

Inside Outreach

A Conversation with Jim Collins

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Dear Colleagues,

Many of you have heard me discuss the work of Jim Collins, highly acclaimed author of four books including "Built to Last" and "Good to Great" and national leader in management research and education. Collins' book, "Built to Last," with co-author Jerry Porras, spent 55 months on Business Week's best-seller list, generated more than 70 printings, and was translated into 17 languages. His book, "Good to Great," was equally successful with more than one million copies sold to-date. Fortune Magazine describes him as "one of the most influential management thinkers alive."

The executive team recently had the opportunity to speak with Jim Collins about how we can apply his framework to Penn State Outreach as we move the organization closer to fulfilling the Promise of Outreach. I know a number of you have expressed concern regarding the transferability of his research findings from the business world to the academy. It is important to note that Jim's current research foci is the application of the "Good to Great" concepts to the not-for-profit sector, including higher education. During our conversation, it was evident that he had given much thought to great higher education organizations. In this edition of "Inside Outreach," I would like to share with you the key concepts from our conversation with Jim. Much of what you read here will reinforce what you heard in my remarks at the recent Outreach Professional Development Conference.

A Culture of Discipline

First, Collins suggests that in order to truly fulfill the Promise of Outreach we must "preserve our core and stimulate progress." In his model, core values and core purpose seldom change and are the overarching foundation for an organization. While strategic objectives and priorities change frequently to address external forces and seize new opportunities. He suggests that all the best organizations have an iterative strategic *thinking* process and he argues that *plans* are useless but *planning* is priceless. Organizations must take time to seek deeper and deeper understanding. This enlightenment occurs through disciplined thinking. His comments and research support the importance of the current disciplined and strategic thinking among our Outreach strategic positioning teams.

His notion of discipline is fundamental in achieving organizational greatness. He stresses the importance of creating a "culture of discipline." His research found that great organizations are comprised of a culture of "disciplined people, engaged in disciplined thought, which ultimately leads to disciplined action," and serves as the underpinning of a culture of discipline. I am confident that we can create a culture of discipline in outreach and I am counting on you to lead the evolutionary process.

What do we mean by disciplined people? Collins suggests that we ask "first who, then what?" In other words, we need to get the "right people on the bus." Collins borrows the bus

metaphor from Tom Wolfe's book "The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test" noting that "there are going to be times when we can't wait for somebody. Now, you're either on the bus or off the bus." This certainly should not be perceived as a threat. Rather, it means that the bus is comprised of many different types of people who think independently but share a common set of core values-bringing multiple standards together in pursuit of one thing. Collins explained that his team consists of a very diverse group of people who are "smart, curious, disciplined, and irreverent, with membership in the group being defined by great work and a deep understanding of what they can do best." As I have traveled across the Commonwealth and engaged in conversations with many of you this past fall, I was struck by the diverse group of talented and very capable people we have on our bus!

"Great" organizations build their success on gathering, discussing, and facing the "brutal facts." Facing the "brutal facts" will help to advance our organization--decision-making will be grounded more in analysis and data and less in anecdotal information. In several of the past issues of Inside Outreach, I have discussed the challenges we are facing. Collins notes that everyone has external constraints and regulator bodies. We need to "manage them smart" and possess "unwavering faith that we can and will prevail."

The Outreach Hedgehog

The core principle in the great companies that Collins studied was the identification and undying commitment to a "hedgehog concept." The hedgehog concept that Collins offers is a critical part of our planning for the future and serves as the basis of our framework. Collins draws the hedgehog analogy from Isaiah Berlin's essay, "The Hedgehog and the Fox." Berlin's work is based on the Greek parable: "The fox knows many things, the hedgehog knows one big thing." Berlin portrays the fox as "scattered or diffused, moving on many levels, never integrating its thinking into one unifying concept or vision." Hedgehogs, however, reduce complexities into one unifying thought or concept that guides everything. In order to achieve this focus in an organization, Collins asks: "What are you deeply passionate about? What drives your economic engine? What can you do best in the world?" Specifically, he challenged our executive team during our conversation, by asking: "What would be lost if Outreach went away? What would you take if you were moving your unit to another institution? Who would miss Outreach the most if it went away? What does Outreach do exceptionally well?" This helped to shape our thinking about our "outreach hedgehog."

One of the breakthroughs for me, during our conversation, was the idea that the Outreach "hedgehog" is process-focused rather than content-focused and that it should allow us to see the underlying concepts and processes that unify our otherwise diverse delivery systems and services. He suggested that, in our case, the focus should be on the identification of the intersection of community need and academic resources and our delivery response to the public. The idea of focusing on "optimizing the process of making matches and making good on them" resonates with what I have been hearing from the strategic positioning teams. He said, "Essentially the cornerstone of your hedgehog concept if you strip it all away is the identification of the intersection between community needs and the academic offerings, and it's really a two-part process: 1) finding the match and 2) delivering the match."

The goal, he suggested, is to make Penn State Outreach relevant and valued by the communities that we serve-that includes the internal university community, as well as the external communities who participate in our services. As he noted, we need to demonstrate

both economic value and social value. This is an extremely important principle for us. We often engage in philosophical discussions at all levels of the organization that go something like this: "Should we be making life better or should we be generating revenue?" The answer is yes. This is the genius of the "and." By identifying what drives our economic engine and placing value on it, we become less dependent on external funding and generate greater levels of freedom and self-sufficiency for our units. Thus, our operating mantra should be to generate revenue to allow us to do good work that transforms lives.

Finally, Collins suggested that we remain patient, recognizing that our process is organic not linear. This personally is difficult for me because I recognize the urgency in moving ahead. He notes that an organization gains clarity over time and we must focus on doing what makes sense at a given point in time and then reflect on the outcomes (i.e., the persistent application of intelligence in the face of ambiguity).

Your Role

You might be asking, what does all of this mean to you? I hope it provides some clarity for you on how we will frame our planning process. The Collins' model will be our guide. More importantly, I am asking you to embrace the culture of discipline: we need disciplined people, engaged in disciplined thought, leading to disciplined action.

Thank you for your leadership. I'll see you on the bus.

Craig