BHAG’S and Hedgehogs: Utilizing The Concepts of Jim Collins with Your Team

Each year the bookshelves of stores feature a new book from the championship coaches of professional and collegiate sports. As I write this article, I look over to my own book case in my office and see books from Bill Parcells, Lou Holtz, Mike Shanahan, Pat Summit and Coach K. Along with those books, I have business books from popular authors such as Dr. John Maxwell, Stephen Covey, and Brian Tracy which discusses topics such as motivation, leadership, and development from a business and professional standpoint.

In the past two weeks, I have read two books that have been best sellers among the business community in recent years. Good to Great and Built To Last: Successful Habits of Visionary Companies by Jim Collins are in depth studies on successful companies and the methods used to reach greatness. In this article, I will share with you some of the biggest takeaways I got from these titles can could be applied to coaching your team.

1. The Stockdale Paradox (from Good to Great)

Admiral James Stockdale was the highest ranking officer captured by the North Vietnamese during the Vietnam War. During a conversation one afternoon, Admiral Stockdale shared with Mr. Collins the secret he used to survive the brutality of the POW camp. The secret? “You must never confuse faith that you will prevail in the end-which you can never afford to lose-with the discipline to confront the most brutal facts of your current reality, whatever they might be.”

The takeaway for coaches: Don’t fear reality. Confront it. Deal with it. But also keep hope alive and be determined to make it to the end.

2. Hedgehogs (from Good to Great)

The Hedgehog concept comes from the Greek parable about the fox and hedgehog. The basic message is that foxes pursue many ends while the hedgehog remains simple. According to Mr. Collins, great companies have the philosophy of the hedgehog by keeping it simple. Collins says the hedgehog concept is made up of three areas:

A. What are you passionate about?
B. What can you be the best at in the world?
C. What drives your economic engine?

The takeaway for coaches: Simplicity and execution. Have a goal to build your program by keeping things simple and motivating players to find their passion for
the game. It is my belief that great players and great programs are passionate, focused, and have great relationships within the team setting.

What can you be the best at? You could focus on having the best defense in your league, or having the best out of bounds plays. There is always an area your team can excel in, no matter the talent level you have.

3 BHAG’s (from *Built to Last*)

BHAG’s (pronounced bee-hags) is short for Big, Hairy, and Audacious Goals. Mr. Collins says, “A BHAG engages people, it reaches out and grabs them in the gut. It is tangible, energizing, highly focused. People “get it” right away; it takes little or no explanation.”

Collins goes on to discuss the BHAG’s of famous companies such as Boeing, Wal-Mart, and Sony and how these goals elevated them to greatness.

**The takeaway for coaches:** What are your BHAG’s for your team? Have you sat down with your team and discussed them? Most importantly, have they bought into the goals and understand what must be done to achieve them? Often, coaches do not take the time to ask their players the goals they feel they can achieve during the season.

4 Core Values and Purpose (from *Built to Last*)

This was a fascinating discovery by Mr. Collins and the first area discussed in *Built to Last*. His researched showed that successful companies (or visionary companies) had solid core values and purposes that went beyond making a profit or satisfying shareholders. These values and purposes were never to be compromised for the sake of making money.

**The takeaway for coaches:** I have heard Coach Don Meyer say often, “Have a purpose for your team beyond winning.” For him, his team’s purpose is the pursuit of arete, the Greek concept of excellence in life. What are your core values and purpose as a team? How do you communicate them with your team, your parents, and your community? What will be your legacy as a coach?

5 Level 5 Leadership (from *Good to Great*)

Mr. Collins discusses the traits of successful CEO’s in the first chapter of book and places them in levels from 1 (a Highly Capable Individual) to Level 5. A Level 5 leader, according to Collins, “channel their ego needs away from themselves and into the larger goal of building a great company. It’s not that Level 5 leaders have no ego or self-interest. Indeed, they are incredibly ambitious- but their ambition is first and foremost for the institution, not
themselves.” Collins goes on to write, “Level 5 leaders look out the window to apportion credit to factors outside themselves when things go well (and if they cannot find a specific person or event to give credit to, they credit good luck). At the same time, they look in the mirror to apportion responsibility, never blaming bad luck when things go poorly.”

The takeaway for coaches: If you want to go from a good to great team, be a Level 5 leader. You can develop Level 5 leadership within your program. Coach John Wooden and Coach Dean Smith are the best examples of Level 5 leadership we have in basketball coaching.