

# Good to Great in Educational Development

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## Abstract

We have been asked to describe One Thing that guides us as educational developers. For me, this is the strategic planning process described in Jim Collins' *Good to Great* (2001). Collins provides a model that helps leaders navigate through change to build effective and influential centers. This framework has allowed me to develop a successful center despite periods of transition and uncertainty. Much of what I experience in my professional life is good. The challenge is to take it to the next level—to turn good into great. Collins' strategic model provides a roadmap for how this might be accomplished.

**Keywords:** administration, organizational development, professional development, start-up

## Introduction

"The future must be more than an extension of the past." [1][#N1]

We have been asked to talk about our perspectives on educational development—the ideas or theories we use to orient our work, to describe the "one thing" that surely guides us in our professional endeavors. This is a difficult task as I have borrowed freely from many sources. It is also a deeply personal question for I recognize that my professional outlook is influenced by my beliefs and world view. That being said, my One Thing is best described as a strategic planning process grounded by Jim Collins' "Hedgehog Concept" as found in *Good to Great* (2001) and *Good to Great and the Social Sectors* (2005). This process has allowed me to develop a successful center despite periods of transition and uncertainty.

Higher education is experiencing a time of (mostly) exciting change. Eckel, Green, Hill, and Mallon (2001, p. 28), although writing almost two decades ago, succinctly frame the context of higher education today: "Clearly, the turbulent environment of technology, globalization, and competition—as well as the larger social needs that higher education must address—will leave no institution unchanged in the years to come. But being intentional about effecting change ... will likely be the most important factor in deciding which institutions thrive and which ones wither." Research recently published in this journal (see Kelley, Cruz, & Fire, 2017) indicates that many educational developers are experiencing rapid and expansive change. As a result, they have the opportunity to become greater strategic resources for the institutions they serve: "The conditions are ripe for faculty development to expand its role collectively and to stake a claim in helping institutions transform" (Schroeder, 2011, p. 287). Collins' theory of the Hedgehog Concept, and the attendant focus on meaningful strategic planning, provides a framework to help educational development leaders navigate through changes to build effective and influential centers.

Collins' books are a staple of business literature but are not widely referenced within literature related to educational development. As Schroeder (2011) noted: "The role of an organizational vision has been discussed in business and management literature for some time. Higher education leaders and administrators are often unaware of or dismiss this organizational literature and may assume that business and organizational research have little to contribute to the nonprofit context or the unique blend of values in an educational organization" (p. 179). Yet some have noted the importance of strategic vision

in the field of educational development. Sorcinelli, Austin, Eddy, and Beach (2006, p. xviii) argued that “Providing institutional support for faculty members facing changing contexts and new demands becomes an essential strategic choice. We believe that the contours of change require us to rethink how we approach, organize, and support faculty development.” Collins’ work has been tremendously valuable as I have developed an organizational vision for our center. In addition, his monograph *Good to Great and the Social Sectors* applies his model specifically to nonprofit enterprises, making it uniquely applicable to our work in higher education.

Collins examined 11 companies that had been mediocre or worse for 15 years (as defined by stock returns at or below the general stock market) and then had a breakthrough point and experienced cumulative returns at least three times the market average over the next 15 years. He contrasted these 11 companies with a selected set of comparison companies. The resulting case study led him to develop his “Good to Great” framework. The framework seeks to answer the following questions:

- What type of personnel do successful organizations have, from top to bottom?
- How do successful organizations think?
- How do successful organizations act?

Collins’ framework was essential to me as I moved from a tenured faculty position into a full time position in educational development. I was hired in 2007 to be the founding director of the CTL at the University of South Dakota. Three months after I was hired, the Provost, who was both my direct supervisor and the guiding force behind the creation of the center, left the institution. Over the next eight years, I went through a series of seven reporting changes and worked under six different provosts, interim provosts, and associate provosts. Collins’ framework and focus on setting strategic direction—his “hedgehog concept”—was indispensable as I navigated through these changes, and it enabled me to establish a center with a reputation for excellence on campus and beyond. This strategic planning process, more than anything else, has been the One Thing that has had the greatest impact on my leadership of our CTL.

## The Hedgehog Concept

The hinge of Collins’ model, the point at which the good companies truly became great, is described through a parable about a hedgehog and a fox. The fox has many tricks up its sleeve, many plans, and tries many ways to turn the hedgehog into dinner. The hedgehog only knows one thing, but it knows that thing really well. The hedgehog, when confronted by a predator, simply rolls up into a spiny ball. It does not matter what kind of predator or what kind of trick the predator is trying to use, the hedgehog does the one thing all the time, really well. This dedication to a specific principle makes the hedgehog more successful than the fox. Collins found that the good to great companies similarly discovered a principle that they were uniquely good at and pursued that idea with single minded determination. This “one thing” was that company’s hedgehog concept, a “simple, crystalline concept that flows from deep understanding” about the following four questions (2001, p. 95): what are our brutal facts, what are we best in the world at, what drives our resource engine, and what are we passionate about? These questions drive our strategic planning process and have helped us to develop insights into who we are and what we can accomplish. This essay will take each question in turn, examine our quest to determine our own hedgehog concept, and describe how it all fits together in our strategic planning process.

### *Brutal Facts and Honest Communication*

The first aspect of the hedgehog concept is an honest appraisal of who we are and the situation we find ourselves in. These questions are what Collins calls the “Brutal Facts.” For example, I would guess that few educational developers have a permanent seat on their institution’s executive committee, few of our centers have an overabundance of personnel and money, and few of us have the institutional authority to mandate major policy changes. Beyond that, however, we all have our individual brutal facts to face. Data published in this journal, for example, revealed that 57.5% of the educational developers who responded to a recent survey worked in a center that had been integrated or combined with another support center. In total, 86.4% of the directors who worked in such a center reported that they oversaw more programs, 72.2% indicated that change had happened within the last five years, and 68.2% of them were managing

more personnel (Kelley et al., 2017, pp. 1–8). It is imperative, as educational development leaders, that we understand and face our facts. It is also imperative that we discuss them openly and honestly with our staff and with the people we report to. Collins states that good to great companies established a culture of honest, truthful communication, wherein “people have a tremendous opportunity to be heard and, ultimately, for the truth to be heard” (2001, p. 88).

This type of communication requires disciplined leadership. Collins found (to my great relief) that high profile leaders with oversized egos and celebrity personae were rarely good to great leaders. Instead, the most effective leaders (which he described as “Level 5 Leaders”) were described as “self effacing, quiet, reserved, even shy... a paradoxical blend of personal humility and professional will” (2001, pp. 12–13). Level 5 leaders are ambitious but seek the success of the organization before themselves. They strive for excellence and may even be fanatically driven toward success, but in a context of humility combined with a strong work ethic. Level 5 leaders stress enduring results and are willing to make difficult short term decisions to reach long range goals. It is in this context that honest communication, in all directions, can occur. It is through these open discussions that purposeful action can be established. The good to great companies were compared to companies in the same industries that faced the same challenges, from deregulation to foreign competition to technological disruption. Often, the difference between a great company and a good company was how they faced adversity. It sounds cliché, but the good to great companies met adversity head on, acknowledged the challenges, and emerged stronger. They were able to do this because they could communicate honestly about the challenges they faced. These companies understood the brutal facts facing their industries, but they also had absolute faith that they would prevail in the end. This has been a beacon of hope for me as our state has faced across the board budget cuts, declining high school populations, and the ever present technological disruption that is impacting almost everything in higher education.

*Best in the World at...*

What can my CTL be the best in the world at? This is the area of Collins’ framework where my staff and I have had the most energized debates. Is it appropriate to even ask this question? Are we not all part of larger institutions, and is cooperation, rather than competition, not the fabric of what we do? After all, my goal is not to put other CTLs out of business! Collins responds as follows: “A Hedgehog Concept is not a goal to be the best, a strategy to be the best, an intention to be the best, a plan to be the best. It is an *understanding* of what you *can* be the best at” (2001, p. 98, emphasis original). In the end, therefore, this idea is not about competition but of understanding the unique nature of each of our centers. We occupy a special place within our institutions and serve faculty in unique ways. As my staff and I have debated this question, it has also led to certain realizations about what we *cannot* be the best at. That has led us to deeper insights about what our strengths truly are and has helped us determine where to strategically focus.

To understand what one can be best at demands intentional assessment of one’s effectiveness. This requires an emphasis on outcomes based measures of assessment rather than outputs based measures (Chen, Kelley, & Haggard, 2013; Kelley, 2014). Outputs would be the measure, for example, of how many faculty attended developmental workshops. While it may be important to track this number for other purposes, it does not prove that the workshops were actually effective. Outcomes based assessment attempts to ask the question “what impact are we truly making?” If faculty attend workshops, for example, is there evidence that teaching or learning improved as a result? It is fiendishly difficult to draw a direct line between what we do and specific, measurable changes in instructor or student behavior. Collins encourages us to look beyond that difficulty:

It doesn’t really matter whether you can quantify your results. What matters is that you rigorously assemble evidence—quantitative or qualitative—to track your progress. If the evidence is primarily qualitative, think like a trial lawyer assembling the combined body of evidence. If the evidence is primarily quantitative, then think of yourself as a laboratory scientist assembling and assessing the data (2005, p. 7).

One element of our strategic planning process is the development of specific, measureable objectives that are related to key areas for which our center is responsible. The outcomes change from year to year as we shift our assessment focus, but the goal is always the same: to continue our growth toward excellence. The data provided through these measures allow us to energetically debate and develop new programs and policies (and eliminate ineffective ones) within the overall framework of our CTL's vision and core principles. These objectives then constitute the bulk of our CTL Annual Report. I have repeatedly seen the value of having evidence to support my claims of effectiveness and a story to frame that evidence. Internally, it helps us define our areas of strength—and, just as important, areas where we should no longer invest time and resources.

*Resources—The Economic Engine of the Social Sector*

What drives our resource engine? Collins focused on industry and business in his *Good to Great* case studies, and the original framework for his hedgehog concept used the question “What drives your economic engine?” In other words, what makes you the greatest amount of profit? However, that question does not work well for the social sector. A food bank, for example, might strive for excellence but would probably want to measure its effectiveness in terms of human impact rather than on dollars and cents. In fact, food banks generally do not exist to *make* money but rather to *use* money for a greater good. In the larger sense, our institutions do compete with each other for students. CTLs themselves, however, are rarely revenue producing centers. We do not produce teaching and learning widgets and thingamajigs that can be counted as profit and loss—we serve faculty. Our “economic engine” is not tied to what we produce but rather to something less tangible. In fact, our competition is not typically external, but rather internal, in the sense that we must fight for resources amongst other areas within our own institutions. Collins recognized this fact, and four years after *Good to Great*, he published a follow up monograph titled *Good to Great and the Social Sectors* (2005).

The most crucial element that Collins changed was the concept of “economic engine.” He states: “In business, money is both an input (a resource for achieving greatness) *and* an output (a measure of greatness). In the social sectors, money is *only* an input, and not a measure of greatness” (2005, p. 5). In other words, the goal of most CTLs is not to make as much money as possible but rather to have the greatest impact with the money we are given. We operate under a “resource engine” rather than an economic one. Our resources include our budget, facilities, time, and personnel. What drives our resource engine is typically a combination of reputation, perceived need, and documented impact. A CTL that has established a reputation for excellence, fulfills a perceived need, and is able to document impact is less likely to have its resources assigned to another campus entity. The question of “what drives our resource engine,” therefore, becomes a vital element of the hedgehog concept. As educational development leaders, we have to understand the broader picture as to why our centers are funded and deserve to be funded in the future.

*Passion*

What are we passionate about? The last question of Collins' hedgehog concept is one my staff most enjoys talking about. We are passionate about a lot of things, even when we limit the field of discussion to just educational development! But what are we *most* passionate about—to what can we devote fanatical adherence? Some folks are passionate about technology in the classroom, others about online learning, some are passionate about SoTL, others about assessment, and so on. The key is to triangulate that passion with the other elements of the hedgehog concept. If our passion is aligned with what we believe we can be best in the world at, and if it helps drive our resource engine, then it can produce powerful results. If our passion is not aligned within the hedgehog concept, however, we are unlikely to move from good to great. Passion is an important element of our strategic planning. The pursuit of programs or activities that we are not passionate about is self defeating. This is not to say that each of my staff members is passionate about everything we do (anyone up for more paperwork?) but rather that I place my staff in those areas that most closely align with what they are passionate about and that I hire staff who are passionate about the principles we have identified as our hedgehog concept.

*The Hedgehog in Action: Strategic Planning*

If you have a deep understanding about your brutal facts, what you can be best in the world at, what drives your resource engine, and what you are passionate about, you are ready to work on that crystalline idea that can be the One Thing for your center. Collins emphasizes that *work* is required. He found that the average good to great company took four years to figure out what its hedgehog concept would be. Developing such a concept is an iterative process, not something that can be determined in an afternoon workshop. It can also be a challenge in a world where we are often expected to “just take on one more responsibility.” Each summer, I host a strategic retreat for my staff. I find a room on campus outside of our “regular” haunts where we can get away from the office for two days. On the very first of these retreats, I introduced the elements of *Good to Great* to my staff, and we began debating what our hedgehog concept might be. During subsequent retreats, we have returned to this idea. We talk openly and honestly about our principles, how things have changed, and what new challenges and opportunities have developed. Currently, our hedgehog concept is that we “develop and support a community dedicated to excellent teaching and learning, regardless of location, formality, or modality.” We are passionate about each element of this concept; it is directly linked to how we receive resources, and we believe that developing community in a variety of educational situations is something at which we can excel. I am still not sure, however, that we have found the ultimate iteration of this concept—and perhaps that is part of its power. The struggle to define our core principle has been a vital activity for me and my staff. It has enabled us to (mostly) keep our CTL centered on the things that allow us to make the greatest impact. It is what Collins calls “Disciplined Action,” and it is what I aspire to in our strategic planning process.

Good to great institutions are able to combine a culture of discipline with an entrepreneurial spirit:

The good to great companies built a consistent system with clear constraints, but they also gave people freedom and responsibility within the framework of that system. They hired self disciplined people who didn’t need to be managed, and then managed the system, not the people (2001, p. 125).

I have found the combination of responsibility and freedom to be particularly potent during our strategic planning process. We know that we have a responsibility to stay true to our hedgehog concept, and yet, within that boundary, just about any idea is fair game. We try to think about our processes and services from a number of different perspectives, including the following [2][#N2]:

1. Programs, Curriculum, and Workshops
2. Participation and Event Marketing
3. Budget and Finances
4. Facilities and Equipment
5. Personnel
6. Improving the Quality of Faculty Life
7. Community Outreach, Impact Beyond Campus
8. Evaluation, Assessment, and Planning
9. Image Enhancement, Fund Raising

In each of those areas, we try to maintain fanatical adherence to our hedgehog concept. For example, are we offering programs that build community? How might a new hire fit into our commitment to excellent teaching and learning? Is our budget used in support of our core principles? As Sorcinelli and colleagues put it, “By considering what *should* happen and what *might* happen, we can more thoughtfully decide on the most desirable future for faculty development and then work to achieve it” (2006, p. 129, italics original). Part of discipline is a recognition that if we are adding programs or processes, we must also choose to stop doing other programs and processes. Therefore, we also look at each of these areas and ask “what should we eliminate, scale down, defund, or just say no to?” It takes discipline to say “no” to opportunities, and yet, opportunities that lay outside of our hedgehog concept are simply distractors, no matter how auspicious they may be.

## Flywheels (In Conclusion)

Schroeder's pivotal book on educational development, *Coming in from the Margins* (2011), noted the importance of developing vision: "Although center vision had not been predicted as one of the factors enabling institutional involvement ... the qualitative interviews with both the center directors and their supervisors consistently traced the director's vision of the center as the beginning point of creating a broader role" (p. 178). With that in mind, I will conclude as Collins did, with a final metaphor. A flywheel is a large, heavy wheel with a handle for spinning. The first time you spin the wheel, it takes a lot of effort and time. Each time you go around the circle, however, the wheel accelerates, and it becomes easier and easier to move the flywheel even more quickly. Soon, so much momentum is built up that it becomes difficult to *stop* the wheel. Collins' framework of good to great generates this type of energy. Disciplined people using disciplined thought to carry out disciplined action creates the flywheel effect. Decisions that support our hedgehog concept begin to produce visible results. These results energize my staff, who then contribute to further innovations that align even more closely with the hedgehog concept. The result is a gain in momentum that other people and departments notice. From the inside, however, the momentum will seem completely organic—simply a series of decisions reinforcing the One Thing that is *your* hedgehog concept.

I believe that the strategic planning processes informed by the hedgehog concept in *Good to Great* resonate so strongly with me simply because most of what I experience in life is good. The challenge is to take it to the next level—to turn good into great. Sorcinelli and colleagues conclude with both a statement and a question: "faculty development is a critically important lever for ensuring institutional excellence.... Will faculty development be a useful but marginal resource, or will it be conceptualized and organized in ways that make it central to institutional quality, health, and excellence...?" (2006, p. 175). The strategic planning process facilitated by Collins' framework has enabled me to position my center as a catalyst that has contributed measurably to institutional excellence. It is my One Thing.

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## Endnotes

1. This is a quote from my first department chair, Mark McCoy. He was a visionary, inspirational leader, and framed my leadership style as much as any written text. He is the one who introduced me to *Good to Great* and the strategic planning process. He is currently President of DePauw University.\*. [#N1-pt1]

2. This is modified from a strategic planning process developed by Mark McCoy.✱[\[#N2-pt1\]](#)

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