



Book Review: *Good to Great and the Social Sectors*

By Robert Rader
Executive Director, CABE

So much has been written and said over the last few years about how beneficial it would be for our public schools to be run like businesses. Experts from the business world, some of whom were wildly successful in their business careers, have, for sometimes altruistic reasons, sometimes not, pontificated on how our schools must change to look more like businesses.

Having watched Enron, airlines, Disney, and other companies go through tremendously difficult periods, it has always seemed to me that we have to be really careful before our schools adopt business models. Of course, “sticking to the knitting”, strategic planning, careful decisionmaking and an empowered board working with the CEO in setting and then accomplishing the mission can be the basis of success in both companies and schools. But, a wholesale adaptation of business rules and operating procedures leaves out some of the most important aspects of our schools: that our “production” of successful students is very different from building widgets, our stakeholders includes the public at large, whether or not the individual pays taxes and measuring success is very difficult.

Jim Collins, the wildly successful author of *Good to Great*, has now written (and self-published) a “monograph” that is only 35 pages on how his research and conclusions apply to the social sector, which includes nonprofits and the public schools.

He states his case right on the cover of the monograph, “WHY BUSINESS THINKING IS NOT THE ANSWER”.

The book uses many of the concepts known to readers of the original *Good to Great*, but Collins argues that we must start with a new language of greatness, that is, defining success without using the same words used with business. He suggests that while money is both the input and output in business, in the social sector, money is only an input, not a measure of greatness.

However, Collins is strongly against stating that measures of performance cannot be used in the social sector. His argument is that it “doesn’t really matter whether you can quantify your results” as to how your (I’m thinking of school districts here) is doing, what “matters is that you rigorously assemble evidence— quantitative or qualitative to track your progress.” Taking that argument one step further, I would argue, therefore, that rising test scores are merely one part of the evidence of progress.

His second issue is how to get to “Level 5 Leadership”, that is, leadership (and he does mention “an elected school board” as one example of leadership) that makes sure the “right decisions happen— no matter how difficult or painful— for the long-term greatness of the institution and the achievement of its mission, independent of consensus or popularity.” How to do this within a “diffuse power structure” is the difficulty. This is the part that has tripped up business executives who have tried to move into the social sectors.

Collins argues that to be successful, leaders must have a “compelling combination of personal humility and professional will” to create legitimacy and influence. This ties in directly with the work of Professor Jeswald W. Salacuse, whose book on “Leading Leaders” (see January, *CABE Journal Book Review*) speaks clearly to the need for the leader to reach out to the “followers” on a one-to-one basis, determining and acting on the interests of the followers.

Collins’ third issue is making sure the “right people are on the bus, within social sector constraints”. As readers of *Good to Great* will remember, critical to success is having the right people (here, administrators, teachers and, yes, board members) who can work together consistently to achieve success. He notes that the social sector is a difficult place to put the right people on the bus, because of issues like tenure and seniority.

But, he says, “early assessment mechanisms turn

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out to be more important than hiring mechanisms. There is not perfect interviewing technique, no ideal hiring method, even the best executives make hiring mistakes. You can only know for certain about a person by working with that person.”

Despite this, he does provide some tips for getting the right people involved: first, “the more selective a position becomes, the more attractive a position becomes— even if volunteer or low pay. Second, the social sectors have one compelling advantage: desperate craving for meaning in our lives [and this] has the power to ignite passion and commitment. Third, the number one resource for a great social sector organization is having enough of the right people willing to commit themselves to mission.” Thus, money may not be as crucial in getting the right people on the bus as the opportunity to work on an issue they care about.

Collins’ fourth issue is part of the “hedgehog concept” which is “to attain piercing clarity about how to produce the best long-term results, and then exercising the relentless discipline to say ‘No, thank you’ to opportunities that fail the hedgehog test.”

The organization’s leaders have to consider what it is deeply passionate about, what it can be best in the world at and how to get sufficient resources to carry out the mission. The last is extremely difficult in the social sector and he suggests rethinking the economic engine without a profit motive. “The

critical issue is not ‘How much money do we make?’ but ‘How can we develop a sustainable resource engine to deliver superior performance relative to our mission?’”

The fifth issue to “turn the flywheel”, that is, Collins’ research has shown in the great companies, there is no one thing that causes success, it is a number of things that start slowly. Then the company keeps pushing the flywheel quicker and quicker, until there is a breakthrough. Then the “flywheel flies forward with almost unstoppable momentum. This is how you build greatness.”

The monograph contains many small recommendations, such as encouraging greatness in “pockets” in your organization (how about the State’s best science department as a starting point?), graphs and resources. For those unfamiliar with *Good to Great*, there is a summary of the ideas contained in that book in the back of the monograph.

While some of the concepts Collins puts forward may be abstract and somewhat difficult to apply in the context of our schools, there are some very helpful ideas in the monograph. It is especially good to see that one of the leaders in researching successful businesses understands that the social sector is different. I would rate that concept as “great” even if he hadn’t written the rest of the monograph.

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