

A Conversation With Jim Collins

Jim Collins, the best-selling author behind the landmark 2001 work on management *Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap...And Others Don't*, has long held an affinity for the work of K-12 educators. One school leader who latched on early to the value of Collins' ideas for his own purposes was Larry Nyland, who spent 27 years in the superintendency and 48 years as an education professional.

When Collins earlier this year published his latest work, *Turning the Flywheel*, as a 40-page monograph to accompany *Good to Great*, we turned to Nyland, who retired in 2018 after four years as superintendent in Seattle, Wash., to conduct an extended interview with the author.

What follows appears as a conversation between the two on the application of Collins' work but also

A veteran superintendent engages the best-selling author on applying the relevant ideas in his newest work, *Turning the Flywheel*

demonstrates the latter's genuine attempts to better understand the demands on those leading elementary and secondary education in the United States today.

This article has been edited for clarity and length. A full transcript of the one-hour conversation between Collins and Nyland is published on the magazine's website at <http://bit.ly/AASA-Nyland-Collins-conversation>.

LARRY NYLAND: Thanks for talking with AASA about your new monograph, *Turning the Flywheel*. In earlier interviews, you have noted your appreciation that some things are more difficult to control in public education.

JIM COLLINS: Building a great school is hands down harder than building a great company. I'll share what I have learned about great enterprises. But I'm in no way telling you how to run schools. I'm very sensitive; I don't want to overstep the bounds of my expertise. I haven't been a superintendent or run a school.

NYLAND: I appreciate that.

COLLINS: I have a great passion for K-12 education. As a kid, you don't get to decide where you're born or grow up. The only acceptable end game is that, a random sample of all 18-year-old kids in this country

would show no statistically significant difference in outcomes by zip code.

NYLAND: Exactly.

COLLINS: I'm curious, is job one to get the kids the best education they can or to put more emphasis on fixing the socioeconomic context first?

NYLAND: Well, fixing the societal problems first would give us a much better opportunity to impact student learning. But I've put my efforts into what I can best influence, which is the K-12 environment.

Preschool does some of both. It changes the environment during those first few years of a student's life when the brain is most malleable and has lifelong benefits. In Seattle, we were fortunate to win public voter support for universal preschool.

An Education Focus

NYLAND: How would you like *Turning the Flywheel* to influence educational leaders?

COLLINS: People began to say the *Good to Great* principles apply outside of business. We found that a third to a half of our readers came from nonbusiness. So we wrote the monograph *Good to Great in the Social Sectors* in 2005.

NYLAND: And this new monograph, *Turning the Flywheel*, has some deeper roots in education?

COLLINS: Yes, I got involved in a study on K-12 education. One of the things that really stood out was the idea of getting a consistent approach rather than a new silver bullet every three years. I noticed that superintendents and principals were building flywheels. They were looking to find something that's going to work over time to build flywheel momentum. That K-12 study was part of what convinced me the flywheel idea should be out there. And, maybe more schools could grab that and use it.

NYLAND: Your books, *Good to Great* and others, have sparked tremendous interest among K-12 leaders. Why the focus on *Turning the Flywheel* and why now?



Larry Nyland has seen the impact of Jim Collins' ideas on educators over his 27 years as a superintendent in multiple school systems.

COLLINS: When you build a great enterprise, what often looks like a dramatic turnaround from the outside isn't how it happened on the inside. The way it happened on the inside is the flywheel effect, building momentum, turn by turn. It is like turning a giant, heavy flywheel in a consistent direction that accumulates over time.

A consistent approach that you compound and get better and better at over time is the only way a really good to great transition happens in our research. It only looks like an instantaneous breakthrough.

NYLAND: So success starts with the steady improvement of the things we do best. You have been working for some time helping organizations apply those ideas.

COLLINS: What I learned from the engagement with Amazon was how they took the flywheel principle and made it their own. You have to get clear on how you build your own specific flywheel. When you get clear on understanding how your flywheel turns, it can be enormously powerful.

Different types of organizations, both for-profit and not-for-profit, began to say, "You need to share this, it's really been helpful to us." So I

created the flywheel monograph to deepen understanding around that.

Speeding Up Transformation

NYLAND: *Turning the Flywheel* is a great book. I've purchased copies to give away.

Does the flywheel principle speed up the four-year transformation process you mention in earlier books?

COLLINS: What I found is that working on the flywheel does increase the momentum of building better and better results. It's like a puzzle. Where does the flywheel start? And if we really did that well, what would be the next inevitable consequence?

If you get the flywheel turning, you might more quickly get to the inside of the hedgehog — the one thing that we can become the best at — in serving our children in our community. The hedgehog could be very localized ... something like getting students safely to and from school.

NYLAND: So the transformation process often starts with the flywheel?

COLLINS: Yes, the flywheel is grounded in the idea of what really works. The flywheel is not an aspiration. It's meant to reflect the real

drivers of momentum. And the linkages, why certain things drive other things. By working at that level, it leads back to a deeper understanding of the hedgehog.

NYLAND: How would you help school leaders sketch out a flywheel to take their school district from good to great?

COLLINS: The most important thing about the flywheel principle is to pick a good answer and then make it a great result over time. The flywheel is about, ultimately, scaling and replicating and doing better at what works.

Chronic inconsistency is oppressive. If people think this isn't going to last, they don't get behind the wheel that you're trying to build.

So stop doing a new initiative every three years. Far better to pick something that's going to work that's reasonably good, if imperfect, and then really build it over time.

Success at Ware Elementary

NYLAND: You provide a great education example in *Turning the Flywheel*. Ware Elementary School in Fort Riley, Kan., is a true success story. They improved student proficiency in reading from 35 percent to 96 percent over five years. How did they do that?

COLLINS: The really critical thing is to look inside — with teachers and principal input — to find actual successes to build upon.

Deb Gustafson, the principal of Ware Elementary, had to confront a practical reality. There was a very limited pipeline of experienced teachers to draw upon at a military base in rural Kansas. And they turned over a fair amount.

What did work was to accelerate their experience. She learned from practical experience that young, passionate and collaborative teachers could very quickly integrate into their system. Her starting point was selecting teachers infused with passion.

And, then, they're going to want to do well ... to learn what really works. That leads to collaborative improve-

ment teams. But the collaborative improvement teams weren't theoretical. They were practical. They worked.

You start with evidence of what actually works. The foundation is actual and practical. This worked, that didn't. And, then, doing a lot more of what actually works and less of what doesn't work in a consistent reinforcing loop.

(See Deb Gustafson's article about her flywheel use on page 39.)

NYLAND: That's very concrete advice for us. Find a few things that work and keep making them better.

COLLINS: Exactly. And making the linkages between each step in the flywheel. You need to really understand why the next step is almost inevitable.

You don't want to have a list of things and just draw them as a circle. That's a big mistake. No one can build the flywheel for you. You have to figure it out for yourself. You only have a flywheel if each step drives the next. Then it becomes infectious; it's got real momentum.

NYLAND: The example from the principal at Ware is great. Passionate teachers in collaborative groups with good assessments create better results



Jim Collins found a significant application of his flywheel idea in use at an improving elementary school in Fort Riley, Kan.

for students. And then, that positive reputation attracts more passionate teachers.

COLLINS: Exactly. Her great challenge is creating a reputation that will bring in more passionate teachers, feed that pipeline and bring us back to the top of the loop.

Transformational Leadership

NYLAND: How do we grow and equip transformational leaders to build their own flywheels?

COLLINS: As a superintendent, you must have had this question. You want great results for kids — great teachers, well led. How did you get great leaders? Did you build them, find them? What worked best?

NYLAND: I wish I had had the kind of flywheel you describe during my time in Seattle. It would have taken us further faster.

For teachers, we were very clear on what a high-quality teacher was, how they were hired, how they were brought on board, how we aligned all of the parts of the system to grow and develop quality teachers. For principals, we created a strong internal pipeline that prepared principal candidates in advance to be strong instructional leaders. And all principals participated on collaborative teams — principal leadership networks — similar to what Deb Gustafson talks about for teachers.

COLLINS: That's interesting. I do think we can grow level five leaders, transformational leaders who are able to take their organizations from good to great.

Education has a lot of level five raw material. You don't go into education unless you are in service of something far beyond yourself. And although it comes with difficult challenges, it also comes with great personal rewards. You do this because there's an underlying belief in equipping students to be citizens of the world.

NYLAND: What have you learned about how best to grow transformational leaders?

COLLINS: It starts with a sense of responsibility for what has to be done right here, right now. Deb Gustafson is looking at kids with urgency. She has students right there in front of her. She has to do something. She can't wait for someone else to fix it. Someone has to take responsibility for what must be done and get others involved.

Leadership is an art, according to President Eisenhower — the art of getting people to want to do what needs to be done. It begins by saying, “This has to be done. I’m going to take responsibility and do what I can.”

NYLAND: So leadership initiative — taking responsibility to do something — is essential?

COLLINS: Yes, and the second thing is a constant interplay between developing themselves as a leader, really taking care of their people and working with people to build the pieces of a great enterprise.

They focus on making their minibus a pocket of greatness. How am I going to do that? I focus on caring for my teachers. I make decisions about who gets to be on this minibus.

And, then, with those people, I engage in disciplined thought about what really turns our flywheel. What can we truly be distinct about that our community really values and needs?

Confronting Brutal Facts

NYLAND: How do you know where to start?

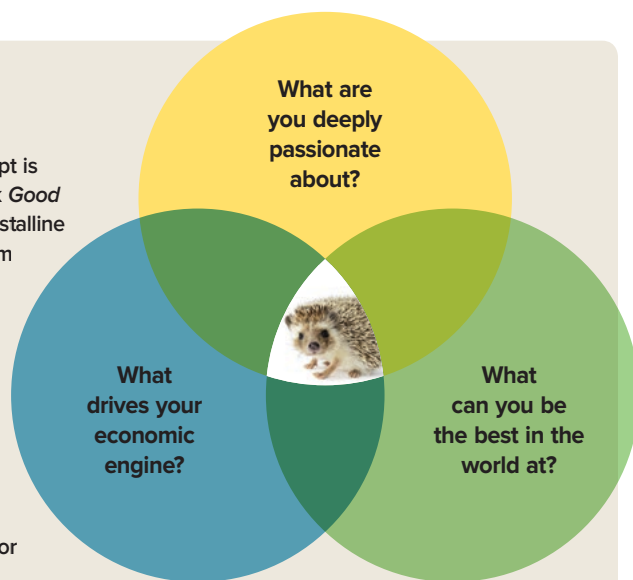
COLLINS: You ignite change first by confronting brutal facts. We have to have brutal clarity about what we can actually influence and what we can't.

I'm not going to change the secretary of education, the state legislature or the state budget. But I can influence what's going on in the classroom, in our buildings, in our district. What are the things we can do something about? Let's put all our energies into that, a simple list. These are things we can do something about. These are things we can't.

That's transformational in itself. The stuff you can't change is like a

The Hedgehog Concept

The Hedgehog Concept is developed in the book *Good to Great*. A simple, crystalline concept that flows from deep understanding about the intersection of three circles: (1) what you are deeply passionate about, (2) what you can be the best in the world at, and (3) what best drives your economic or resource engine.



black hole, it just draws everybody in. But the other side of the coin are the things we can influence. That's a powerful question. What can we do? Let's focus on that.

Learning by Doing

NYLAND: What else do leaders need to do?

COLLINS: First, get the flywheel turning. You build momentum over time. I'm a big believer in the 20-mile march. Some very consistent thing that you're going to do, like walking across the United States. No matter what the weather conditions, I'm going to do 20 miles a day.

The 20-mile march gives you a sense of consistency and control in a world that's out of control. That gives us a heartbeat, a way to move consistently forward.

NYLAND: So turning the flywheel and leadership development go hand-in-hand, each reinforcing the other?

COLLINS: Yes, the *Good to Great* framework begins with level five leadership. But really, it's all these practical things: taking care of your people, confronting the brutal facts, finding a hedgehog, turning the flywheel, going on the 20-mile march.

By doing the things level five leaders do, you become more like a level

five leader. Doing actual practical stuff helps you evolve as a leader.

NYLAND: That is encouraging and doable. The metaphor that comes to mind is a staircase where you do the things you just described at the bottom of the staircase and get something small started. Then, you climb the staircase to figure out which of the *Good to Great* concepts are next.

COLLINS: Climbing is a great way to think about it.

I'm an avocational mountain climber. In climbing it is a constant feedback loop. You have to systematically break down and eradicate weaknesses. And, then you're going to find new weaknesses. You have to step up to another tier of ability. It's a layering process — very workmanlike.

It's a great paradox. Doing something transformational is very workmanlike. Level-five leaders are very comfortable being workmanlike.

NYLAND: Those are great ways to keep growing our transformational skills. Breaking down weaknesses seems to be one of our critical challenges. If we're not making mistakes — confronting our weaknesses — we're not learning. Making that shift from knowing to learning is essential.

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Our Simple Flywheel Spins Off Major Gains

BY DEBRA M. GUSTAFSON

If I can successfully frame the problem, I am more likely to find the best solution. *Good to Great* by Jim Collins and his model of a flywheel helped me do that.

The Challenge: I was assigned to serve as principal of a 1,000-student elementary school situated in the middle of a military installation in Kansas. The school had been placed on state-sanctioned school improvement status. Union complaints, low teacher morale, divided leadership, duplicated suspensions, disruptive discipline challenges and high student and teacher mobility were the major symptoms.

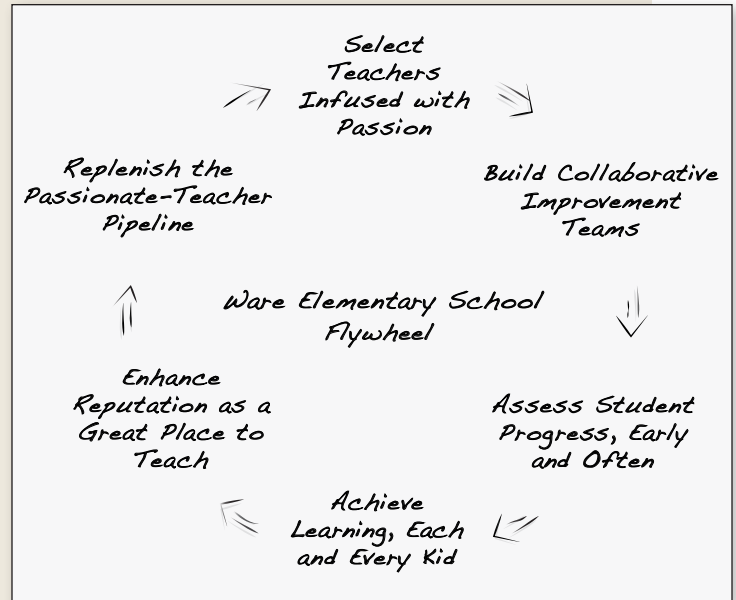
Most devastating was the extremely low student performance. With fewer than 40 percent of the students on grade level in reading or math, I recognized the urgency for improvement.

The Opportunity: With 10 years of principal experience, I knew one thing for certain: Every kid deserves a great education every year.

In the absence of a leadership team, I created a five-year improvement plan that included reviewing hiring practices, establishing a non-negotiable environment of respect and developing a system of academic accountability. But these provisions lacked an overall structure for becoming a turnaround school.

Collins' flywheel provided a conceptual framework for the plan. Consistent energy applied to the flywheel would build momentum and create a breakthrough to sustain the energy we would need. Rather than seeking a miracle moment or big initiative, Collins suggested developing the relentless practices I planned to implement.

Our Flywheel: The school was limited in the pool of experienced teachers available for hire. Therefore, our plan was to hire first-



year educators with a passion for students and a fire in their belly for education. We could equip them with the necessary pedagogy and instructional strategies, but we couldn't create heart.

Secondly, we put first-year teachers on a caring, nurturing team to ensure their success as they collaborated daily on agenda-driven purposes. and we provided teachers with unlimited amounts of support to ensure their own personal success. We tested students frequently and intervened quickly where gaps were identified. Administrators monitored the success of every student quarterly and reviewed written improvement plans with teachers.

The success of these teams improved the climate in the building. Teacher, student and parent morale improved, student behavior improved, and teacher turnover dropped.

Our Success: The flywheel concept worked. In the first year alone, we pushed student achievement on state reading assessments above the 70 percent bar and two years later to 96 percent. Students continue to score above state and district averages. No one discusses the flywheel anymore. It is just business as usual. It's what we do and who we are.

Maintaining the momentum takes minimal effort because everyone is trained in the same structure. School staff now can apply energies to students' social and emotional needs because the academic process is in place.

Sometimes the simplest of models work the best. The flywheel is not a complex machine, and school improvement should not be so complex it cannot be attained.



Debra Gustafson (standing), an administrator in Kansas' Geary County Schools, latched on to the flywheel model to resuscitate a state-sanctioned elementary school as its principal.

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A Personal Flywheel

NYLAND: I'm curious, do you have a flywheel for your personal work?

COLLINS: In my own work, my flywheel starts with curiosity. Then I pursue answers. I construct methods for answering the question. That involves research, which leads to insights. And then you figure out how to share those insights with the rest of the world. I had to come up with the metaphor of the flywheel and how flywheels work so that people can grab the idea and really use it.

So the driving force of my flywheel has been curiosity — the things that I want to figure out and to share.

NYLAND: *Good to Great* continues to be listed as one of the best business books some 15 years after initial publication. You're doing well at keeping the flywheel moving and keeping people engaged with your ideas!

What other insights would you like to share?

COLLINS: You asked earlier if you can build a flywheel at any level. I think of education as a flywheel with concentric circles. How does a flywheel look in the classroom? Then there's



Jim Collins, a lifelong climber, explores challenging situations in his latest publication *Turning the Flywheel*.

a flywheel for an individual school. Then the next layer out is a flywheel for a district with a leadership development element for school leaders.

Those three layers strike me as within the power of schools and school districts. Teacher flywheel. School flywheel. District flywheel.

The Importance of Equity

COLLINS: I go back to what we talked about at the beginning. America is simply not the best of what we could be if we have results that can be predicted by zip code.

NYLAND: Indeed! Have you worked with schools or districts that are making that happen?

COLLINS: The Center for the Future of Arizona (at Arizona State University) did a “Beat the Odds” study. They looked at public schools with a high Latino population and difficult environments. They compared those that produced better results in the same environment to ones that didn't. The big, big difference was a strong, steady school leader who was able to stay consistently with a program that builds momentum over time.

The other research I've done looked more at individual leaders. I

think one of the great challenges is [growing] enough of the right leaders to make all of our schools great.

NYLAND: That's my passion, and I see places where we're getting smarter. It's a matter of scale. How do we make those individual successes — classroom, school and district — part of our national success rather than an accident of time, place, leader? Your work will help us make that happen.

COLLINS: Thank you for letting me engage with you. You've been on the ground. You've actually been there, done it, worked on it.

NYLAND: You have provided concrete ideas for transformational leaders: Start with what you are good at, make it better and better, add the next element that turns the flywheel, and focus on what you can do best for your community.

COLLINS: Let's get those transformational leadership flywheels turning for classrooms, for schools and for districts. Ultimately, we need a K-12 national flywheel, one where every 18-year-old is just as statistically likely to get to the same point as any other kid in this country! That may be *the* most important challenge that our country faces. ■

Additional Resources

Much more information about Jim Collins and his concepts is available on his website (www.jimcollins.com), including articles, a listing of his other books, videos and other tools.

Copies of *Turning the Flywheel: A Monograph to Accompany Good to Great* can be ordered from www.harpercollins.com.

