

Was Jesus a "level 5 leader"?

Five Questions for Good to Great author Jim Collins

by Helen Lee, guest contributor

In the ongoing search for leadership skills, many church leaders have recently read *Good to Great* by Jim Collins. It's become popular fodder for board meetings, leadership conferences, and D.Min. seminars. One church renamed their newsletter *The Hedgehog News* to elevate Collins's concept of focusing on one thing, doing it well, and defending it fearlessly. His depiction of the "level 5 leader," who is both humble and strongly intentional, seems especially Christ-like, but Collins himself is not a Christian. Recently, *Leadership Journal* posed 5 Questions for Jim Collins.

Like business executives and strategists, pastors and church leaders everywhere are reading Good to Great, Jim Collins's bestselling account of eleven dramatic business turnarounds and the CEOs who engineered them. Collins, a former professor at Stanford Business School and founder of his own management research laboratory, had already become well-known in management circles for his first book, Built to Last (HarperCollins, 1994). But with Good to Great (HarperCollins, 2001), he became an even more established name in the Christian business world—quite an accomplishment given that Collins has no affiliation with Christianity.

Many of his findings resonated with the Christian audience, however, particularly the concept of Level 5 Leadership.

Collins and his research team discovered that leaders who took their companies from good to great were not larger-than-life figures that typify today's celebrity CEO culture, but instead were characterized by a unique blend of humility and resolve. As Collins explains in his book, "Level 5 leaders channel their ego needs away from themselves and into the larger goal of building a great company."

Collins spoke about his findings with former Christianity Today assistant editor Helen Lee.

Lee: *Good to Great has struck a nerve with Christian leaders, who have latched on to your concept of Level 5 Leadership. Were you surprised by what your results showed about leadership?*

Collins: *I am delighted that so many people in the Christian community resonate with the Level 5 concept. They probably feel tension between the brutal competitiveness of the outside world and their inner faith and being a type of person that the New Testament calls you to be. If you thought you had to be an anti-level 5 to be successful, but now you find this evidence that your instincts were right all along, that can be powerful.*

I should point out that we were not looking for Level 5. This is very important. I really dislike leadership answers, I'm biased against them, and I didn't want to write about leadership. I certainly wasn't looking for leaders like this. Our findings were a complete shock, and to see that these were the distinguishing type of leaders was out of left field and remarkable.

The kind of leaders who took companies from good to great match up with the findings of the great leaders of the world religions. That gives it so much power. It would be one thing if I came from that point of view to begin with. But I didn't believe this would be true, and yet the evidence led us to it. In the big picture, it makes sense. You would hope that in some rational way that the universe works, the findings would map with the teachings of great world religions. But I see that now in retrospect. Therefore, as a result, I'm that much more influenced by the findings.

How do Good to Great companies treat their employees?

We came across a number of paradoxical findings. Clearly the notion of people came first, but not in the way you normally think about it. We learned that people are not the most critical asset. The right people are. So much so that great companies will put picking the right people ahead of picking the right strategy. Secondly, these Good to Great leaders were in service to their company, not to their people. This is a different idea from servant leadership.

So these great companies were bipolar—they were great places to work for the right people. But they were terrible places for the wrong people. Great company leaders didn't see it as their objective to make it a great place to work. There was an absence of motivational programs. That's because they had the right people: those who wanted to be part of an environment that succeeds and wins, and whose values connected with the values of the institution.

It's one of the most demeaning, barbaric things to think of human beings as a lump of inert coal that can be fired on with a ray gun called motivation. Great companies find people who are intrinsically self-motivated. If they're only motivated because someone motivated them, they're the wrong people. The key in management is not to de-motivate people who are motivated.

Motivation is not the same as affirmation, however. I have wonderful people here who don't need motivation. But I like to affirm them when I can. Still, have you ever had a great professor who didn't affirm but for whom you worked your butt off? People want to be in an environment with the highest standard; it inspires them. Being someplace where you can feel proud of your organization is inspiring.

So, what really makes a place the right place to work? First, the values. Second, the people who connect with those values, and then third—that the model and system and all the work produce real results.

What trends did you notice in Good to Great companies' treatment of employees?

First of all, there's no evidence that a company has to have concern for its employees as a core value. There are a number of inherently great companies that didn't have this. I don't think Walt Disney cared about his people. He cared about films, and Disneyland, and smiles of kids. On the other side, with Hewlett-Packard and IBM, you had the antithesis of Walt Disney. When you look at corporate history, what matters is not what core values you have but that you have core values. And that you believe them.

There are two sides to that coin. If you don't have concern for employees as a core value, don't say that you do. That will cause more harm. Fundamentally, if your value

system is the mission, then be honest about it and pursue it fanatically. The other side of the coin is equally important: there's no evidence that you're at a competitive disadvantage if you do have a tremendous concern for your people. You can have a great company having that as a core value. So the real question is, what are your company values? Live them fanatically.

What are the typical barriers to becoming a Level 5 leader?

The question regarding Level 5 is which side is harder for you? The humility or the will? The magic of Level 5 is the combination of the two, not just one or the other. One side is usually harder for people than the other. Sometimes it takes brutally hard decisions to be Level 5. What if Abraham Lincoln could not stomach the consequences of his being Level 5, which was to endure five years of the bloodiest conflict so that our nation could live? Would you do whatever is needed for the cause?

If your struggle is on humility side, have people track your questions-to-statements ratio. You should see that ratio go up over time. Another thing is to really practice the discipline of the window and the mirror. Give credit to people outside the window and look at the mirror when things go wrong. As for the will: when you come to a fork in the road, one side is about being comfortable, and the other is about the cause, or the mission, or the work. You know that the best thing for the cause is to go one way, but the more comfortable decision for you is to step right. The key is to try to keep increasing your tendency to step left.

Has writing this book had any impact on you?

*The book changed me more than *Built to Last*. On every dimension, it changed me. I find Level 5 challenging for me. The standard is enormously compelling. And for me the "who" question is now the most significant. I think about it whenever I make decisions, whether it's who to hire or who to have renovate my kitchen. It's all about "who."*

I have absolutely no religious background at all, which gives me more confidence in the findings. If I had come from a strong religious background, I'd be more suspicious. After the book came out, I kept hearing people say to me, "There was this ultimate Level 5 leader who lived 2,000 years ago. The things he talked about in the Gospels have great compatibility with what you say." Of course I had heard about Jesus, but as a result of finding out about Level 5, I was inspired to begin reading the New Testament to see for myself.