

## **World Class in Safety: Are You a Fox or a Hedgehog?**

This is the second of a three-part review on what it takes to be world class in safety. The series presents a number of exemplary criteria presumed to reflect “world class” as gleaned from a national bestseller: *From Good to Great*. The author, Jim Collins, and his research team studied the special qualities of companies that made and maintained the leap from good to great performance results.

The focus last month was on engaging in open and frank assessment and conversation to match people’s interests and talents with specific job functions, thereby capitalizing on intrinsic reinforcement. According to Collins and his research team, there’s no need to manage and motivate the right people, because these employees are self-motivated. However, these people can be demotivated if other workers are not contributing their fair share.

Thus, Collins claims “one of the primary ways to de-motivate people is to ignore the brutal facts of reality” (p.89). With regard to safety, this means workers need to adjust their behaviors to be consistent with those required for “world-class in safety,” and if they choose not to do this, they should choose to work somewhere else.

### **The Hedgehog Concept**

In order to typify the simple and organized focus of the good-to-great companies, Collins contrasts the hedgehog with a fox. The fox looks like a winner with crafty, quick, and sleek fleet of foot, while the hedgehog waddles

along, day after day, focusing on the bare necessities of living. Analogously, some people are showy, diffuse, and scattered with regard to purpose, goals, and action plans; whereas others are more like the hedgehog, simplifying their complex world into a single unifying principle or vision that provides organization and focus for their daily activities.

The good-to-great companies did the latter, which Collins and his research team label “The Hedgehog Concept.” Specifically, the great companies have a profound understanding of their answers to these three questions that provide organization and focus to all of their activities: 1) What can we be the best in the world at?, 2) What drives our economic engine?, and 3) What are we deeply passionate about?

This hedgehog concept reminds me of the “constancy of purpose” principle advocated by W. Edwards Deming. The great companies discriminate between a) what they can do best and what they cannot, b) what is profitable for them and what is not, and c) what they are passionate about and what they are not. These discriminations define their mission, and fuel their goal setting and action plans. Behavior inconsistent with this purpose is avoided.

### **Relevance to Safety**

Thus, the world-class safety organization maintains a hedgehog approach to injury prevention. They understand what it takes to be among the best in industrial safety, and believe they can reach this level of excellence. They also realize the direct correlation between their financial profit and their success at preventing injuries. Their passion to be world-class in safety alerts them to any

inconsistencies between this vision and various company activities, from strategic planning in the boardroom to behaviors on the shop floor.

### **A Culture of Discipline**

Maintaining these hedgehog principles and constancy of purpose requires a culture of discipline. But the meaning of discipline here is not punishment, as this term is often used in industry. In fact, a consistent distinction between the good-to-great companies and the comparison companies was the way discipline was defined and practiced. Top-down, disciplinarian control, while common in the comparison companies, was not found in the good-to-great companies. “Sustained great results depend upon building a culture full of self-disciplined people who take disciplined action, fanatically consistent with... the Hedgehog Concept” (p.142).

For a world-class organization, an operationalization of the Hedgehog Concept defines a consistent system with a clear mission as well as constraints. Within this highly-developed structure, workers have opportunities to choose a particular course of action. However, the workers must be responsible and self-disciplined. This gets us back to an underlying challenge and the key point of my first article in this series – “getting self-disciplined people on the bus in the first place” (p.126).

### **The Practice of Discipline**

Collins delineates certain practices of the good-to-great companies that help define a culture of discipline and suggest guidelines for becoming world class in safety. Foremost is strict adherence to the Hedgehog Concept, which

includes rejecting opportunities beyond the organization's answers to the three basic hedgehog questions defined above. In other words, a "stop doing" list is as important as a "to do" list. Continually ask: "What are we doing to be the best?, And what are we doing that detracts us from being the best?"

World class in safety means dropping policies, programs, and slogans that do not contribute to safety excellence. For example, I've met several safety pros who realize their organization's safety incentives or bonus system rewards a reactive mindset and detracts from proactive involvement in injury prevention, yet they can't gain the support needed to drop or alter this ineffective program.

In addition, while special safety efforts often start off with lots of participation and optimism, many fizzle over time. Obviously, such drifting beyond original intentions detracts from optimal performance. If such programs cannot be re-energized or refined to get back on track, they should be dropped.

The good-to-great companies do not operate out of a fear of failure, but focus on achieving success. Moreover, these companies recognize that a transition to greatness will not come from one magical event, turning point, seminal meeting, epiphany moment, or a breakthrough accomplishment. Rather, success evolves from a series of incremental changes or small wins.

Analogously, the world class safety organization promotes success seeking over failure avoiding by putting more focus on the daily proactive things people do to prevent injuries than on the injuries themselves. They define their safety excellence by the various safety-related activities accomplished each day to prevent mishaps, not by such reactive, failure-focused outcome statistics as

total recordable injury rate and worker compensation costs. (For more on the success seeker vs. failure avoider perspective see my *ISHN* contribution last April, 2004).

### **In Conclusion**

This presentation continued the mission to define “world class in safety” by discussing the Hedgehog Concept and its relation to discipline, as defined by Jim Collins and his research team. While Collins presents the Hedgehog Concept as a company guideline to achieving greatness, I find this theory equally relevant to individuals. For example, happy, self-motivated employees perceive they are well paid for applying their special talents effectively on a job they feel passionate about doing well.

People who do not believe they are applying their talents effectively for important work are not self-accountable nor intrinsically motivated. They cannot be the best they can be and can detract from the achievement of world class in safety. Effective leaders can sometimes help these individuals reframe their thinking and develop a relevant Hedgehog perspective. Next month I’ll discuss the kind of leadership that can make this happen and guide a company into world-class status.

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Dr. Geller and his partners at Safety Performance Solutions (SPS) help companies achieve the status of “world-class in safety.” For more information

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