

From Good to Great in Safety

What does it take to be world class?

By E. Scott Geller

RECENTLY, THE CEO of a leading chemical company told the author 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 that provocative question by critically analyzing conclusions reported in Jim Collins’s national best-seller *Good to Great*. Collins and his research team studied 11 companies that progressed from being good to being great, generating cumulative stock returns that averaged 7 times higher than the general stock market. These 11 “great” companies sustained this level of excellence for at least 15 years. Collins does not mention safety in his evaluation of good versus great companies, although the link between profit and safety performance is obvious.

By systematically comparing these great companies with a carefully selected set of 11 companies that maintained good productivity and profits for at least 15 years, yet never made the leap from good to great, Collins and his research team discovered several common qualities among the great companies not consistently observed at the comparison companies. These attributes reflect possible characteristics of “world-class safety,” and imply ways to achieve this level of performance excellence. The special feature of good-to-great companies (as concluded by Collins and his research team) are reviewed, followed by a discussion of the relevance of these conclusions to industrial safety along with some caveats and possible fallacies.

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” (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 that “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” (56). The best performers are motivated by the intrinsic or natural consequences of their jobs. If people do not find such satisfaction in their work, it is 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’s research team.

Put People in the Right Positions

Once the right people are on the bus, each person must be placed in the right seat. 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 or needs to get off the bus altogether. Such decisions require ongoing assessment through behavioral observa-

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tion, as well as interpersonal conversation and coaching. These are key tools of behavior-based safety [Geller(c); Krause, et al; McSween].

When people perform work that matches their talent and interest, they receive intrinsic or natural gratification from that work. Collins's research team found no impact of financial compensation on whether a company shifts from good to great. The team 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" (64).

Confront Brutal Facts through Open Communication

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uous learning to uncover and report the objective facts of current reality. Management sets the tone for open communication in the workplace. For example, a climate of truth telling is created in part by supervisors leading with questions, not answers, and seeking facts, not fault.

Collins claims "one of the primary ways to demotivate people is to ignore the brutal facts of reality" (89). According to his research, the great companies deal with as much adversity as the comparison companies. The difference is the great companies uncover the brutal facts of the situation and confront them—and as a result, they emerge from their troubles stronger than before.

Relevance to Occupational Safety

Are these special qualities of great companies relevant to defining a world-class safety organization? Perhaps, but bear in mind the focus is the qualities of an ideal total safety culture. These qualities reflect safety ideals toward which companies should aspire. Rarely 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 workforce discusses freely and openly, without embarrassment, all injuries (minor and major) as well as near-hits. The workers realize that only through such open discussion can the environmental, behav-

ioral and cultural factors contributing to these mishaps be identified and removed or corrected. Facing such adversity head-on results in a workforce 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 is certainly possible that 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, then engage in open, frank conversation with individuals whose at-risk behaviors suggest they are not prepared or appropriate for a particular task.

To achieve world-class 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 this issue is addressed in a person's tenure with a company, the better.

Safety organizations aspiring to be world class deliver specific safety-related expectations during worker orientation. New workers are observed carefully during this time 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, frank conversation with an appropriate supervisor. If they choose to stay on the bus, the workers develop detailed corrective action plans in which they commit to certain behavior change and specify any peer or management support they need in order to make this happen [Geller(a); (b); Grote].

The Hedgehog Concept

To illustrate the simple, organized focus of the great companies, Collins contrasts the hedgehog with the fox. The fox looks like a winner by being crafty, quick, sleek and 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, while 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.

The good-to-great companies did the latter, which Collins and his research team label the "Hedgehog Concept." Specifically, the world-class companies have a profound understanding of the answers to these three questions that provide both 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?
- 3) What are we deeply passionate about?

This concept is reminiscent of the "constancy of purpose" principle advocated by Deming. The great companies discriminate between: a) what they can and cannot do best; b) what is and is not profitable

for them; and c) what they are and are not passionate about. These discriminations define their mission, and fuel their goal-setting and action plans. Behavior inconsistent with this purpose is avoided.

Relevance to Occupational Safety

World-class safety organizations maintain 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. These companies also realize the direct correlation between their financial profits 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 shopfloor.

A Culture of Discipline

Maintaining these principles and constancy of purpose requires a culture of discipline. However, the meaning of discipline here is not punishment. In fact, a consistent distinction between the 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 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" (Collins 42).

For a world-class organization, an application of the hedgehog concept defines a consistent system with a clear mission as well as constraints. To ensure safety, these constraints include detailed prescriptive operating procedures that must be followed. Even within a highly developed structure, employers have opportunities to choose safe or at-risk behavior, especially when working alone. Thus, world-class workers are responsible and self-disciplined. This goes back to an underlying challenge and a key point of Collins's research—"getting self-disciplined people on the bus in the first place" (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. 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 prevents us from being the best?"

Being world class in safety means dropping policies, programs and slogans that do not contribute to safety excellence. For example, some organizations maintain an outcome-based safety incentive system that rewards a reactive mindset and stifles the reporting and discussion of close calls and minor injuries,

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thereby detracting from proactive involvement in injury prevention. Yet, even when the disadvantages of such an approach are realized, it can be difficult to gain the support needed to drop or alter these programs. Expect people to resist dropping a program that provides financial incentives without specific accountability for personal effort.

While special safety efforts often begin with great participation and optimism, many fizzle over time. Obviously, such drifting detracts from world-class performance. If these programs cannot be re-energized or refined to get back on track, they should be dropped.

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

Analogously, the world-class safety organization promotes success seeking rather than failure avoiding by putting more focus on the daily proactive things people do to prevent injuries than on the injuries themselves. Such an organization defines its safety excellence by the various safety-related activities accomplished each day to prevent mishaps—

from identifying and/or removing hazards to showing coworkers how to perform a task more safely. This puts the focus of a safety evaluation on what people do proactively for injury prevention rather than on reactive, failure-focused outcome statistics such as total recordable injury rates and workers' 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 and Weiss; Judge, et al). People who do not believe they are applying their talents effectively for important work are neither self-accountable nor intrinsically motivated. They cannot be their best and this can detract from the achievement of world-class performance 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 to 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 studied do not use incentives, motivational talks, layoffs, compensation systems or restructuring to achieve world-class performance. In Collins's words, "the good-to-great companies paid scant attention to managing change, motivating people or creating alignment" (11).

Instead, the great companies studied 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" (64).

Selection Versus Intervention

Collins put the onus on selection rather than intervention. That is, greatness is more about selecting the right people than it is about teaching and motivating the right behavior. This perspective runs counter to much teaching and research on the human dynamics of injury prevention, especially scholarship on behavior-based and people-based safety [Geller(b); (c); Krause, et al; McSween; Petersen). Actually, the entire discipline of applied psychology places more focus on improving people's performance than on finding the best people to perform (Aamodt; Gilmer; Oskamp and Schultz).

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 difficult to use with an existing workforce. Furthermore, even when a selection device provides valid information, it is often 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 professes 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, then drives the bus to the right locations. They help people apply their talents effectively and realize self-accountability and self-motivation.

The following seven qualities distinguish the leadership of the good-to-great organizations from that of the comparison companies. While these attributes seem to define characteristics of the best safety leaders, some have not been included in contemporary presentations on "safety leadership."

Quality 1: Manifest Personal Humility or Compelling Modesty

This leadership quality receives priority attention from Collins. 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 company's reputation. The "good-to-great leaders never wanted to become larger-than-life heroes"; rather they "were seemingly ordinary people quietly producing extraordinary results" (Collins 28).

Quality 2: Project Success Beyond Self

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

Quality 3: Accept Responsibility for Failure

While spreading success beyond themselves, the world-class 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 found that the leaders of the comparison companies often blame others for lackluster performance, while taking personal credit for extraordinary results. Social psychologists call this the "self-serving bias" (Miller and Ross).

Quality 4: Promote a Learning Culture

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

As a result, people are not satisfied with the status quo. Instead, they 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.

Quality 5: Work to Achieve, Not to Avoid Failure

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

At the same time, these leaders adhere fervently to the Hedgehog Concept. Essentially, this means identifying what they can do best, what they feel passionate about and what is profitable. They attend to their envisioned enterprise with fanatical consistency and a disciplined constancy of purpose (Deming).

Quality 6: Be Rigorous Rather than Ruthless

When making decisions about people, world-class leaders are rigorous, not ruthless. For example, in contrast to the comparison companies, the leaders of the good-to-great organizations did not use restructuring and indiscriminate layoffs to improve performance or profits. However, they remained consistent and rigorous in their people decisions, meaning they made discriminating personnel decisions based on individual talents and interests.

Great leaders do not keep hiring personnel until they are sure they have found the right person. And, if observations suggest a need to change personnel, they act quickly. This could mean changing a person's seat on the bus or asking someone to get off the bus.

However, Collins offers no suggestions for making the valid personnel selection decisions needed for a world-class organization. A critical caveat is that valid selection devices are not readily available, other than behavioral checklists for job performance.

Quality 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? When people believe their work is meaningful. When does this happen? Sometimes, the special value of the effort is obvious, as when people are engaged in activities that prevent injuries. Even in these cases, however, it is critical to provide the interpersonal attention which reassures people that they are accomplishing

meaningful work (Blanchard and Bowles). World-class leaders know how to do this well and do it often.

This final quality is most relevant to safety because it defines a primary source of motivation for safety leaders. Specifically, working for safety is meaningful work that fuels self-motivation. In this regard, 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" (210). Safety leaders do meaningful work and, therefore, have meaningful lives.

A Total Safety Culture

Reviewers of early drafts of this article suggested the good-to-great qualities defined by Collins are not specific enough to provide clear direction for achieving world-class performance, especially with regard to safety. Indeed, the concept of safety or injury prevention is not even mentioned in his book.

Consequently, this article has attempted to relate the qualities that define a good-to-great company in terms of production and profit with characteristics of an organization presumed to be world class in terms of safety. Clearly, the parallels between Collins's good-to-great companies and expectations for world-class performance in safety are imperfect. They need more specificity before they can activate the development of safety-related action plans.

A total safety culture (another term for world class) has been defined as a culture in which people:

- 1) hold safety as a value;
- 2) feel a sense of personal responsibility for the safety of their coworkers as well as themselves;
- 3) are willing and able to act on the sense of responsibility they feel. They "actively care" [Geller(c)].

This definition is still rather ambiguous in terms of a prescription for action. Therefore, in workshops for supervisors and line workers, the author's colleagues ask participants to list specific components of a total safety culture. Common responses follow. Each reflects workers' perceptions of world-class safety and suggests the application of a particular action plan. Most of these link directly to the general qualities discussed earlier.

- All employees comply with safety rules and regulations at all times.

Seven Qualities of Good-to-Great Company Leaders

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

Quality 1: Manifest personal humility or compelling modesty

Quality 2: Project success beyond self

Quality 3: Accept responsibility for failure

Quality 4: Promote a learning culture

Quality 5: Work to achieve, not to avoid failure

Quality 6: Be rigorous rather than ruthless

Quality 7: Encourage self-motivation for meaningful work

A total safety culture (another term for world class) has been defined as a culture in which people: 1) hold safety as a value; 2) feel a sense of personal responsibility for the safety of their coworkers as well as themselves; 3) are willing and able to act on the sense of responsibility they feel.

- Employees continuously search for safety hazards and take personal initiative to correct these hazards when found.

- Line workers are eager to participate in safety-related activities, and participation in all safety-related activities is promoted and encouraged through respect and positive recognition.

- All safety-related issues are openly communicated and are not inhibited by fear of reprimand or negative discipline.

- Safety-related incidents are viewed as an opportunity to identify overall system failures and, therefore, improve the system and, thus, individuals are rarely found to be at fault.

- Education and training programs teach employees the needed knowledge, skills and abilities to perform their jobs safely.

- All employees fully understand and appreciate the potential hazards of the operations performed.

- Employees do not consider taking any unnecessary risks.

- Managers never (knowingly or mindlessly) encourage employees to take unnecessary risks.

- Regular behavior-based feedback on safety matters is a way of life, and corrective feedback is constructive and appreciated.

- Peer pressure acts toward, rather than against, safety and is actually peer support (Perdue).

Conclusion

This article has explored what it takes to be world class in occupational safety. The stringent criteria were gleaned from a best-selling book that stipulated the qualities of 11 elite companies which made the leap from good to great results—and sustained those results for at least 15 years. Key qualities of these organizations include the following:

- 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.
- 6) Maintain a constancy of purpose.

For world-class safety performance, these criteria imply a need for open, frank, fact-finding conversations about all safety-related incidents—from near-

hits 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 desired behaviors of relevant jobs. When an employee's behavior does not meet the specific expectations, a corrective action plan is implemented that includes candid conversation and a personal commitment to improve or change jobs.

Great leaders bring out the best in people. They show people the intrinsic consequences of their meaningful work, thereby inspiring them to be self-accountable. To do this, they: 1) are humble; 2) acknowledge the contributions of others; 3) accept personal responsibility for failure; 4) promote a learning culture; 5) demonstrate optimistic success-seeking over pessimistic failure-avoiding; 6) make rigorous and discriminating, rather than ruthless and indiscriminate, personnel decisions; and 7) encourage self-motivation. ■

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