

Jim Collins on Building & Accelerating Momentum

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Author of legendary bestsellers such as *Good to Great*, *Built to Last*, *Great by Choice* and more, Jim has spent his career searching for what makes businesses great. With other 6,000 years of corporate research in their database, he believes his findings to be centered around asking, ‘Why?’ In his words, “I believe questions are better than answers.” Jim’s Keynote centered around 5 questions to ask and reflect on right now – and to take back to your team.

Question 1: Do we have 90% or more of the key seats on our bus filled with the right people?

As he shares in many of his books, Jim starts with ‘who’ to find and sustain momentum in turbulent times. “You can’t predict the ‘what’ so the ultimate hedge against uncertainty is the people who can adapt to what is coming.” He clarifies that this a time where the normal hiring struggles is unfrozen and encourages leaders to seize this opportunity and be rigorous (but not ruthless) about the right people. This is a time, above all others, where you should be focused on taking care of your people.

He shares a story of General Lloyd Austin who, after graduating from West Point, spent the early part of his career focused on and worried about his success. After a time, he realized that wasn’t very helpful and made a change. He decided to stop focusing on his success and career and instead to take care of his people. “That’s when everything changed,” Jim said, “Because his people would not let him fail.” General Austin went on to become a four-star general and 12th commander of the United States Central Command (CENTCOM).

Question 2: What are the brutal facts and how can we do a better job of embracing both sides of the Stockdale Paradox?

The Stockdale Paradox is what Jim Collins uses to describe Admiral Stockdale’s method of survival during his seven years as a prisoner of war in Vietnam. Stockdale shared with Collins, “I never wavered in my absolute faith that not only would I prevail, but I would also turn it into the defining event of my life that would make me a better and stronger person.” In *Built to Last*, Collins found that great leaders had this same faith – knowing that would get through the current challenge and prevail on the other side and an unwavering ability to confront the brutal facts right now.

We are in a Stockdale moment right now. Use this question to confront the brutal facts as they are right now without losing sight of what is means to prevail on the other side of this.

Question 3: How, if at all, in this great time of change should we change our flywheel?

In Jim’s latest publication, *Turning the Flywheel*, he focuses the concept of turning the flywheel to accelerate momentum. He explains that they way you build something great is never a single moment or reactionary move but rather like pushing a giant, heavy flywheel in an intelligent and consistent direction. Over a long time the wheel builds momentum and beings to spin easier and faster.

Start by asking your team, ‘What is our flywheel? How does it work? How can we gain momentum?’ A flywheel is not just a series of steps, each step is built with momentum in mind.

After getting your flywheel right, you can look at adjusting it. Jim has words of caution – Fire bullets, then cannonballs. Create a calibrated line of sight before firing the big guns.

Question 4: What should be on our ‘stop doing’ list?

Jim argues that the first question is not what to do, but what to stop doing. It takes discipline to clear the clutter and decide what to include on a stop doing list. Update your practices and strategies to stimulate progress, innovation, improvement and renewal. And as you find things to never do again, remember to preserve the core and maintain your core values.

Question 5: How can you be of service to others in this time?

Jim shares the story of mountaineer David Breashears, who went on a quest to put an IMAX camera on the top of Mt. Everest and shoot a film from the top of the world. He explains that David is a productive paranoid, who consistently asks, ‘What if?’ questions. This served him well on his quest when he planned a head with extra oxygen tanks and was able to avoid a horrible storm by retreating down the mountain with their supplies. Others didn’t make the same choice and David and his team donated many oxygen tanks to rescue missions to help others in need. In the end, he did finish his journey and put the camera on top of Mt. Everest and was able to save lives in the process. It was an important lesson in never getting caught unprepared.

However difficult, scared or uncertain you and your team are, one of the most calming things you can do is ask the question – Who needs our help? How can we be of service?

After sharing his Keynote, Jim Collins did a brief Q&A with virtual attendees. He reminded attendees to be rigorous with getting the right people in the right seats on the bus, but not ruthless. He talked about how diversity stimulates progress and adds ideas. And he quoted John Garner when asked about communicating virtually to a distributed team, ‘Don’t be interesting, be interested.’ Ask questions and invite others into the conversation, be interested in your people.

In closing, he encouraged us to look at history and other severe times. History is the study of surprises. There is no ‘new normal,’ rather a consistent series of not-normal for the rest of our lives. He references the start of the 20th century with the Spanish influenza, World Wars and Great Depression. And that through all the disruption and turmoil, some companies were able to navigate these events exceptionally well and come out as enduring, great companies.

So adapt by focusing on your people. Confront the brutal facts while holding on to the unwavering faith that you will prevail in the end. Take a look at your flywheel and how you build momentum, create a stop doing list and evaluate how you can serve others. It is not the environment that determines how well you do, it’s your own discipline and choices that determine how well you do in the long run.