

LISA RICHTER, a freelance writer based in Evanston, Illinois, conducted this interview via telephone; lrchtr@comcast.net.

Lisa is currently reading *Never Let Me Go* by Kazuo Ishiguro.

“Book Talk” provides authors’ perspectives on libraries, books, technology, and information. If you have any suggestions of authors you would like to see featured in Book Talk, or if you are interested in volunteering to be an author-interviewer, contact Kathleen Hughes, Editor of *Public Libraries*, at the Public Library Association, 50 E. Huron St., Chicago, IL 60611; khughes@ala.org.

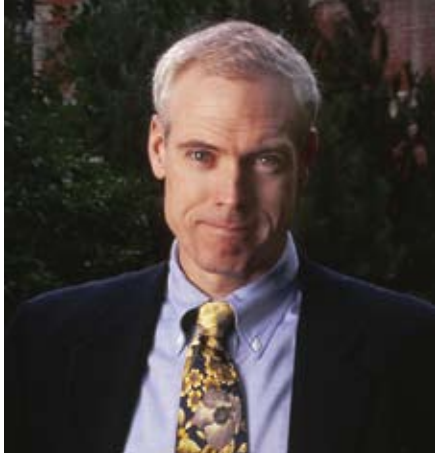
Great Expectations

An Interview with Jim Collins

Jim Collins has authored or coauthored four books, including 1994’s *Built to Last: Successful Habits of Visionary Companies* and 2001’s *Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap . . . and Others Don’t*. Both are bestsellers that explore the characteristics of success based on extensive research of the business sector. Recently, he released *Good to Great and the Social Sectors: A Monograph to Accompany Good to Great*, which explores the *Good to Great* principles as they apply to the social sector, and, by extension, building a meaningful life. The ideas in this companion piece, which states upfront that business thinking is not the answer, just might surprise you.

Public Libraries: One of the hallmarks of your work is the thoroughness of your research and a commitment to evidenced-based ideas, even when they are contrary to accepted beliefs. Yet you’ve published this monograph on the social sector without the usual obsessive research into this specific subset. Why?

Jim Collins: I was getting inundated with readers from the social sectors asking a series of questions about the application of *Good to Great* ideas to their world. They had already established for themselves that the ideas applied. This interest came as a delightful surprise—how quickly and extensively *Good to Great* reached into the social sectors. I had hoped that would happen, but I did not expect that it would happen to the extent that it did. In fact, I thought it would take hold less in the social sectors than *Built to Last*, because *Built to Last* is inherently about mission-driven, vision-driven organizations, which I thought clearly would appeal to social sector enterprises. As I kept getting more calls, cards, e-mail, questions, and invitations, I felt that I really owed our readers an attempt to try to answer their most



Jim Collins

frequently asked questions. So that's where the whole thing really began. That and a passion that I have for social sector questions; I never thought of myself as a business writer. I just happened to use business as my starting point.

The second answer is that I stuck very close to the *Good to Great* ideas, and I did that because they are research-driven ideas. It's a treatise on the *Good to Great* concepts in the context of the social sectors. It is entirely possible that, if you did a massive research project, you would find some additional insight and maybe even key concepts that you don't find from the *Good to Great* research. In fact, I would suspect that you might. I don't think they would subvert what we found, but I think you would find some additional things.

In fact, I've been very excited to see that people in the social sectors are taking our research method and applying it into their particular arenas. Any given study is going to take years. There's only so many silver bullets that I have in my life, but I can serve as a bit of a thesis adviser. So, perhaps the biggest contribution that we might be able to make is to give people the method and say,

"You know, you can do this in medical centers, libraries, police departments, or in communities." Because, someday I'm not going to be here, and I would love the method to be left behind as something that people can use in their own world.

PL: Some of the concepts in *Good to Great and the Social Sectors* seem almost counterintuitive. For instance, the front cover states "Why Business Thinking Is Not the Answer." Why isn't it?

JC: Sometimes well-intentioned businesspeople join boards or serve as advisers to social sector enterprises, and, in an attempt to be helpful, bring with them a sense of what I would call business parochialism: "Let us businesspeople show you how to do it because we know how to deliver results and you need to be more like a business." But from what I've seen, that actually is a counterproductive approach because social sector leaders might be put off by that attitude. Thus, my first objective was to speak to businesspeople and give them a bridge to say, this isn't about imposing business on the social sectors, this is about creating a shared language around the principles of what separates great from good. Then a social sector leader and a business leader can both agree that what they are trying to do is create great outcomes and whether those are great sports outcomes, crime reduction outcomes, chronic homelessness reduction outcomes, orchestra outcomes, educational outcomes, or whatever, we all agree that what we want to do is embrace the principles of greatness as distinct from feeling like it's an imposition of business on social sectors.

The second is this: It's just tautologically true that most businesses

are average. I mean just by definition. So to say that we're going to export the average practices of businesses into the social sector is to say that we are exporting average-ness. Why do we want to do that? As it says in the monograph, the critical question is not the difference between *business* and *social*, but between *great* and *good*.

PL: Another idea that seems illogical is that, to achieve greatness, an organization must first find the right people and put them in the appropriate place *before* it decides where it is going. Why is that?

JC: I came in with an expectation that what we would find is that to take a company from good to great you would have somebody who would set a vision or a direction and would really galvanize people to go there. And, that's just what comparison companies did. Our comparison companies tended to have people who first set the direction and then tried to get people to go there. But the empirical observations found that *Good to Great* companies did not do that. They said, "First, we made sure we had the right people, and then we figured out where we were going to go." So it isn't so much a point of view as it was an empirical finding of the difference between the two sets of companies.

That said, you have to stand back and puzzle. Well, why would that be? Number one, in an uncertain world, and that is the world that we live in, your ultimate hedge against uncertainty is not your plans but your people.

To use an analogy from climbing, my good friend, Jim Logan, did a climb called the Emperor Face on Mount Robson (Canadian Rockies) in the 1970s. It's been almost thirty

years since that climb was done, and, since then, it has never been repeated. I asked Jim, “Why were you able to get up this thing?” He said:

Because I knew that above a certain point on the climb, where no one had ever been, it was entirely uncertain what the mountain would throw at us. We didn’t know how big the cracks would be, we didn’t know what the ice would be, whether we could be hit by a storm. There were so many variables that we couldn’t possibly plan for because we didn’t know what the mountain would give us. So the most important decision I made was picking my partner. I picked Mugs Stump. I went up there with a great confidence that, if I couldn’t do a certain pitch, Mugs could. And Mugs had confidence that, if he couldn’t do a certain pitch, I could. The ultimate plan for the route was who I climbed with.

Secondly, what really separates a great organization from a good one is the discipline of being able to not only see clearly what needs to be done but to actually execute and execute well. Therefore, even if you did have the right decision about which direction to take things, it’s not going to make any difference if you haven’t populated the bus with the right people in the first place; they will not be able to climb the pitches.

PL: How do you know if you’ve got the right people and how do you find them?

JC: How do you find them? I’ll come to that question second. That’s a harder question actually. In terms of what makes for the right people,

obviously, of course, it varies from type of industry or type of situation. If you were to have a great surgical operation, for example, your people better know something about surgery.

But, what are some of the generic things?

Number one, they have to be someone who fits your core values. Not that they’ve learned your core values intellectually, but rather they have in their DNA a fit with the core values. People often ask me, “How do you get people to share your core

values?” The answer is, you don’t. You find people who already have a disposition to sharing your values, and you create a culture that is so tight around those values that those who don’t share them find themselves very uncomfortable and generally self-eject like a virus.

Number two is the right people understand that they don’t have a job; they have responsibilities. Now in the social sectors this is even more important because a lot of people who work in social sector enterprises by definition don’t have a job, they’re

Collins’ Concepts

Throughout *Good to Great*, Collins coins terms for its main concepts. Here are some highlights.

Level 5 Leadership: Level 5 leaders are ambitious for the cause—not themselves—and they have the fierce resolve to do whatever it takes to make good on that ambition. A Level 5 leader displays a paradoxical blend of personal humility and professional will.

First Who . . . Then What: Those who build great organizations make sure they have the right people on the bus, the wrong people off the bus, and the right people in the key seats *before* they figure out where to drive the bus.

The Stockdale Paradox: Retain unwavering faith that you can and will prevail in the end, regardless of the difficulties, and, at the same time, have the discipline to confront the most brutal facts of your current reality.

The Hedgehog Concept: An operating model that reflects understanding of three intersecting circles: what you can be the best in the world at, what you are deeply passionate about, and what best drives your economic or resource engine.

The Flywheel: In building greatness, there is no single defining action, no one killer innovation, no solitary lucky break. Rather, the process resembles relentlessly pushing a giant, heavy flywheel in one direction, turn upon turn, building momentum until a point of breakthrough and beyond.

Excerpted from *Good to Great and the Social Sectors: A Monograph to Accompany Good to Great*, by Jim Collins, reprinted here with permission from Jim Collins.

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volunteers. But even in a for-profit situation, the same idea applies. You need people who think in terms of what is my responsibility as distinct from what are my tasks.

Let me underscore, by the way, that I'm talking about key seats. Obviously, you can't necessarily get a perfect hit rate on all of these criteria for every seat on your bus. You have to do it for the seats that really matter.

Third is that the right people don't really need to be tightly managed. The moment you feel the need to tightly manage someone, you might have made a mistake. They need to, of course, be guided and taught and led and all of those things, but tightly managed? Probably not.

Fourth, the right people deliver on their commitments; they do what they say, which means two things. They are very careful with what they say, and they don't fail to deliver on what they say they're going to deliver. There is just simply no room in key seats in a great organization for people who fail to deliver on their commitments, just no room.

And then the last thing I would point to is an emerging ability to have window and mirror maturity. In the Level 5 chapter in *Good to Great*, we write about the window and the mirror. The essence of it is this: If you are mature with the window and the mirror, you point out the window to apportion the credit to forces, factors, and people outside of yourself. But when things go badly, and this is where the maturity really comes in, you don't point fingers at factors out-

side of yourself. You stand in front of the mirror and say, "Yeah, I'm responsible. It wasn't circumstance, it wasn't this, or that, I'm responsible."

Now, how do you find those sorts of people? The best place to look for people for key seats is in your own organization. You may have somebody who has been working in a much smaller seat for a while, but you look at them and you say, yeah they have the core values, they don't need to be tightly managed, they seem to understand the notion of responsibility, they've fulfilled their commitments, and you know they really seem to have a sense of that window-mirror maturity. Maybe there is somebody who you can grow into that bigger responsibility. That's a much lower risk game because they're a tested quantity; they may not yet have the skills, but they've demonstrated some of the character you're looking for.

How then do you find people for seats, small seats, big seats, volunteer, or nonvolunteer, whatever? This may sound completely trivial, but it's not. How is your daily calendar organized? If you are responsible for this bus, are you spending your best hours obsessing on the question of finding and getting and hanging onto and developing the right people for your key seats? If you're not spending more than one-third of your time and somewhere around two-thirds maybe of your best hours on that question, you're not going to succeed at it.

PL: Given the constraints of an organization such as a public library—

limited financial resources, diffuse power structure and, often, little to no control over who "stays on the bus"—how can anything like greatness be achieved?

JC: Let me give you an example. You want to talk about an environment full of constraints? Let's talk about underfunded schools with poor kids. You don't have the money you'd like to have. You don't have the class size you'd like to have. You don't have the parental involvement you'd like to have. You don't have the ability to change the bus because of the teachers union. I mean there are all these reasons why you couldn't deliver outstanding results. And yet Juli Peach, the principal of Alice Byrne Elementary School in Yuma, Arizona, is standing up and saying, "There are all kinds of reasons why we can't succeed, but we refuse to capitulate, and we're not going to capitulate."

She refuses to capitulate on the fundamental goal, which is one thing: 100 percent of the kids are going to read by the end of grade 3. She's a total hedgehog: Kids are going to read.

So then she and her teachers make obsessive use of data to track each kid, week by week, month by month. She got all of her teachers involved with the data. She couldn't change the people, but she could change the conversation around actual results. Then, of course, a big chunk of this is the hedgehog focus on one thing: The kids are going to read, all of them.

If Juli Peach, standing on the island of her little school in Yuma,

Arizona, can basically refuse to capitulate to mediocrity on the variables that matter, then it should give all of us hope that we are not imprisoned by our circumstances. I just get so inspired by what she does. That to me is, in the end, what our work is all about, showing that Juli Peach is possible.

PL: How can any of these concepts apply to my everyday life when I'm not in charge of any big organization, I have little power?

JC: The incredible beauty of the story we were just talking about is that, sure, you may have even less to work with than a small elementary school in Yuma, Arizona, but even that's a pretty contained circumstance. I always like to say to people, look, you have a minibus. It may only be a four-seat minibus, but the principles of deciding what the standards are that you are not going to capitulate on and then the discipline to try to either change those seats or, if you can't change the seats, to use the brutal facts (Stockdale Paradox) to begin to engage people in the conversation of how do we do a better job of achieving those standards. Those are things that can apply.

Really they can apply down to a seat of one. You might be the whole bus yourself as an individual, although most people have at least a small group.

A good example from my own life is when my wife was ill (she's healthy now). Prior to *Good to Great*, I would have focused much more on what we should do. But since this happened after *Good to Great*, I found I focused more on *who* should be the doctors.

It sounds like something very simple, but it's huge when the Stockdale Paradox is an approach to life. I mean, life throws curve balls. Life can really be a pretty awful experience sometimes for any number of reasons, and the Stockdale Paradox can really make a difference. I had a woman come up to me yesterday at a gathering and asked me to pass along a thank-you to the Stockdale family because the Stockdale Paradox really helped her get through her son's illness. She said, "We had to have faith that we could get through it and prevail, but we had to confront the brutal facts and not think we were going to be 'out by Christmas.'" (James Stockdale maintained that it was those people who believed they would be out of the prisoner of

war camp by Christmas—the optimists—who were the ones who "died of a broken heart.")

It is also helpful in life to think about the Hedgehog Concept. What are you passionate about? What are you genetically encoded for? What can you contribute that is of economic value? How can you put those three things together so that you have an economic engine for yourself, you're building off of your genetic encoding, and you're doing something you're really passionate about?

Also relevant is the notion of a Flywheel—that life is about a consistent building of momentum as opposed to looking for the single big strike, which is so very American, but it's not generally how great things happen.

These things come back in a lot of different guises so I encourage people to think broadly about the idea because we discovered them by studying the difference between big corporations in contrast to average corporations, of course, but that doesn't change the fact that we were comparing great to good and that can be scaled up as well as down. E