Jim Collins: Even nonprofits should seek to be great

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Jim Collins did not write “Good to Great” with the nonprofit community in mind.

But in the years that followed its publication in 2001, almost half of the letters, questions and invitations to speak that Collins received came from the nonprofit sector. One of those invitations came from The Bridgespan Group, a nonprofit organization that offers consulting services to nonprofit organizations and philanthropists. And speaking to them in 2006, Collins shared this realization:

“If all we have is great companies, then we will merely have a prosperous country. But a prosperous country is not necessarily a great nation. A great nation is also made up of great schools, orchestras, police departments and religious institutions.”

That insight inspired Collins to write “Good to Great and the Social Sectors,” taking the guiding principles found in his seminal business work and translating them for the similar environment – yet very different language – of the nonprofit community.

One key difference: What greatness looks like. In the corporate world, success is measured by profits. But as Collins noted, “There is no one underlying economic driver that applies across all social sector organizations. The whole purpose of the social sectors is to meet social objectives, human needs, and national priorities that cannot be priced at a profit.”

That is one reason why the team at DANA has worked for the past couple of years to get Jim Collins to come to Delaware, and why the “Good to Great” philosophy is the guiding focus for our programming in the first half of this year, culminating in Collins speaking at our Annual Conference at the Chase Center on the Riverfront on June 15.

As Collins came to understand, nonprofits are vitally important to our cities, our states and our nation – and if these organizations can collectively move from “good” to “great” in Delaware, the impact on those social objectives and human needs of our community will vastly improve. All Delawareans will benefit.

Several nonprofit leaders and boards are now going through intensive “Good to Great” strategic planning in a fellowship program that includes a small group “Socratic session” with Collins before the conference.

In addition, over the last few months, we scheduled a number of “Circles of Greatness” discussion forums to provoke thought and reflection among nonprofit staffs, leaders and boards. In particular, answering the three critical questions outlined by Collins: “What are you deeply passionate about (defined as core values and mission)? What can you be best in the world at (defined as your unique contribution)? What drives your resource engine (defined as time, money, and brand)?”

Aligning the answers to those questions can be a daunting and time-consuming exercise – especially for an
organization that has been in existence for some time and therefore is experiencing some sort of institutional momentum, good or bad. And those questions, when you start to drill down, can lead to even tougher questions about why you are doing some of the things you are doing – and, potentially, what are the things you should stop doing.

But that is really the point – invoking a deliberate process of inquiry to help focus the organization on what’s most important because, as Collins emphatically states, it is disciplined people with disciplined thought and disciplined action that leads organizations to exciting breakthroughs…and beyond.

Our goal in all of this has been to be a catalyst and stimulate this type of self-evaluation and self-improvement – and in many ways, we’re already seeing evidence of it happening among our member organizations. Whether it’s hearing them use the language of “hedgehogs” and “flywheels” in elevator conversations in the Community Services Building or reports from impromptu good-to-great roundtable meetings – like one that happened when our friends at OperaDelaware and the Delaware Shakespeare Festival met to compare notes and ideas about how to move their respective organizations toward greatness – it is clear the ripple effects of our proverbial pebble are beginning to make their way through the sector.

But it doesn’t end there. I hope many of you will also find value in joining the conversation and being part of our process. Our annual conference is open to all, regardless of what sector you work in – nonprofit, for-profit, or government and all that is required is a genuine desire to define your own path to greatness and, of course, a commitment to never get too comfortable with whatever success you attain because, as Collins emphatically states:

“The moment you think of yourself as great, your slide toward mediocrity will have already begun.”

Author Jim Collins speaks Monday at the Delaware Alliance for Nonprofit Advancement (DANA) annual conference at the Chase Center on the Riverfront in Wilmington. For more information, visit: www.DelawareNonprofit.org