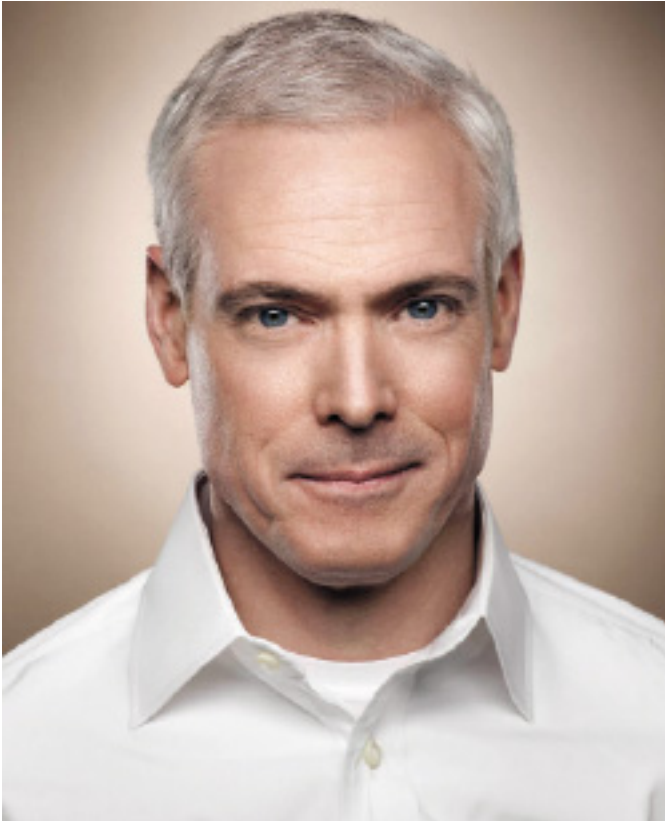


Humility, Will, and Level 5 Leadership

An Interview with Jim Collins

Michael Brosnan
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Editor's Note: Last time we caught up with organizational expert Jim Collins - author of *Good to Great* (2001) and *How the Mighty Fall* (2009) and coauthor of *Great by Choice* (2011) - he had just written his monograph, *Good to Great and the Social Sectors*, and had spoken at the 2007 NAIS conference about his findings. Recently, Collins spent two years as the Class of 1951 Leadership Chair for the Study of Leadership at the United States Military Academy at West Point and now has embarked on research about educational leadership.

Michael Brosnan: The last time we talked, you had just spoken at the NAIS conference, hanging around afterward to talk with school leaders. What drove your interest in schools then - and what have you learned about school leadership in the intervening years?

Jim Collins: As you know, I'm very interested in the social sectors. But if I were to pick the most compelling of the social sectors, it would be education. I happen to believe that the single most important investment we can make as a society is to get as many kids as possible to a strong starting point for adult life by the end of high school.

My own interest, in many ways, has been with me since childhood. I had the experience of going to a variety of schools and could see the difference in quality. The trajectory of one's education can be substantially different depending on the schools one attends.

Since we last talked, I've been involved in two major projects. The first was the completion of *Great By Choice*. In it, my colleague Morten Hansen and I looked at enterprises that had navigated environments of tremendous turbulence. We wanted to know how they thrived in chaos and uncertainty. Essentially, we found a number of things that deepened my thinking about leadership. In particular, it became clear to me that, in challenging times, the swing variable of exceptional leadership becomes pronounced.

An analogy: If you are wandering on a safe trail with a mountaineering expedition leader, you might sense something about the leader's ability, good or bad, but it may be no more than a passing observation. You see the exceptional or unexceptional leadership come to the fore, however, when you are caught in the equivalent of a howling storm on the side of K2. There, whether you are an exceptional leader or an unexceptional leader is going to be exposed. This turns out to be true for all organizations facing challenges, including schools. And we know that, today, a lot of our schools operate in very difficult environments.

Second, in 2012 and 2013, I had the privilege to serve as the Class of 1951 Chair for the Study of Leadership at the United States Military Academy at West Point. It was a phenomenal experience to be exposed to and involved with one of our great leadership-development institutions in the world. As the chair for the study of leadership, I was able to reflect on the essence of leadership, especially on how leaders become great when they don't start that way.

At West Point, the importance of unit-level leadership became crystal clear. It's not that people haven't known this before. It's just that I hadn't really understood how crucial unit-level leadership is. If you don't have exceptional unit-level leadership, it's hard to have large-scale exceptional things happen. This led me back to thinking about schools - about all these different approaches to school and where the commonalities lie. I came away from West Point thinking, "Strong unit leadership - that applies directly to school leadership."

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The premise is that the school leader is the swing variable. Yes, we have to have exceptional teachers. But the school leader is the one who has the most profound influence on the culture in the building, the one who can create a culture of performance within the environment.

Brosnan: *I know you are in the early stages of this new project, but can you tell me what*

you hope to investigate and learn?

Collins: The essential approach is similar to *Good to Great and the Social Sectors*: to learn from exceptional school leaders about the issues they face and how these issues differ from the issues leaders in other sectors face. The approach has been to identify leaders who have had success in a range of schools: public, charter, independent, and parochial; rural and urban; large and small; elementary, middle, and high school. We want to cover the gamut, looking to find leaders who have created inflections or have performed well in adversity.

After we've done that, we'll aim to surface the qualities of great school leadership, examining it through the lens of our 25 years of research about great organizations.

Brosnan: *A major concern among many independent schools is the transition of leadership - especially now that many of the longtime baby boomer heads are retiring. What advice would you give trustees about leading the search process to keep the momentum going?*

Collins: A great organization must meet three tests. It has to have superior results relative to its particular mission. It has to have a distinctive impact, which means if it went away it would leave an unfillable hole. A distinctive impact doesn't mean it has to be big. An organization or school can be small and great. It just needs to be distinctive - so distinctive that people would truly miss it if it disappeared. The third quality is lasting endurance - endurance not only through multiple cycles but also through multiple generations of leadership.

If your school or organization or company cannot be great without you as its leader, it is not yet a great enterprise. In order to be great, you have to render it not dependent upon you. This is one of the conundrums of unit leadership: an organization needs exceptional unit leadership, yet it must not need any particular unit leader. This means that leaders have to think about the longevity of the organization as much as their own tenure.

Back when we were working on *Built to Last*, the first major piece of research we did was on the question "Why do some enterprises achieve enduring greatness, remaining visionary for generations, and others do not?" In the process, we developed the metaphor of clock building vs. time telling. The time-teller approach to leadership is to be the great time teller - the go-to person to make the right decisions, point everyone in the right direction. The time teller is phenomenal at telling time, but it means that everyone relies on him or her. For more sustainability, great leaders realize they have to build a clock that can tell the time long after they are gone. The leader's real task is to think about how he or she builds the clock. In organizational terms, of course, building the clock means that you have developed a clear mission and established organizational structures, procedures, and culture that keep everyone focused on the mission. It means having exceptional people in your organization. It means the organization can absorb a bad transition for a period of time because the quality of the people is so exceptional.

Of course, you don't want a bad transition, but if it happens, it's a lot easier for everyone to sustain what was working earlier if you've built the clock. Plus, with an exceptional staff, you have the opportunity to pick a new leader from within - which our research makes clear is always the first place you should go. Part of clock building is how well a leader cultivates and develops people who can potentially step into the leadership role.

Brosnan: *When it comes to schools, it sounds as if you are talking about the centrality of shared values.*

Collins: Clock building means building a culture around a set of values so that people will have the ability to make independent decisions in the context of those values. If they embody the values - have that star-on-the-horizon purpose - even if you have a leadership gap from time to time, the values are so ingrained that people make decisions in the context of those values, and in pursuit of that purpose.

But it's more than values. Another aspect of great leaders is to set a BHAG - a Big Hairy Audacious Goal. There's a fundamental dynamic of any enduring enterprise. On the one hand, it's a matter of preserving the core. On the other, it's stimulating progress. This is the yin and the yang of organizations - and they play off of each other constantly. The core comprises essential values and purpose. They are immutable. They don't change with leaders. They are the truths your institution holds to be self-evident. The stimulating progress part doesn't mess with these values. But it does look at ways to *improve* on their delivery. It's about looking forward - about doing new stuff, doing things better, doing big things, and even looking beyond one's tenure. The research on exceptional leaders reveals that some towering figures also did a marvelous job of looking beyond their tenure.

Brosnan: *You are talking about institutions that are doing well prior to a leadership transition. In independent schools that's often the case. But there are instances in which the leadership and teacher turnover rates are high because the school is struggling for one reason or another. So they are looking for a leader to move the school to that next level.*

Collins: The scenario you describe is exactly how *Good to Great* came into existence. We had written *Built to Last*. I was at a dinner in San Francisco, and a business leader said to me, "*Built to Last* is really interesting. Too bad it's also completely useless." Why? He said because we were focusing on companies that were always great. What about the ones that weren't? That's the vast majority of businesses. They are not great. That's their problem. Can they change that? I said, "Wow, that's a great question. I'll get back to you." Five years later we had *Good to Great* in which we studied companies that were average performers, or worse, but which made that inflection jump to great.

Interestingly, the jump was always correlated with a change in leadership. However, that leadership was surprising on two dimensions. First, it almost always came from inside the company. Second, it almost never came in the form of a charismatic change-agent. In our research, we found that the charismatic, radical change agent from the outside tends not

to produce good-to-great transformation. Usually it's someone who doesn't try to draw too much attention to him or herself. It's about the enterprise. It's about the school, about the kids. It requires Level 5 leadership to create the inflection from good to great.

Brosnan: *With schools looking for a new head, you advise them to look within first?*

Collins: I need to put a little nuance on this. Statistically, we've found that the best change agents tend to come from within. They can both preserve the core and stimulate progress. That's because they come from the core, and yet they really want to see progress as well. They know, from having lived and worked in an organization for a while, the things they can do to really improve it. More than 90 percent of the good-to-great CEOs came from inside their companies. More than two-thirds of the companies that tried to go from good to great but failed to do so went for outside leaders.

But it's not 100 percent. You could get someone good from the outside. Here's the key: What matters most is that you find Level 5 leaders, not Level 4 leaders. It just so happens that you are better able to tell if someone is a Level 5 leader if you've known them and worked with them for a while.

The tendency is to think you need someone with a proven track record. Most great leaders grow into becoming great leaders. They don't start out great. So it makes sense to look for someone with the Level 5 drive and put him or her in a position of leadership.

Brosnan: *Can you briefly remind me of the difference between a Level 4 leader and a Level 5 leader?*

Collins: Both Level 5 and Level 4 leaders have tremendous ambition. The difference is that the Level 5's are not ambitious for themselves. They have high levels of humility *and* will. All their ambition and drive are channeled outward into a cause or a company or school. It truly is not about them. It's not about how they look to the public. Not about their career. Not about the power or the money. It's about the cause or the mission. And they have the utterly stoic will to do whatever it takes to succeed for the sake of that cause.

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Level 4 leaders can be very effective in getting people to do things, but deep down it is about them. Deep down, their ambition is about themselves. Level 5's are much more selfless.

Brosnan: *These days, schools are feeling a lot of pressure to innovate. What advice can you give them about balancing school tradition and innovation? Is it OK for a school in the midst of a leadership transition to mess around with its hedgehog concept?*

Collins: It's a crux question. First, you go back to the formula: preserve the core,

stimulate progress. You have to do both. It's about continuity and change, about preserving your values and doing big audacious things - improving *and* innovating. It's not a balance. It's both at the same time. We're not going to give up our values no matter what. On the other hand, we are also going to stimulate progress. And one of the reasons we develop big, audacious goals is because they are so big and so hard and so energizing that there is no way we're going to accomplish them with our current level of capability. We need new ways of doing things. It's not about dividing things up 50/50. We need to focus 100 percent on preserving the core and 100 percent on stimulating progress simultaneously. Great leaders know that.

Second, in *Great By Choice*, we looked at leaders and organizations that were facing a constant series of technology and global disruption changes - uncertainties and shocks and crises. Storm after storm. We wanted to know: Who does well facing that kind of world? Why do some organizations and companies thrive in that environment while others get clobbered by it or languish? It took us nine years of research to answer these questions.

We learned a number of things. First, you would think that those who were more innovative would win. But you'd be wrong. It's not that the winners didn't innovate, but that they were not the most innovative. In comparisons of organizations in the same environment, it wasn't that better ones innovated more, but that they innovated differently. What mattered to them is that they wanted empirical validation for their innovations.

With leadership transitions, you need to be careful about being too bold too quickly. If a new leader is going to make things better, he or she needs to know what is empirically validated - figure out what will actually work, then make it big.

This brings me to something else we learned in *Great By Choice*. We looked at companies facing turbulence of various kinds and asked a simple question: Once you find something that works, how much does it change? Over a several-decade period, we found that one set of companies changed the recipe about 70 percent. In the same environment, another set of companies changed the recipe about 20 percent. Who were the winners? The ones who changed the recipe 20 percent. Innovation is present. But once they got their constitution working, they amended it to make it better. They didn't throw it all out every three years or so and write a new constitution.

Brosnan: *I can imagine that it's difficult to hold back on pushing for radical change in hard times.*

Collins: When a company or an organization is in trouble, it has to ask a central question: Is the reason we're in trouble because our recipe no longer works and we need to completely change it, or is it that we've lost discipline with a recipe that, in essence, still works? More often than not, it's a matter of getting the discipline back. But you have to know the answer to this question for your organization. And you have to be right. Organizations often get in trouble when they are confused about whether their model or

their discipline is broken.

Brosnan: *There's a lot of talk about generational differences. It comes into play in the independent school world now with so many baby boomer leaders and teachers retiring. Do you see such differences coming into play among younger leaders today?*

Collins: I'm convinced that the principles of great leadership have nothing to do with generations. And that when we find a great leader of any generation, it often feels like it's something new. But the reason it feels new is because it's rare. We should never confuse what's rare with what's new.

When it comes to the *practices* of leadership, of course there may be generational differences. These days, it's often evident in the kinds of technologies you use, how you prefer to communicate. But when I was at West Point, I finally found what, for me, is the best definition of the essence of leadership. It's from Dwight Eisenhower: *Leadership is the art of getting people to want to do what must be done*. It's a beautiful definition - with three parts. First of all, great leadership is an art. Second, you have to know what must be done, which is no easy feat, and be right about this. Third, it's not about getting people to do it; it's about getting people to *want* to do it.

I would argue that this definition has nothing to do with generational differences. However, the artistry and the way you do it may well change across generations. This means that new generations of leaders, while they must have the essential attributes of Level 5 leaders, can bring new ideas for accomplishing a goal, and this is always interesting and worth paying attention to.

Closing thought: I believe that we need legions of Level 5 leaders in our schools. My sense is that the up-and-coming generation of leaders has the Level 5 capacity to spark the entire education system to go from good to great. I am increasingly inspired and impressed by the young leaders I meet. Let's get out of their way and let them lead!

Michael Brosnan is editor of Independent School.

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