

by Wendy Green

Good to Great: GETTING TO “GREAT”

Understanding the role of culture, consistent action and fealty to core values in building a truly great organization.

In his best-seller, *Good to Great*, Jim Collins studied a group of organizations that had moved from being merely “good” to truly “great,” and went on to maintain that level for many years. This article is the fifth and final in a series examining the principles of *Good to Great*, as seen through the prism of aging services providers who have adopted them.

For the four previous installments of this series, see the January/February, March/April, May/June and September/October 2006 issues of *FutureAge*.

If you have followed our *Good to Great* series over the past year, you have thought about how to get the right people on your aging services “bus” (and the wrong people off). You have already started to confront the “brutal facts” of your organization: Perhaps you have recognized a lack of accountability on the senior team, seen that employees are taking advantage of your scheduling process to the detriment of the staffing budget, or you have decided that a CCRC model may not be the best choice for your organization.

Perhaps you have succeeded in identifying what Jim Collins calls a “hedgehog concept”—the single, guiding concept at the intersection of three critical circles: what you’re most passionate about, what drives your economic/resource engine and what you can be best in the world at. And, by some stroke of luck or divine intervention, you even have a “level 5 leader” at the helm of your organization—an individual who, in Collins’ words, “blends extreme personal humility with intense professional will.”

So what happens now? How do you leverage the right leader, the right approach to confronting challenges and, most important, your hedgehog?

Building a Culture of Discipline

The beauty of a hedgehog is that it provides you with a framework for decision-making. Do you build that new skilled nursing facility? Do you offer home and community-based services? Do you partner with a competitor on an initiative that will ultimately benefit seniors in your community? *Only if doing so aligns with your hedgehog.* But that’s easier said than done. It takes a tremendous amount of discipline to stick to

your hedgehog, says Collins, and that discipline must extend well beyond the leader. Indeed, there must be a “culture of discipline” established throughout the organization.

Collins points out that this does not mean a culture ripe with hierarchy and red tape. In fact, it calls for just the opposite. “If you get the right people on the bus, and the wrong people off,” says Collins, “you don’t need stultifying bureaucracy.” The benefit of building a culture of discipline, he points out, is that management can focus on managing the system, not the people. The people, then, have the freedom within that framework of responsibility to do what they do best.

Creating a culture of discipline starts with self-disciplined people—people who have the discipline to confront the brutal facts, while retaining faith that the organization can and will prevail despite its challenges. It requires people who have the discipline to identify the organization’s hedgehog, and more importantly, to use that guiding concept to inform decision-making, even if that means saying “no” to exciting opportunities, and may mean halting projects and programs that don’t align with the hedgehog.

Establishing a culture of discipline—made up of disciplined people who engage in disciplined *thought* and who then take disciplined *action*—positions the organization and lays the groundwork for “flywheel mode.”

Entering Flywheel Mode

None of the *Good to Great* transformations Collins and his team researched came about because of a miracle moment. There was no single defining action, no

one program or grand event that launched the organizations into greatness. Rather, those transformations were part of a cumulative process, a “quiet, deliberate process of figuring out what needed to be done to create the best future results and then simply taking those steps.”

Collins likens this model to the movement of a huge, heavy flywheel. It takes enormous effort to get the flywheel to move, but with constant pushing in a consistent direction over a great deal of time, momentum is built and the flywheel eventually hits a point of breakthrough, virtually spinning on its own.

The process of building up to flywheel mode begins with a level 5 leader—a leader who is less interested in flashy new projects and more interested in the results that come from quietly, deliberately pushing on the flywheel. It continues with having the right people in the right seats—people who understand that a breakthrough may not happen in a week, a month, a year, but that it eventually will happen—and people who are able to confront the brutal facts to help everyone see the steps that must be taken for the flywheel to turn in the right direction.

Once you’ve attained an understanding of the three circles that make up your hedgehog, and you are using that hedgehog as a framework to decide what you should and should not do, your flywheel accelerates and your organization is propelled to greatness.

Preserving Core Values While Stimulating Progress

The path to greatness doesn’t end once your flywheel is spinning. The final, logical step is to consistently work to preserve your core values while consistently stimulating progress.

Great organizations, Collins insists, have a set of timeless core values and a core reason for being that remains constant. At the same time, they also exhibit a relentless drive for change and progress. How does he explain this duality? Great organizations, he says, keep clear the “distinction between ‘what we stand for’ (which should never change) and ‘how we do things’ (which should never stop changing).”

Thankfully, adhering to core values is a no-brainer for most mission-driven aging services providers. Our core values revolve around the people we serve now and in the future. And, realistically, given the workforce, regulatory and other challenges our field faces, we have no choice but to stimulate progress and adapt to the world around us.

Do all aging services organizations have the potential to achieve greatness? Actually, yes. “Greatness,” says Collins, “is not a function of circumstance. Greatness, it turns out, is largely a matter of conscious choice, and discipline.”

Whether or not you choose to implement the *Good to Great* principles, there is no denying the benefits any organization can reap from its core concepts: superior leadership and staff, honesty and fearlessness about facing unpleasant truths, a clear purpose and a disciplined culture.

Best of luck in getting to great! 🎯

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