

***World-Class Safety:
What Does it Take?***

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"Good is the enemy of great"
Jim Collins (2001)

The CEO of a leading chemical company told me recently he dislikes the term "world-class safety," because its meaning is so ambiguous. "Everyone talks about wanting a world-class safety program, but nobody provides a straightforward definition of this vision. What does it mean to be *world class*?"

This article attempts to answer this CEO's provocative question. The answer does not come from common sense, but from over five years of empirical research. As reported in the book, *Good to Great* (Collins, 2001), the author and his research team studied 11 companies that transitioned from being good to being great, generating cumulative stock returns that averaged seven times higher than the general stock market. These 11 "great" companies sustained this level of excellence for at least 15 years.

By systematically comparing the good-to-great companies with a carefully selected set of 11 companies that maintained good productivity and profits for at least 15 years, but never made the leap from good to great, Collins and his research team found a number of common qualities among the good-to-great companies not consistently observed at the comparison companies. These

attributes not only imply an operational definition of “world-class safety,” but also suggest ways to achieve this enviable level of safety excellence.

Start with the Right People

Claiming “it’s who you pay, not how you pay them,” Collins places substantial focus on employing the right people. He uses the metaphor of a bus, emphasizing the need “to get the right people on the bus in the first place and to keep them there” (p. 50). His research team concluded that character, work ethic, conscientiousness, and values are more important than educational background, practical skills, specialized knowledge, and work experience. The latter attributes are teachable and changeable, whereas the former are presumably more permanent traits.

Collins also concludes “letting the wrong people stay around is unfair to all the right people, as they inevitably find themselves compensating for the inadequacies of the wrong people” (p. 56). It’s also unfair to hire a wrong person, with intentions to let them go later. The best performers are motivated by the intrinsic or natural consequences of their job. If people do not find such satisfaction in their work, it’s in the best interest of all involved to let them go early or find them another assignment. This relates to another key conclusion of Collins’ research team.

Put People in the Right Positions

Once you have the right people on your bus, it’s essential to put each person in the right seats. As with team sports, this means matching job function with individual talent. Collins indicates it can take time to determine whether

less-than-great performance means a person is merely in the wrong seat on the bus or needs to get off the bus altogether. Such decisions require ongoing assessment through behavioral observation, as well as interpersonal conversation and coaching.

When people are performing work that matches their talent and interest, they get intrinsic or natural gratification from their work. Collins' research team did not find any impact of financial compensation on whether a company shifts from good to great. They concluded that "the purpose of compensation is not to 'motivate' the right behaviors from the wrong people, but to get and keep the right people in the first place" (p. 64).

Confront Brutal Facts Through Open Communication

It might seem harsh to get wrong people off the bus, and to move people from one seat to another. Yet for the good-to-great companies this is merely consistent with a work culture in which employees engage in rigorous debate, analysis, and continuous learning to uncover and report the objective facts of current reality. A climate of truth telling is created in part by supervisors leading with questions -- not answers, and seeking facts -- not faults.

Collins claims "one of the primary ways to de-motivate people is to ignore the brutal facts of reality" (p. 89). According to Collins' research, the good-to-great companies deal with as much adversity as the comparison companies. The difference is the good-to-great companies uncover the brutal facts of the situation and confront them head-on. The result: They emerge from their troubles stronger than before.

Relevance to Occupational Safety

Are these special qualities of good-to-great companies relevant to defining a “world-class safety” organization? Perhaps so, but bear in mind we are talking about the qualities of an ideal Total Safety Culture. These qualities reflect safety ideals toward which we should aspire. Rarely, if ever, are these exemplary criteria achieved throughout an entire workplace.

Most obvious is the last point – maintaining a climate where the truth is heard. A world-class safety work force discusses freely and openly, without embarrassment, all injuries (minor and major), as well as close calls. The workers realize that only through such open discussion can the environmental, behavioral, and cultural factors contributing to these mishaps be identified and removed or corrected. Facing such adversity head-on results in a work force more prepared to prevent occupational injuries.

What is the safety relevance of getting the right people on the bus and in the right seats? It's certainly possible workers are not doing the job for which they are most suited, and this could be a safety hazard. In some cases, an employee or contractor may not care about safety to the degree demanded by the work culture. Supervisors need to look for these incongruities and then engage in open and frank conversation with individuals whose at-risk behaviors suggest they are not prepared or appropriate for a particular job.

To achieve world-class in safety, work cultures need to help people face the brutal fact that their at-risk behavior is inconsistent with a workplace that promotes safety as a core value. This does not necessarily mean the person

should get off the bus, but it does mean some corrective action is required. The sooner in a person's tenure with a company this issue is addressed, the better.

Safety organizations aspiring to be world-class give specific safety-related expectations during worker orientation. New workers are observed carefully during this orientation period to determine compatibility between job function and individual talents, interests, and values. When workers' behaviors suggest they do not hold safety as a value, they receive corrective action, which includes at least an open and frank conversation with an appropriate supervisor. If they choose to stay on the bus, the workers derive a detailed corrective-action plan in which they commit to certain behavior change and specify any peer or management support they need to make this happen (Geller, 2005; Grote, 1995).

The Hedgehog Concept

In order to typify the simple and organized focus of the good-to-great companies, Collins contrasts the hedgehog with a fox. The fox looks like a winner with crafty, quick, and sleek fleet of foot, while the hedgehog waddles along, day after day, focusing on the bare necessities of living. Analogously, some people are showy, diffuse, and scattered with regard to purpose, goals, and action plans; whereas others are more like the hedgehog, simplifying their complex world into a single unifying principle or vision that provides organization and focus for their daily activities.

<Figure 1 – Illustration of Hedgehog & Fox>

The good-to-great companies did the latter, which Collins and his research team label "The Hedgehog Concept." Specifically, the great companies have a

profound understanding of their answers to these three questions that provide organization and focus to all of their activities: 1) What can we be the best in the world at?, 2) What drives our economic engine?, and 3) What are we deeply passionate about?

This hedgehog concept is reminiscent of the “constancy of purpose” principle advocated by W. Edwards Deming (1986). The great companies discriminate between a) what they can do best and what they cannot, b) what is profitable for them and what is not, and c) what they are passionate about and what they are not. These discriminations define their mission, and fuel their goal setting and action plans. Behavior inconsistent with this purpose is avoided.

Relevance to Safety

Thus, the world-class safety organization maintains a hedgehog approach to injury prevention. They understand what it takes to be among the best in industrial safety, and believe they can reach this level of excellence. They also realize the direct correlation between their financial profit and their success at preventing injuries. Their passion to be world-class in safety alerts them to any inconsistencies between this vision and various company activities, from strategic planning in the boardroom to worker behaviors on the shop floor.

A Culture of Discipline

Maintaining these hedgehog principles and constancy of purpose requires a culture of discipline. But the meaning of discipline here is not punishment, as this term is often used in industry. In fact, a consistent distinction between the good-to-great companies and the comparison companies was the way discipline

was defined and practiced. Top-down, disciplinarian control, while common in the comparison companies, was not found in the good-to-great companies.

“Sustained great results depend upon building a culture full of self-disciplined people who take disciplined action, fanatically consistent with... the Hedgehog Concept” (p.142).

For a world-class organization, an operationalization of the Hedgehog Concept defines a consistent system with a clear mission as well as constraints. Within this highly-developed structure, workers have opportunities to choose a particular course of action. However, the workers must be responsible and self-disciplined. This gets us back to an underlying challenge and a key point explained above – “getting self-disciplined people on the bus in the first place” (p.126).

The Practice of Discipline

Collins delineates certain procedures of the good-to-great companies that help define a culture of discipline. These practices suggest guidelines for becoming world class in safety. Foremost is strict adherence to the Hedgehog Concept, which includes rejecting opportunities beyond the organization's answers to the three basic hedgehog questions defined above. In other words, a “stop doing” list is as important as a “to do” list. Continually ask: “What are we doing to be the best?, And what are we doing that detracts us from being the best?”

World class in safety means dropping policies, programs, and slogans that do not contribute to safety excellence. For example, some organizations

maintain a safety incentive or bonus system that rewards a reactive mindset and detracts from proactive involvement in injury prevention. Yet even when the disadvantages of such a program are realized, it can be difficult to gain the support needed to drop or alter this ineffective program.

While special safety efforts often start off with lots of participation and optimism, many fizzle over time. Obviously, such drifting beyond original intentions detracts from optimal performance. If such programs cannot be re-energized or refined to get back on track, they should be dropped.

The good-to-great companies do not operate out of a fear of failure, but focus on achieving success (Geller & Wiegand, 2005). Moreover, these companies recognize that a transition to greatness will not come from one magical event, turning point, seminal meeting, epiphany moment, or a breakthrough accomplishment. Rather, success evolves from a series of incremental changes or small wins (Weick, 1989).

Analogously, the world-class safety organization promotes success seeking over failure avoiding by putting more focus on the daily proactive things people do to prevent injuries than on the injuries themselves. They define their safety excellence by the various safety-related activities accomplished each day to prevent mishaps, not by such reactive, failure-focused outcome statistics as total recordable injury rate and worker compensation costs.

From Organizations to Individuals

While Collins presents the Hedgehog Concept as a company guideline to achieving greatness, this theory is equally relevant to individuals. For example,

happy, self-motivated employees perceive they are well paid for applying their special talents effectively on a job they feel passionate about doing well (Brief & Weiss, 2002; Judge, Locke, Durham, & Kluger, 1998). People who do not believe they are applying their talents effectively for important work are not self-accountable nor intrinsically motivated. They cannot be the best they can be and can detract from the achievement of world class in safety. Effective leaders can sometimes help these individuals reframe their thinking and develop a relevant Hedgehog perspective. Let's consider the kind of leadership that can make this happen and guide a company into world-class status.

Immutable Attributes

The conclusions from Collins and his research team give minimal regard to intervention, or management techniques to improve human performance. Apparently, the good-to-great companies did not use incentives, motivational talks, layoffs, compensation systems, or restructuring to obtain great performance. In Collins' words, "the good-to-great companies paid scant attention to managing change, motivating people, or creating alignment" (p.11).

Instead, the great companies studied by Collins et al. hired the right people in the first place - - people who were conscientious and self-motivated, and whose talents and interests matched their job function. Moreover, the great companies did not let the wrong people hang around, because the right people inevitably compensate for the inadequacies of the wrong people and become demotivated. Thus, "People are not your most important asset. The right people are" (p. 64).

Selection vs. Intervention

Collins and his research team put the onus on selection rather than intervention. For them, greatness is more about selecting the right people than teaching and motivating the right behavior. The perspective runs counter to much teaching and research on the human dynamics of injury prevention, especially scholarship on behavior-based and people-based safety (e.g., Geller, 2001, 2005; Krause, Hidley, & Hodson, 1996; McSween, 1995; Peterson, 2001). Actually, the entire discipline of applied psychology places more focus on improving people's performance than on finding the best people to perform (e.g., Aamodt, 1999; Gilmer, 1975; Oskamp & Schultz, 1998).

Industrial/organizational psychology does address the important challenge of employee selection. Also, the development of aptitude, achievement, and personality tests has always been a primary domain of mainstream psychology. However, selection devices with impressive predictive validity are rare, and are not applicable to an existing work force. However, even when a selection device provides valid information, it is usually unwarranted and unfair to assume the attributes accurately assessed in an individual are immutable.

Changing Attributes through Leadership

While Collins gives primary attention to employee selection, he does profess a need for the right conditions to support the right people. He also gives substantial attention to leadership by defining the special qualities of those who guided a company's transition from good to great. Thus, the leaders of the good-to-great companies cultivate a culture that "puts the right people in the right seats

on the bus, and then drives the bus to the right locations". They help people apply their talents effectively and realize self-accountability and self-motivation.

Here are seven qualities that distinguished the leadership of the good-to-great organizations from the leadership of the comparison companies. While they define attributes of the best safety leaders, some of these have not been included in presentations on "safety leadership".

1. Manifest Personal Humility or Compelling Modesty

This leadership quality receives priority attention in Collins' book. He relates several case studies of companies that did not reach their potential because their leaders were more concerned about their own notoriety than the reputation of their company. The "good-to-great leaders never wanted to become larger-than-life heroes" rather they "were seemingly ordinary people quietly producing extraordinary results" (p. 28). They "attribute much of this success to good luck, rather than personal greatness" (p. 40).

2. Project Success Beyond Self

Related to the first quality, good-to-great leaders attribute company success to factors other than themselves. As systems thinkers (Senge, 1990), they see the big picture and realize their success is contingent on the daily small-win accomplishments of many individuals. And, they acknowledge the synergistic contributions of many others who enable remarkable results.

3. Accept Responsibility for Failure

While spreading success beyond themselves, the good-to-great leaders take full responsibility for failures. They face the brutal facts of less-than-desired

outcomes, and hold themselves accountable without blaming other people or just “bad luck”. Interestingly, Collins and his team found the leaders of the comparison companies to often blame others for lackluster performance, while taking personal credit for extraordinary results. Social psychologists call this the “self-serving bias” (Miller & Ross, 1975).

4. Promote a Learning Culture

Humble leaders are open to new information. They are always learning, with impassioned belief in never-ending improvement. The good-to-great leaders facilitate fact finding to learn and improve, not to find someone to blame. They lead with questions rather than answers, and promote frank and open dialogue and debate.

The result: People are not satisfied with the status quo, but are engaged in finding ways to improve company performance. They are constantly alert to possibilities for process refinement, diligently search for the best solutions to problems, and regularly submit suggestions for fine-tuning their operations.

5. Work to Achieve, not to Avoid Failure

Although they reveal and face brutal facts, the good-to-great leaders never waver in their resolve for greatness. Failure is not an option; it is not even considered. With an optimistic stance, these leaders focus on achieving exemplary success (Seligman, 1991).

At the same time, these leaders adhere fervently to the Hedgehog Concept, as discussed above. Essentially, this means identifying: a) what you can do best, b) feel passionate about, and c) is profitable. They attend to their

envisioned enterprise with fanatical consistency and a disciplined constancy of purpose (Deming, 1986).

6. Be Rigorous rather than Ruthless.

When making decisions about people, the good-to-great leaders are rigorous, not ruthless. For example, in contrast to the comparison companies, the leaders of Collins' good-to-great organizations did not use restructuring and layoffs to improve performance or profits. But they did remain consistent and rigorous in their people-decisions.

Good-to-great leaders didn't hire personnel until they were sure they found the right person. And, if observations suggested a need for a personal challenge, they acted quickly. This could mean changing a person's seat on the bus, or asking someone to get off the bus.

7. Encourage Self-Motivation for Meaningful Work

Self-motivation is key to long-term productivity and is gained through intrinsic consequences. In other words, people are self-motivated when their behaviors provide natural ongoing consequences that are rewarding.

When does behavior on the job become intrinsically rewarding and self-motivating? Answer: When people believe their work is meaningful. When does this happen? Answer: Sometimes the special value of the effort is obvious, as when people are engaged in activities that prevent injuries. But even in these cases, it's critical to give the kind of interpersonal attention that reassures people they are accomplishing meaningful work. Great leaders know how to do this, and do it often.

This final quality is most significant for safety, because it defines the source of the motivation that keeps the effective safety leaders going. Specifically, working for safety is meaningful work that fuels self-motivation. In this regard, Jim Collins ends his book with the following: "It is impossible to have a great life unless it is a meaningful life. And it is very difficult to have a meaningful life without meaningful work" (p. 210). Safety leaders do meaningful work and therefore have meaningful lives.

In Summary

This presentation explored what it takes to be world-class in occupational safety. The stringent criteria were gleaned from a national bestseller that stipulated the qualities of 11 elite companies that made the leap from good to great results, and sustained greatness for at least 15 years. Key qualities addressed here are: 1) get the right people on the job, 2) get the wrong people off the job, 3) match talent and interest with job operations, 4) maintain a climate of truth telling by engaging people in rigorous debate, analysis, and continuous learning, 5) confront the facts, even when they are harsh, and 6) maintain a constancy of purpose.

For world-class safety, these criteria imply a need for open, frank, and fact-finding conversations about all safety-related incidents -- from close calls and first-aid cases to the most serious injuries and fatalities. The high safety standards of a world-class organization are explained to all employees, with specific reference to the behaviors of relevant jobs. When an employee's behavior does not meet the specific expectations, a corrective action plan is

implemented which includes candid conversation and a personal commitment to change or get off the bus.

The good-to-great leaders bring the best out of people. They show people the intrinsic consequences of their meaningful work, thereby inspiring them to be self-accountable. They do this by: a) being humble, b) acknowledging the contributions of others, c) accepting responsibility for failure, d) promoting a learning culture, e) demonstrating optimistic success seeking over pessimistic failure avoiding, f) making rigorous rather than ruthless personnel decisions, and g) encouraging self-motivation.

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