
Power Play

Business guru Jim Collins says great legislators find a way to get good things done.

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JIM COLLINS

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BY EDWARD SMITH

Jim Collins is the first to tell you he doesn’t know very much about state legislatures.

The former Stanford University business professor who has emerged as a top business leadership guru in the past 15 years says he is still trying to understand how leadership works in the public arena. Listen to him for awhile, however, and he displays a

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remarkably nuanced and insightful understanding of the differences between leading people beneath a capitol dome and from an executive suite.

“Business is the special case. It is the case of concentrated executive power,” Collins says. “If Sam Walton wanted Wal-Mart to turn left, it would turn left. But when you step outside of business, you have a very different power map.”

In the legislative arena, he says, “the question is how to assemble enough points of power to get the decisions to happen that,

if you had executive power, you would just make. And I’ve come to the conclusion that it is much more difficult. Really difficult leadership is getting things done when you don’t have the power.”

Instead, Collins says, you need to employ other skills “that I imagine these people are really great at: the power of language, the power of shared interests, the power of coalition, the power of the favor jar.”

“That is legislative leadership. I think a lot of business people have trouble when they step outside business. They’ve had the crutch

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of concentrated power, and now they have to operate without it.”

Those legislative leadership skills are especially challenged in times of great adversity, says Collins, who is the author of five books about why companies fail or remain mired in mediocrity. Perhaps the best known is *Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap ... And Others Don't*. That was followed by a 36-page monograph, *Good to Great and the Social Sectors*, which grappled with leadership in nonprofits and government.

Education is one area where legislative leaders are particularly concerned about maintaining quality. Collins recounted a study in Arizona to try to improve education for poor Latino children. The study, conducted with some assistance from Collins' organization, compared two similar schools,

one with great results and the other with a poor track record.

Collins mentioned two key findings. One is familiar to people who look at education policy: Strong leadership from a principal can make an enormous amount of difference in a school's success.

The other finding, however, might be more surprising: Consistency is the key to achieving success. Finding something that works and sticking with it is more likely to lead to success than continually trying new approaches.

“The signature of mediocrity is not an unwillingness to change,” Collins says. “The signature of mediocrity is chronic inconsistency.”

Collins stresses that he is “not an expert on government. I'm not an expert on the legisla-

tive process.”

But he does think inconsistency is a trait that can plague government. “I think one of the great challenges of a multi-party or two-party democratic process is that it has built into it an inherent kind of inconsistency. If you have a change in parties, you are very rarely going to have people say, ‘What we really want to do is build upon the consistent program of the previous party.’ It will be the opposite.”

That poses a significant challenge, he says. “If the signature of mediocrity is chronic inconsistency, then how do we get the kind of consistent cumulative building of results that produces outstanding results?”

His answer, at least in part, is to develop strong leadership in nonelected and staff offices. Drawing on his considerable work with the military and other government agencies, Collins thinks putting the right people in place to run agencies and work as city managers can help deliver great results.

“That is where we get the consistency. If somebody is doing something well, let them continue to do it better. Just because there is political push and pull doesn't necessarily mean the police or the military or the education or any of these really important functions have to be inconsistent.”

Collins said his organization's research has tried to distill the factors common to those he calls level five leaders, the cream of the crop. And one trait stands out.

“It's what in the end you are really ambitious for,” he says. “Over a long course of a career, those who seem to be ambitious for the actual goal, the actual work first, are the real level fives. Your ambition is channeled into something bigger and beyond yourself.”

Turning again to legislative work, he said the ambition to be of service to the community or the state or the nation is what defines the top leaders in that area.

“If you really have that legislative skill, your art form is assembling the points of power to get good things done,” he says. “You are of tremendous service to society and it is just that most of society can't see what you do.”

“It is in that sense a very, very noble form of service in a great classic sense going all the way back to Athens.”

 **CHECK OUT** a Q&A with Jim Collins at www.ncsl.org/magazine.