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BOOK REVIEWS

GREAT BY CHOICE: UNCERTAINTY, CHAOS, AND LUCK—WHY SOME THRIVE DESPITE THEM ALL

*By Jim Collins & Morton T. Hansen
New York, NY: HarperCollins (2011)
Kindle Edition, 183 pages*

Reviewed by STEVEN D. REECE

This sequel to *Good to Great* takes on the question, “What are the distinguishing characteristics of those companies which do extremely well and those which do not perform well under the same set of [extremely difficult and chaotic] circumstances?” To answer this question, the authors studied companies which outperformed their competition over time (generally 15+ years). Collins and Hansen call them “10X” companies (p. 2) for returning at least ten times more shareholder value than their industry.

On the surface the book appears to be looking at companies, but the reader soon notices that the spotlight is on the leaders who lead these companies. In the process, the authors do away with some leadership myths. Contradicting the notion that “suc-

cessful leaders in a turbulent world are bold, risk-seeking visionaries,” they present findings that the best leaders “did not have a visionary ability to predict the future. They observed what worked, figured out why it worked and built upon proven foundations” (p. 9). These leaders are not supersized charismatic heroes; instead, they seem to find their calling in steadfast discipline focused on getting the right results.

To highlight the difference between the two kinds of leaders, Collins and Hansen use the 1911 race to the South Pole by Roald Amundsen and Robert Falcon Scott as a metaphor for leadership. They began their journeys to the South Pole within a few days of each other; however, each man planned differently. While Amundsen made wise decisions that eventually “led his team to victory and safety,” Scott did not, leading “his team to defeat and death” (p. 14). For example, Amundsen systematically built in “enormous buffers for unseen events” by ensuring that supply depots were marked with black flags in “precise increments for miles,” easily seen against the white landscape, which gave him a clear target in the event he got off course during a storm, while Scott did not (p. 16).

What can we learn from this story? Leaders lead differently in similar circumstances. The question is, are they prudent, envisioning potential outcomes and preparing accordingly, or are they foolish, ignoring critical preparation for difficult circumstances? Christian leaders would be wise to follow Amundsen’s example, which mirrors the principle of preparation found in Jesus’ parable of the wise and foolish builders (Matt. 7:24–27).

Successful leadership does not depend on luck or circumstances but on leaders cultivating behaviors as they face the same trying circum-

stances that derail so many of their competitors. Collins and Hansen boil it down to “a triad of core behaviors: fanatic discipline, empirical creativity, and productive paranoia” (p. 19). Readers will no doubt feel challenged as they reflect on some their own habits that tend to deviate from these core behaviors. Being more empirical means “relying upon direct observation, conducting practical experiments and/or engaging directly with evidence rather than relying upon opinion, whim, conventional wisdom, authority or untested ideas” (pp. 25–26). Most readers will also resonate with the authors’ call to turn the possibility of danger or failure into “preparation and productive action” (p. 29). They will also find great stories of how companies like Southwest Airlines, Intel, Microsoft and Progressive Insurance outperformed their competition based on leadership choices and practices through the prism of fanatic discipline, empirical creativity and productive paranoia.

For Christian leaders one of the most useful and practical principles presented may be the concept of “bullets, then cannonballs” (p. 78), or using incremental steps (firing bullets) to measure effectiveness toward success or outcomes before launching into full-blown efforts (firing cannonballs). Most readers can probably think of an example of how that might work in their own context. A church might first test a new study resource in a class or small group before launching a church-wide campaign. On the other hand, the book warns Christian leaders not to look for magic bullets.

I think that Collins has presented a compelling argument for the leadership principles that he discovered through historical comparative analysis. A case in point is the history of

two companies sharing the same business model—Pacific Southwest Airlines (PSA) and Southwest Airlines. PSA disappeared long ago as a regional carrier, while Southwest Airlines—due to leadership choices and decisions to maintain its commitment to certain practices—was able to become a national carrier in the midst of catastrophic events such as airline deregulation and 9/11.

Overall, I think *Great by Choice* provides good food for thought for Christian leaders who desire to lead with excellence in turbulent times. First, these leaders would affirm that companies and organizations do not need to sacrifice their core values in order to adapt to market conditions. Curiously, 10X companies “changed less in their reaction to their changing world than the comparison cases” (p. 10). Second, they will appreciate the notion that the destiny of great companies lies “largely within the hands of its people” and depends on “what they create, what they do and how well they do it” (p. 181). Finally, even though circumstances vary dramatically, accomplishments derive from the passion and standards that “are ultimately internal, rising from somewhere deep inside” (p. 182). These conclusions seem to hark back to the exhortation of the apostle Paul: “Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men” (Col. 3:23, NIV, 1984).

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