

## **Good-to-Great Leadership: What does it take?**

This is the third installment of a three-part review of Jim Collins' national bestseller: "Good to Great", from the perspectives of industrial safety and health. The first two articles in this series (March & April, 2005) reported characteristics of companies that made and maintained a step change from good to great performance. I attempted to draw parallels between key qualities of good-to-great companies and the safety-related operations of an ideal Total Safety Culture. My objective was to identify what it takes to be "world class" in safety.

### **Immutable Attributes**

Some of my graduate students reacted rather negatively to my two previous articles in this series, claiming the conclusions from Collins and his research team gave minimal regard to intervention, or management techniques to improve human performance. Apparently, the good-to-great companies did not use incentives, motivational talks, layoffs, compensation systems, or restructuring to obtain great performance. In Collins' words, "the good-to-great companies paid scant attention to managing change, motivating people, or creating alignment" (p.11).

Instead, the great companies study by Collins et al. hired the right people in the first place - - people who were conscientious and self-motivated, and whose talents and interests matched their job function. Moreover, the great companies do not let the wrong people hang around, because the right people will inevitably compensate for the inadequacies of the wrong people and become

de-motivated. Thus, “people are not your most important asset. The right people are” (p. 64).

This perspective puts the onus on selection rather than intervention. In other words, greatness seems to be more about selecting the right people than teaching and motivating the right behavior. My students questioned the practicality of this conclusion, especially with regard to safety. Some said it seemed to contradict the focus of my teaching, research, and scholarship. Throughout my career, my professional purpose has been much more about helping people perform better (and safer) than about identifying and selecting the best personalities for a particular task.

Actually, the entire discipline of applied psychology places more focus on improving people’s performance than on finding the best people to perform. Industrial/organizational psychology does address the important challenge of employee selection. Also, the development of aptitude, achievement, and personality tests have always been a primary domain of mainstream psychology. However, selection devices with impressive predictive validity are rare, and are often impractical to administer in a work setting. But, even when a selection device provides valid information, it is usually unwarranted and unfair to assume the attributes accurately assessed in an individual are immutable.

### **Changing Attributes through Leadership**

While Collins gives primary attention to employee selection, he does profess a need for the right conditions to support the right people. He also gives substantial attention to leadership by defining the special qualities of those who

guided a company's transition from good to great. Thus, the leaders of the good-to-great companies cultivate a culture that puts the right people in the right seats on the bus, and then drives the bus to the right locations. They help people apply their talents affectively and realize self-accountability and self-motivation.

Here are seven leadership qualities that distinguished the good-to-great organizations from the comparison companies. I'm convinced they define attributes of the best safety leaders, yet some of these have not been mentioned at presentations on "safety leadership".

### **1. Manifest Personal Humility or Compelling Modesty**

This leadership quality receives priority attention in Collins' book. He relates several case studies of companies that did not reach their potential because their leaders were more concerned about their own notoriety than the reputation of their company. The "good-to-great leaders never wanted to become larger-than-life heroes" rather they "were seemingly ordinary people quietly producing extraordinary results" (P. 28). They "attribute much of this success to good luck, rather than personal greatness" (p. 40).

### **2. Project Success Beyond Self**

Related to the first quality, good-to-great leaders attribute company success to factors other than themselves. As systems thinkers, they see the big picture and realize their success is contingent on the daily small-win accomplishments of many individuals. And, they acknowledge the synergistic contributions of many others who enable remarkable results.

### **3. Accept Responsibility for Failure**

While spreading success beyond themselves, the good-to-great leaders take full responsibility for failures. They face the brutal facts of less-than-desired outcomes, and hold themselves accountable without blaming other people or just “bad luck”. Interestingly, Collins and his team found the leaders of the comparison companies to often blame others for lackluster performance, while taking personal credit for extraordinary results.

#### **4. Promote a Learning Culture.**

Humble leaders are open to new information. They are always learning, with impassioned belief in never-ending improvement. The good-to-great leaders facilitate fact finding in order to learn and improve, not to find someone to blame. They lead with questions rather than answers, and promote frank and open dialogue and debate. The result: People are not satisfied with the status quo, but are engaged in finding ways to improve company performance. They are constantly alert to possibilities for process refinement, research diligently for the best solutions to problems, and regularly submit suggestions for fine-tuning their operations.

#### **5. Work to Achieve, not to Avoid Failure**

Although they search diligently to reveal and face brutal facts, the good-to-great leaders never waver in their resolve for greatness. Failure is not an option; it is not even considered. With an optimistic stance, these leaders focus on achieving exemplary success.

At the same time, these leaders adhere fervently to the Hedgehog Concept, as I discussed in my *ISHN* column last month. Eventually, this means

understand a) what you can do best, b) feel pessimistic about, and c) is profitable. They attend to their envisioned enterprise with fanatical consistency and a disciplined constancy of purpose.

## **6. Be Rigorous rather than Ruthless.**

When making decisions about people, the good-to-great leaders are rigorous, not ruthless. For example, in contrast to the comparison companies, the leaders of Collins' good-to-great organizations did not use restructuring and layoffs to improve performance or profits. But they did remain consistent and rigorous in their people-decisions.

Good-to-great leaders didn't hire personnel until they were sure they found the right person. And, if observations suggested a need for a personal challenge, they acted quickly. This could mean changing a person's seat on the bus, or asking someone to get off the bus.

## **7. Encourage Self-Motivation for Meaningful Work**

I've discussed their last quality of good-to-great leaders in prior *ISHN* articles (for example, and ). Self-motivation is key to long-term productivity and is gained through intrinsic consequences. In other words, people are self-motivated when their behaviors provide natural ongoing consequences that are rewarding.

When does behavior on the job become intrinsically rewarding and self-motivating? When people believe their work is meaningful. When does this happen? Sometimes the special value of the effort is obvious, as when people are engaged in activities that prevent injuries. But even in these cases, it's critical

to give the kind of interpersonal attention that reassures people they are accomplishing meaningful work. Great leaders know how to do this, and do it often.

### **In Conclusion**

The relevance of these seven qualities for great safety leadership is obvious. I think the final quality is more significant for safety, because it defines the source of the motivation that keeps the effective safety leadership going. Specifically, working for safety is meaningful work that fuels self-motivation. In this regard, Jim Collins ends his book with the following: “it is impossible to have a great life unless it is a meaningful life. And it is very difficult to have a meaningful life without meaningful work” (p. 210). Safety leaders do meaningful work and therefore have meaningful lives.

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