

JUST GOOD OR JUST GREAT

Just “Good” or Just “Great”? Flywheel Leadership and Social Factors for  
Greatness

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### Abstract

This paper describes the principles of great leadership, as noted in research findings by author Jim Collins and demonstrates how a proper navigation of social roles and expectations can transform a good department, college, or university into a great one that will last.

The requirement for public higher education institutions to address effectiveness and to produce verifiable results toward achieving their goals is not a new ideology or practice. Consequently, governing boards and other public officials are challenged by their constituents concerning the performance and impact of these institutions, especially as it relates to a return on monies spent to fund them (Commission on the Future of Higher Education, 2006; Teicher, 2006).

Regional accrediting agencies require higher education institutions to adhere to set standards designed to measure compliance and effectiveness and to report results. For example, the Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP) (Commission on Colleges, 2005) is a process that includes ongoing activities designed to increase the effectiveness of educational programs relating to student learning. This plan is implemented among higher education institutions accredited by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS). Another methodology used within the ranks of higher education is the academic audit, an evaluation of the processes concerning how faculty organize their work and use data to improve teaching and learning with the resources available to them (Tennessee Board of Regents (TBR), 2006).

Then, there is the wider community that defines an institution by either its direct experience with it or by its inputs and outputs; that is, successful recruitment efforts based on the enrollment of high school graduates with B or better grade point averages, community service and outreach, tuition costs, reputable faculty, graduation rates, and of that group of graduates, the number that continues to pursue other academic degrees or enters employment with successful businesses (Commission on the Future of Higher Education, 2006; Governor's Communication's Office, 2006). For all of the reasons

stated above, it is clear that the performance of public colleges and universities is under the microscope and ways to measure their performance continue to be developed.

One of the factors concerning how to accurately measure whether a higher education institution's performance is average or above average is to consider the application of business principles from the private sector to determine its success. When private businesses are considered, "financial returns are a perfectly legitimate measure of performance. For a social sector or public organization; however, performance must be assessed relative to mission, not financial returns" (Collins, 2005, p. 5). Thus, the leadership within the social sector must hold itself accountable and ask "How effectively do we deliver our mission and make a distinct impact relative to our resources?" (p. 5).

According to Jim Collins in "Good to Great and the Social Factors: Why Business Thinking is not the Answer" (2005), it is the responsibility of organizational leaders to use the input factors such as human and economic resources, to achieve the output factors associated with the mission of the institution. Leaders must identify the indicators for measuring output factors, such as performance toward goals, and possess the discipline to set consistent and intelligent methods for assessing output results.

Unfortunately, social sector or public organizations receive some criticism from the private sector for being undisciplined in the areas of planning, managing people, and allocating resources (Collins, 2005), all of which help to create average or just "good" organizations. However, many organizations, regardless of whether they are public or private, have a desperate need for greater discipline. Hence, a significant challenge for leaders is to create a culture of discipline within the organization.

Using the principles of great leadership, as noted in the study of 1,435 companies and their Chief Executive Officers (CEO's) (Collins, 2001), research findings suggest a good-to-great framework that shows how a great organization is built in four basic stages. The framework, modified for the purpose of this paper, considers fundamental principles that are necessary in transforming and directing an organization toward greatness that will last overtime. Ironically, the fundamental principles are social in nature and appear to fit well within the confines of public institutions, including higher education.

### **Organizational Culture**

The first step within the good-to-great framework is to understand that culture exists within organizations. Culture can be described simply as the way we do things or “how things are around here” (Cameron & Quinn, 1999, p. 14). A more formal description of organizational culture “is reflected in what is valued, the dominant leadership styles, the language and symbols, the procedures and routines, and the definitions of success that make an organization unique” (p. 15). In order for organizational performance to be adequately understood, it must be accompanied by a comprehension of the culture of the organization (Bolman & Deal, 1991; Fjortoft & Smart, 1994).

From a leader's perspective, culture can be used as a strategy to look at, think about, and define an organization (Smart, Kuh, & Tierney, 1997). CEO's of the “great” companies that emerged from Collins' study (2001) were those who understood that “all” companies have a culture, and that “some” companies have discipline. However, only a few have a culture of discipline; that is, an established set of core values that sanction the practice of creating, monitoring, and responding to evidence of performance. For these

CEO's, "it was a matter of conscious choice" (p. 13). Hence, discipline became a key component of their leadership.

Higher education institutions do function within a cultural context. The mission of the institution can directly influence the cultural context, which is especially significant for community colleges that generally adhere to multiple missions; transfer/university parallel, careers/technical, adult/continuing education, and other goals (Cohen & Brawner, 2003; Smart, Kuh, & Tierney, 1997; Van Wagoner, 2004). For four-year colleges and universities, the emphasis on elevating the level of prestige of the institution through research, learning, and scholasticism (Koh, et al., 2005) tends to be prevalent in their mission and core value statements, and therefore, creates a culture that places value on these achievements.

Higher education administrators, faculty, staff, and students should be introduced to the concept that a unique culture exists on their campuses and how it influences the behavior and performance of those directly involved with the institutions. Furthermore, the development of a culture of discipline should be embraced and defined as critical to the transformation of the institution in changing its performance from good-to-great.

### **Disciplined Action**

It is interesting to note that CEO's of the great companies, also referred to as Level 5 leaders (Collins, 2001), typically come from the ranks within the company rather than from the outside. Consequently, evidence from Collins' findings do not support the idea that an outside leader needs to come in and "shake up the place" to go from good-to-great. "In fact, going for a high-profile outside change agent is negatively correlated with a sustained transformation from good to great" (p. 31).

Level 5 leaders in Collins' study (Collins, 2001) understood the existing culture within their companies and brought a passion for the work to their leadership positions. Paradoxically, they were self-effacing and reserved. At the same time, they were unwavering in their will to create an agreed upon set of values and an agreed upon definition of results. Level 5 leaders helped to transform good companies into great ones by clearly communicating their message and standing up for their beliefs. They were able to articulate the company's basic purpose and future direction and translate the vision and economic strategies into a cause worth fighting for (Hart & Quinn, 1993; Kouzes & Posner, 2002).

Level 5 leaders act in ways that depict ferocious resolve and stoic determination to do whatever is necessary to move the company forward. They are sometimes described as "fanatically driven with an incurable need to produce results...if that's what it takes to make the company great" (Collins, 2001, p. 30).

For leaders in higher education, every opportunity should be taken to clearly state the importance of the role of disciplined action for the institution. Within the printed media and during annual convocation speeches by presidents, the core values of an institution should reflect the message. Moreover, the dialogue and behavior across the campus should illustrate the determination to transform the institution from good-to-great.

### **Investing in Disciplined People**

Rather than setting a new vision and strategy at the beginning of their tenure, Level 5 leaders directed their attention toward getting "the right people on the bus, the wrong people off the bus, and the right people in the right seats—and then they figured

out how to drive it” (Collins, 2001, p. 13). They were able to make tough decisions in order to place people in positions that better served their personal talents and the needs of the company.

The act of investing in disciplined people in higher education can possibly be correlated with the unique system of tenure for faculty, in particular. The criteria and process for earning tenure may infer that it is a way to invest in the most disciplined people among faculty. On the other hand, tenure and longevity among faculty and staff may serve as a challenge to selecting the right people to ride on the bus, keeping the wrong people off, and placing the right people in the right seats (Collins, 2001). According to Van Wagoner, (2004), “the longer individuals stay at one institution, the more likely that their experience and duration tends to negatively influence their perceptions of organizational change” (p. 720). On the other hand, “the more individuals understand the mission and strategic goals of an institution, and the more they are involved in change, the better equipped they are to put change into context and view change in a positive manner” (p. 720). These findings suggest that tenure and longevity do not have to serve as road blocks to moving “the bus” toward change and ultimately, transformation. Leadership within the institution must develop ways to engage people at all levels to put forth a disciplined effort to transform the organization from good-to-great.

### **Confronting the Brutal Facts with Disciplined Thought**

The assessment of performance requires honesty concerning the good and bad within the organization. Hence, the culture must be such that the truth can be heard and

the brutal facts confronted—unfiltered. To create a climate where the truth is heard, Collins (2001) suggests four basic practices:

1. Lead with questions and not answers. The leader seeks to understand and asks questions to receive input rather than to present predetermined answers or solutions for staff.
2. Engage in dialogue and debate, not coercion. People engaged in “healthy conflict” set the tone to search for the best answers.
3. Conduct autopsies, without blame. Leaders should never assign blame but, rather, they should search for understanding and learning.
4. Build “red flag” mechanisms. Information performance indicators are available to organizations and should not be ignored.

The use of QEP, the academic audit, and accreditation processes discussed earlier in this paper are designed to assist higher education institutions to confront brutal facts in an organized and comprehensive manner. An honest assessment of the performance of an institution not only allows for compliance to the mandates issued by the above processes, but promotes an ongoing engagement to evaluate the results of performance and to use the results for continuous improvement.

### **Building Momentum toward Targeted Results**

Building momentum toward the transformation of organizations from good-to-great becomes a process similar to watching a rotating flywheel turn slowly. Overtime, with consistent and relentless effort, the value of becoming a disciplined organization pays dividends through improved performance and progress toward targeted results. By getting people to act on the implications gathered from confronting the brutal facts, the

right decisions become self-evident (Collins, 2001). Using the flywheel concept, there is no end point. The process continues.

For colleges and universities, the function and purpose of established committees and groups, such as faculty senates and academic counsels, can be enhanced by using the flywheel concept for navigating the social roles and expectations toward improved performance. Incorporating the development of cross-sectional groups for fact gathering and decision making will support the building of momentum toward achieving targeted results.

### **Bottom Line--Output**

The good news for higher education is that there are mechanisms already in place that can be used to diligently progress toward targeted results, which will help in the effort to transform good institutions into great ones that achieve lasting endurance. The output value is the hope that the college or university becomes a great place to work and offers the opportunity to fulfill both individual and collective passions associated with the mission of the institution.

It is possible to deliver superior performance and to make a distinct impact on the community served. By working toward these goals, there is a chance that the end result can be that the institution earns recognition from its constituents for its transformed status and is “branded” as the best institution and place to work.

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**Brief Bio**

Cynthia B. Calhoun is Professor and Department Chair of Social and Behavioral Sciences at Southwest Tennessee Community College (Southwest) in Memphis, TN. Having worked in the profession for 29 years at both a university and community college, she incorporates her scholarship in the social sciences, adult education and leadership to facilitate workshops in performance coaching, team-building, and diversity. A graduate of the inaugural class of the Regents Academic Leadership Institute of the Tennessee Board of Regents (TBR) in 2005, Dr. Calhoun also provides leadership in many community efforts to offer teaching and learning opportunities to adult learners. She is the recipient of awards for her work in distance education, teamwork, and for faculty and community service. Her service at Southwest includes providing leadership for the Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP) initiative, Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS) reaffirmation, Institutional Effectiveness (IE), and student clubs.