



Leadership Tips and Tools

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The Academy

Have you ever felt like this . . .

“This is a job that will definitely strain your sanity and drain your ego if you let it. Seems like everyone wants a piece of me. Yet many of the people I serve . . . just don’t believe in me at all. And those who do believe often expect me to do the impossible—rarely caring about what I have to do, or go through to meet their expectations. . . and they ALL have expectations.”

So begins *The Leadership Secrets of Santa Claus*, by Harvey MacKay. In this clever little book we learn to:

- * Build a Wonderful Workshop: Make the mission the main thing
- * Choose Our Reindeer Wisely: Strategies to select and promote the best and the brightest
- * Make a List and Check it Twice: Plan your work and work your plan
- * Listen to the Elves: Pay attention to how others perceive you
- * Get Beyond the Red Wagons: Techniques to deal with change
- * Share the Milk and Cookies: Do right by those who do right
- * Find Out Who’s Naughty and Nice: How to deal with your staff
- * Be Good For Goodness Sake: Strategies to build an ethical and high integrity workplace

At the end of the book we are reminded never to forget “that getting big things done all year long isn’t about magic. It’s about leadership.”

This issue of *Leadership Tips and Tools* is devoted to . . .



Getting Big Things Done Through Leadership!

Embracing the Language of Greatness! Like a child getting to meet Santa, I recently had the opportunity to visit with Jim Collins, author of *Good to Great*. An energetic and engaging man, Collins introduced me to his new monograph originally intended as a chapter in future editions of *Good to Great*.

In this monograph, Collins challenges us to get big things done by implementing the key findings of *Good to Great* in post-secondary education. He argues that his research is not about business, it is about greatness. “We must reject the idea—well-intentioned, but dead wrong—that the primary path to greatness in the social sectors is to become more like a business. Most businesses—like most of anything else in life—fall somewhere between mediocre and good. Few are great. When you compare great companies with good ones, many widely practiced business norms turn out to correlate with mediocrity, not greatness. So, then, why would we want to import the practices of mediocrity into the social sectors?”

Collins finds that we are in “desperate need of greater discipline—disciplined planning, disciplined people, disciplined governance, disciplined allocation of resources.” He argues that “we need a new language. The critical distinction is not between business and social, but between great and good. We need to reject the naïve imposition of the ‘language of business’ on the social sectors, and instead jointly embrace a ‘language of greatness.’”

While his monograph can certainly be read as a stand-alone piece, Collins has written it to go hand-in-hand with his book. The full monograph, *Good to Great and the Social Sectors: Why Business Thinking Is Not the Answer*, can be obtained from most online booksellers.

A Nice Surprise! It is important to note that Jim Collins is a leader AND a teacher. For me, it makes his applications to our world of post-secondary education more meaningful. One of the most interesting comments in Collins’ monograph comes at the beginning. In the author’s note, Collins reports . . .

“During my first year on the Stanford faculty in 1988, I sought out professor John Gardner for guidance on how I might become a better teacher. Gardner, former Secretary of Health, Education and Welfare, founder of Common Cause, and author of the classic text *Self-Renewal*, stung me with a comment that changed my life.

“ ‘It occurs to me, Jim, that you spend too much time trying to be interesting,’ he said. ‘Why don’t you invest more time being interested.’ ”

Gardner’s advice is compelling. It has profound implications for all of us in post-secondary education. I think it is true that many of us as teachers . . . and as leaders spend far too much time trying to be “interesting” when being “interested” would be a great gift to our students, staff, faculty, colleagues, and communities. Taking this advice to heart, I hope to be far more “interested” this year!

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Merry-Go-Round! If I were to identify a concept or a finding that is about getting big things done through leadership it would be “The Flywheel.” A key finding in the good-to-great research by Collins, the flywheel is a critical concept in the language of greatness. It is the finding that explains the momentum it takes to get big things done.

Collins describes a large “mechanical” flywheel as he develops his metaphor for the transformational process of momentum in good-to-great organizations. Frankly, I had a hard time identifying with the “mechanical” flywheel. I could not get my head around the notion until a colleague at George Brown College helped me see the research finding of the “flywheel” as a playground merry-go-round.

I can identify with the momentum of the flywheel when I tie it to my experiences pushing the playground merry-go-round. I recognize the pushes I must give this “flywheel” as I try to get it started. I can remember times of running around the circle of this “flywheel” putting all of my energy into getting it going. I recall, too, after getting it spinning — the delight of standing at its side — giving it an occasional push to keep up its momentum. Having to work hard to get the momentum going — I could stand watchfully by — nudging the “flywheel” to keep it spinning.

At what point did I transition from the work of pushing and running along side to standing back and enjoying the spinning flywheel?

In his research into good-to-great transformations, Collins found that while “good-to-great transformations often look like dramatic, revolutionary events to those observing from the outside; they feel like organic, cumulative processes to people on the inside. The confusion of end outcomes (dramatic results) with process (organic and cumulative) skews our perception of what really works over the long haul. No matter how dramatic the end result, the good-to-great transformations never happened in one fell swoop. There was no single defining action, no grand program, no one innovation, no lucky break, and no miracle moment.”

A “miracle moment” would be nice. However, leadership is hard work — it takes talent and skill— mindful effort—discipline! We get big things done when we get the flywheel spinning—and keep it spinning.

A Gift! I began this issue of *Leadership Tips and Tools* sharing the clever book, *The Leadership Secrets of Santa Claus*. While delightful, I believe the author missed an important leadership secret: Listening! Just think of all the stories he hears, all the requests he receives, all the time he spends listening to others. Perhaps this is his greatest secret — and a precious gift!

Margaret Wheatley reminds us in her latest book, *Finding Our Way*, “Listening is such a simple act. It requires us to be present, and that takes practice, but we don’t have to do anything else. We don’t have to advise, or coach, or sound wise. We just have to be willing to sit there and listen.”

“Our natural state is to be together. In this time when we keep moving away from each other, we haven’t lost the need and longing to be in relationship. Everybody has a story, and everybody wants to tell their story in order to connect. . . Listening moves us closer . . .” Wheatley’s words resonate in our heads and hearts, especially at this time of year.

Simplify! “Many of us would like to simplify our lives and life in general. Yet I notice how difficult it is to accept and believe in simple solutions and processes. Everything has become quite complicated,” Wheatley goes on to say.

Perhaps her thoughts help explain our delight in a book about *The Leadership Secrets of Santa Claus*. It’s simple. The simplicity of the childhood metaphor for Collins’ Flywheel, the gentle advice from Gardner, the caring act of listening—these are simple gifts. May they help each of us get big things done throughout the coming year!

A Breathing Space! To get big things done through leadership we need to build in time to think and reflect. In particular, we need time to muse—to reflect on the successes of our students, teams and organizations. We need time to reflect on what causes success and what we think about excellence. Our days get packed tight with the work and tasks of leading and managing. During this time of year we take a break from our work to rest, to celebrate, and to look forward with resolution. Perhaps the gift we need more than any other is a place to catch our breath.

Recently, friends from Nova Scotia Community College shared a gift. I think it speaks of leadership. So, I close wishing you the best of the Season . . . and a breathing space . . .

Fire

*What makes the fire burn
is space between the logs,
a breathing space.*

*Too many logs
packed in too tight
can douse the flames
almost as surely
as a pail of water would.*

*So building fires
requires attention
to the spaces in between,
as much as to the wood.*

*When we are able to build
open spaces
in the same way
we have learned
to pile on the logs,
then we can come to see how
it is fuel, and absence of the fuel
together, that make fire possible.*

---Judy Sorum Brown