. While drifting slowly in his boat, Professor Hugh Smith surely heard the calls of the nocturnal creatures uncoiling from their dens or taking flight from their nests and beginning their nightly hunts. I can envision how the water must have shimmered under the light from the stars, unspoiled by the light pollution that existed in the remote cities. What happened next on that humid day in 1935 is part of recorded academic history. Smith looked up at one of the mangrove trees, and suddenly the entire canopy glowed as if a lightning bolt had shot out from the tree instead of striking it. Then all went dark, leaving a burned image on his vision.

Then lightning, as it sometimes does, struck twice.

The entire tree glowed again, then went entirely dark again twice in three seconds.¹ Then, in a reality-bending moment, all of the trees along the riverbank suddenly glowed in unison. Every tree on one side of the river for a thousand feet was flashing and going dark at exactly the same time.

Something deep inside me warms at the thought that such a patient, careful, and scientific observer, whose curiosity about the world led him so far away from his normal life in the Pacific Northwest, could be rewarded that night by such a magical moment of nature.

Once his capacity for mental reasoning returned, he realized that the trees were not, in fact, glowing; rather, they were covered with a critical number of bioluminescent lightning bugs, all illuminating at the exact same time. Upon returning home, Dr. Smith wrote up a journal article on his discovery of the synchronous lightning bugs. It seemed too good to be true, like something out of a storybook. I'm sadly unsurprised by the next part of the story. He was not believed. Biologists ridiculed his account, even calling it fabricated. Why would male fireflies glow in unison, which would only decrease their chances of distinguishing themselves to potential mates? Mathematicians were equally skeptical. How could order come from chaos in nature without a leader to direct it? And entomologists asked how millions of fireflies could see enough other fireflies to create the exact same pattern, given the limited visibility in the mangrove forest. It seemed physically, mathematically, and biologically impossible.

Yet, it wasn't. And now, thanks to modern science, we know how and why. Turns out that this puzzling behavior actually serves an evolutionary purpose for the fireflies. As published in

the prestigious journal *Science*, researchers Moiseff and Cope-land found that when lightning bugs light up at random times, the likelihood of a female responding to a male in the deep, dark recesses of a mangrove forest is 3 percent. But when the lightning bugs light up together, the likelihood of females responding is 82 percent.² That's not a typo. **The success rate increased by 79 percentage points when flashing as an interconnected community rather than as individuals.**

Society teaches that it's better to be the only bright light than be in a forest of bright lights. After all, isn't that the way we think about success in our schools and companies? We want to graduate at the top of our class, get the job at the best company, and be chosen to work on the most coveted project. We want our child to be the smartest kid at school, the most popular kid on the block, the fastest kid on the team. When any resource—be it acceptance to the most prestigious university, an interview with a top-ranking company, or a spot on the best athletic team—is limited, we are taught that we have to compete in order to differentiate ourselves from the rest of the pack.

And yet, my research shows that this isn't actually the case. The lightning bug researchers discovered that when the fireflies were able to time their pulses with one another with astonishing accuracy (to the millisecond!), it allowed them to space themselves apart perfectly, thus eliminating the need to compete. In the same way, when we help others become better, we can actually increase the available opportunities, instead of vying for them. Like the lightning bugs, once we learn to coordinate and collaborate with those around us, we all begin to shine brighter, both individually and as an ecosystem.

But pause to think for a moment. How did lightning bugs even do it? How did they all coordinate their flashing lights so

perfectly, especially given their limited visibility and vision? Researchers Mirollo and Strogatz from Boston College and MIT found in the *Journal of Applied Mathematics* that, amazingly, the fireflies do not have to see everybody to create coordinated action; so long as no group of fireflies is completely out of sight of any other group, they can sync up with one another's rhythms.³ In other words, it only takes a few nodes to transform the entire system.⁴

Our new understanding of “positive systems” teaches us that the same is true for humans. As you will discover in this book, by becoming a “positive node” in your workplace, company, or community, and helping those around you improve their creativity, their productivity, their abilities, their performance, and more, you are not only helping the group become better; you are exponentially increasing your own potential for success.

There is one final important detail to this intriguing story. Biologists who have explored these jungles now know that the glow emanating from those mangroves can be seen for miles. This means it is even easier for *other* fireflies to find their way to the light. So the brighter it shines, the more newcomers join and add their light. This is true just as much for humans as it is for fireflies: The more you help people find their light, the brighter you both will shine.

THE POWER OF OTHERS

When George Lucas originally wrote the script to the billion-dollar Star Wars franchise, the most iconic line in movie

history—“May the Force be with you”—was not in it. Instead, the earliest versions read, “May the Force of *Others* be with you.” What does this arcane piece of movie history have to do with the science of potential? As the children’s book author Roald Dahl wrote: “The greatest secrets are always hidden in the most unlikely places.” And I believe that hidden in this tiny line lies both the problem undergirding our broken pursuit of potential as a society and the secret to exponentially increasing our success, well-being, and happiness.

Our society has become overly focused on the “power of one alone” versus “the power of one made stronger by others.” Of course, Hollywood glorifies individual superstars; where else are the streets literally paved with their names? But when we adopt this script in our companies and schools, focusing only on individual achievement and eliminating “others” from the equation, our true power remains hidden. But what is hidden can be revealed.

Three years ago, as I was researching the hidden connections that underlie success and human potential, I had a breakthrough. I became a father.

When my son, Leo, came into the world, he was quite literally helpless. He couldn’t even roll over by himself. But, as he got older, he became more capable. And with each new skill he picked up, like any good positive psychology researcher would, I found myself praising him, saying, “Leo, you did that all by yourself! I’m proud of you.” And after a while, Leo began parroting it back to me in a soft but proud voice: “All by myself.”

That’s when I realized: First as children, then as adults in the workplace, we are conditioned to disproportionately value things we accomplish on our own. As a father, if I stopped my

praise and guidance there, my son might come to view independent achievement as the ultimate test of our mettle. But in reality it is not. There is a whole other level.

The cycle begins at a young age. At school, our kids are trained to study diligently and individually so they can best others on exams. If they seek help on projects from other students, they are chastised for cheating. They are given multiple hours of homework a night, forcing them to trade time with others for more time working in isolation. Over and over they are reminded that their future success in the workplace hinges on individual metrics, including their grades and standardized test scores. Statistically it doesn't, but this approach to learning does do one thing: It dramatically raises their stress levels while robbing them of social connection, sleep, attention, happiness, and health. Yet, instead of questioning the system, we judge those who can't keep up with this feeding frenzy for individual achievement. By the time students finish school they are frazzled, fragile, and lonely, only to find that the success and happiness they had been promised did not lie at the end of that rainbow.

Suddenly, those same people who tested so well individually struggle when they need to work with others to bring a product to market or get their team to hit a target. Meanwhile, the people who rise to the top are not those who try to do everything all by themselves, but, rather, those who can ask others for help and rally others to grow. Parents who support a balanced, connected approach to pursuing success for their children are rewarded for their persistence, while parents who urge individual achievement at the cost of connection find themselves unprepared for their child's burnout or loneliness.

We spend the first twenty-two years of our life being

judged and praised for our individual attributes and what we can achieve alone, when, for the rest of our life, our success is almost entirely interconnected with that of others.

Over the past decade I have worked with nearly half of the Fortune 100 companies and traveled to more than fifty countries to learn how people everywhere approach the concepts of success, happiness, and human potential. One thing I've found to be true almost everywhere is that the vast majority of companies, schools, and organizations measure and reward "high performance" in terms of individual metrics such as sales numbers, résumé accolades, and test scores. The problem with this approach is that it is predicated on a belief we thought science had fully confirmed: that we live in a world of "survival of the fittest." It teaches us that success is a zero-sum game; that those with the *best* grades, or the *most* impressive résumé, or the *highest* point score, will be the **ONLY** ones to prosper. The formula is simple: Be better and smarter and more creative than everyone else, and you will be successful.

But this formula is inaccurate.

Thanks to groundbreaking new research you will read about in this book, we now know that achieving our highest potential is not about survival of the fittest; it is **survival of the best fit**. In other words, success is not just about how creative or smart or driven you are, but how well you are able to connect with, contribute to, and benefit from the ecosystem of people around you. It isn't just how highly rated your college or workplace is, but how well you fit in there. It isn't just how many points you score, but how well you complement the skills of the team.

We often think if we can just work harder, faster, and smarter, then we'll achieve our highest potential. But scientifically in the modern world, the biggest impediment to your success and

realizing your potential is not lack of productivity, hard work, or intelligence; it is the way in which we pursue it. The pursuit of potential must not be a lonely road. The conclusion of a decade of research is clear: It's not faster alone; it's better together.

By clinging to the old formula for success we are leaving enormous amounts of potential untapped. I saw this firsthand during my twelve years at Harvard as I watched students crash upon shoals of hyper-competition, then get stranded on the banks of self-doubt and stress. Realizing that they were no longer the only superstar, many panicked. They pushed themselves harder, sequestering themselves so they could go faster, trying to be the brightest light shining. The result was darkness. A staggering 80 percent of Harvard students report going through depression at some point in their college life.

Now that I have done this work all over the globe, I know this is not a problem reserved for Ivy League students. The average age of being diagnosed with depression in 1978 was twenty-nine. In 2009, the *average* age was fourteen and a half.⁵ Over the past decade, depression rates for adults have doubled, as have hospitalizations for attempted suicide for children as young as eight years old.⁶ What could possibly have changed so much to account for this? And, more important, what can we do to fix it?

Our emphasis on individual achievement has gone into serious overdrive, fueled primarily by two significant shifts. First, the rise of technology and social media allows us to broadcast individual accomplishments 24/7, constantly feeding competition while simultaneously stoking insecurity. Second, the astronomical pressure and competition in our schools and companies in pursuit of higher individual success metrics are driving longer days, less sleep, and more stress. Luckily, a better way has begun to emerge.

This exciting new path was inspired by my initial work studying happiness. In *The Happiness Advantage*, I wrote how you can significantly increase your own happiness by doing things such as gratitude exercises, practicing optimism, and meditating. But at some point, if you make these things only about *your* happiness, you reach an invisible limit where happiness can neither be sustained nor grow. The only way to lift that ceiling is to use your own happiness as a fuel to make others happier. Ultimately, I realized that while **happiness is a choice, it is not just an individual choice; it is an interconnected one.** This is because when you choose to act with gratitude or joy, you make joy and gratitude easier for others, who in turn give you more reasons to be grateful and joyous.

Armed with this discovery, I dug into the new research, and it became clear: Happiness was only the tip of the iceberg. Now, thanks to the advent of Big Data, I could finally see the connections that had previously remained hidden. Before, we could only ask questions like “How smart are you?” or “How creative are you?” or “How hard do you work?” But now, we can ask the bigger questions: “How smart do you make others around you?” “How much creativity do you inspire?” “How much does your drive become contagious to a team or family?” “How resilient do you make others?” And when we do, we see that our greatest successes don’t exist in isolation. As the research begins to emerge, we seem to be learning that **almost every attribute of your potential—from intelligence to creativity to leadership to personality and engagement—is interconnected with others.** Thus, to truly thrive physically, emotionally, and spiritually, we need to change our pursuit of potential in the same way we need to change our pursuit of happiness: We need to stop trying to be faster alone, and start working to become stronger together.

Big Potential

By creating hyper-competitive environments in which only individual achievements are celebrated, companies and schools are leaving enormous amounts of talent, productivity, and creativity on the table. Overemphasizing the individual and removing others from the equation places a “soft cap” on our potential, an artificial limit on what we can achieve. But the good news is that I call this a *soft* cap for a reason: Because it can be lifted. Because when we work to help others achieve success, we not only raise the performance of the group, we exponentially increase our own potential. This is what I describe later in this book as a Virtuous Cycle—a positive feedback loop whereby making others better leads to more resources, energy, and experiences that make *you* better, fueling the cycle again. Thus, making others better takes *your success* to the next level. Thus:

SMALL POTENTIAL is the limited success you can achieve alone.

BIG POTENTIAL is the success you can achieve only in a Virtuous Cycle with others.

In this book, I describe eight original research projects I have conducted with others as well as cutting-edge research from academics that unites neuroscience, psychology, and network analysis to shape the new field of positive systems research. But I know you did not come to this book looking simply for a review of research; there are better books for that. Instead, you want things you can start to implement today. So I have spent the past three years crafting a practical approach to Big Potential based on this science and my work at NASA, the NFL, the White House, and elsewhere, as well as my conversations with highly

successful people, including Will Smith, Oprah Winfrey, and Michael Strahan, who are living the principles of Big Potential.

This path consists of five stages, what I call the SEEDS of Big Potential: SURROUND yourself with a Star System of Positive Influencers. EXPAND your power by helping others lead from every seat. ENHANCE your resources by becoming a Prism of Praise. DEFEND the system against negative attacks. And SUSTAIN the gains by fueling the Virtuous Cycle. Seeds are the perfect metaphor for this research, because a seed cannot grow alone, without the help of the sun, soil, and water. In the same way, you can grow your potential, but you can't grow it alone. The biggest growth is achieved when you tap into the potential of those around you.

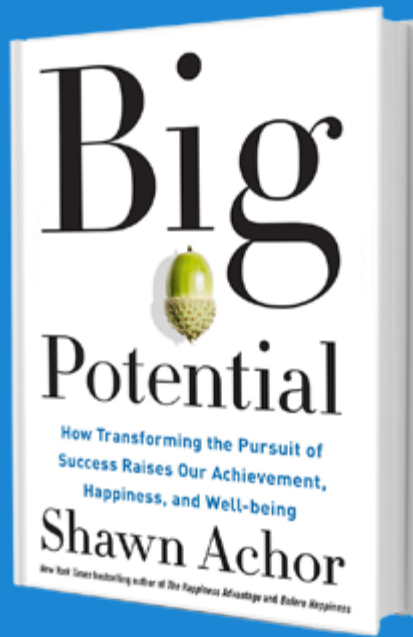
We can no longer be content competing for the scraps of Small Potential; we must seek new frontiers of human potential and invite others to follow. A challenging world demands that we put “the force *of others*” back into our formula. And it all starts by finding the hidden connections between flashing bugs, nudity at Harvard, featherless chickens, and an awkward dance with Oprah.

NOTES



CHAPTER 1: THE POWER OF HIDDEN CONNECTIONS

1. <http://www.nytimes.com/1991/08/13/science/a-mystery-of-nature-mangroves-full-of-fireflies-blinking-in-unison.html>.
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