

THE RE-EDUCATION OF JIM COLLINS

The author of *Good to Great* went to West Point to teach leadership. Instead, he was the one who got schooled.

BY BO BURLINGHAM



IT WAS A WARM, LATE-SUMMER AFTERNOON on the banks of the Hudson River, and a large contingent of cadets had gathered in the Hayes Gymnasium on the campus of the United States Military Academy. Dressed in gray T-shirts and black shorts, they had come to train for the Academy's grueling Indoor Obstacle Course Test, which involves jumping through tires, climbing ropes, swinging on monkey bars, leaping over barriers, running along a balance beam, and sprinting around a track with a medicine ball, among other physical feats. Cadets say it is one of the hardest parts of a West Point education.

On one side of the gym, a group of cadets watched an older, gray-haired man trying to mount a shelf eight feet above the ground. He was Jim Collins,

the best-selling business-book author who was visiting West Point to hold seminars on leadership. "No, sir," a cadet said to him. "You don't want to do it like that, sir. You look like an old man, sir. You need to do it this way."

"I am an old man!" Collins murmured. Then, he tried it again.

Why was the author of such business classics as *Built to Last* and *Good to Great* competing with college students less than half his age? For one thing, Collins, 55, is an avid climber and seldom shies from a physical challenge. But what Collins really wanted was the opportunity to interact with cadets, to experience what they experience. With that in mind, he had set himself the goal of completing the course in the same time required of all male cadets before they can graduate—three and a half minutes or less. So he was

grateful that West Point's rock-climbing team had turned out to coach him.

Glancing around the gym, Collins could see numerous other cadets struggling with various obstacles; some of them were not much farther along than he was. Most of them had at least one or two other cadets standing nearby, coaching, critiquing, and cheering on their compatriots.

That struck Collins as interesting. West Point is a highly competitive place. Every cadet wants to do the obstacle course faster than his or her peers. Every cadet also is extremely busy. Yet these cadets were taking time away from their studies and other duties to help their friends get through the course.

Collins had seen the same phenomenon among his students. And not only were the cadets more collegial, but they seemed to be happier—much happier—than students at civilian universities, including those he had taught during his seven years on the Stanford faculty. Which was odd. After all, West Point cadets lead extremely demanding lives. Nearly every minute of every day is programmed, and every aspect of their lives is regimented, down to the color of their socks and the way razors must be positioned in their medicine cabinets. Meanwhile, they are constantly being tested both physically and mentally—and they often fall short. This goes on for four years with almost no letup, followed by five years of active duty.

How, Collins wondered, did such a burdensome environment produce such a happy, lively, and confident cohort of young men and women? In business, happy cultures tend to be associated with pool tables, foosball, Friday-afternoon beer parties, and dogs in the office—in a word, fun. A cadet's life is anything but fun. And yet these young people seem to get something out of their lives that is missing from the lives of many of their contemporaries.

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GOOD TO GREAT
Even Jim Collins could learn
from West Point cadets

When Collins was offered West Point's Class of 1951 Chair for the Study of Leadership in the early summer of 2011, he was in the midst of preparing for the publication of his fourth bestseller, *Great by Choice*, which would wrap up a quarter-century of research into great companies. Although he faced a packed schedule in the coming year, he couldn't resist the opportunity. For one thing, he was curious about the place itself. West Point has been turning out "leaders of character" for more than 200 years. "I expect that it will transform my thinking in some way," Collins told me a week before he started. "I have this feeling something's going to happen to me that will set me on a new trajectory, a renewing path."

When I spoke to him again after his first seminar, he was even more enthusiastic than he had been. Back in 2006, he had trained with Tommy Caldwell, a 35-year-old Coloradan who is widely viewed as one of the greatest rock climbers of all time. The two had formed a close bond, so Collins invited him to participate in the seminar. On the night before the seminar, I joined Collins and 10 cadets for dinner. For a couple of hours, they discussed a range of topics, from the qualities of great leaders to the risks and rewards of contrarianism. Then Collins changed the subject. "What is the opposite side of success?" he asked.

"Isn't it failure?" one cadet responded. "Well, let's talk about failure," said Collins. "How many of you have experienced failure?" They all nodded or raised a hand.

"Failure is part of life here," said a diminutive female cadet, Kiley Hunkler. "There's a recurring sense of inadequacy," she says. "For a 200-pound linebacker, it's having to do a cartwheel. For me, it's the survival swim in full combat gear."

"Does anyone get through West Point without feeling that sense of inadequacy?" Collins asked the group.

"No," they said, more or less in unison. "From the outside, it looks like everything here is difficult," Collins said. "I think you can go through most universities without ever having a big inadequacy moment. That doesn't seem possible here. You keep getting decked. So why do you keep getting back up?"

"It's better to fail here and have other people help you get it right than to fail in Afghanistan, where the consequences could be catastrophic," said another cadet, Christer Horstman.

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"Here, everybody knows it's a learning experience," said Hunkler.

"Yes, and you've put yourselves in an environment where you can't go through without failing," Collins said.

Indeed, repeated failure was built into West Point's culture. Yet that didn't seem to faze the cadets in the least.

But Collins, of course, is best known for pondering the secrets of organizational, not personal, success. So what do these West Point revelations mean for company leaders whose shelves are lined with Collins's books?

He sees a number of useful lessons. First, "if you want to build a culture of engaged leaders and a great place to work," he says, "you need to spend time thinking about three things."

- **SERVICE** to "a cause or purpose we are passionately dedicated to and are willing to suffer and sacrifice for;"
- **CHALLENGE** and growth, or, "What

huge and audacious challenges should we give people that will push them hard and make them grow?"

- **COMMUNAL SUCCESS**, or, "What can we do to reinforce the idea that we succeed only by helping each other?"

His time at West Point has also given Collins a new appreciation for some aspects of leadership that he had not previously thought much about. The first has to do with frontline, or unit-level, leadership. "I have come to see how important it is," he says. "We tend to think that what matters is having outstanding leadership at the senior level. But great leadership at the top doesn't amount to much if you don't have exceptional leadership at the unit level. That's where great things get done."

Second, he has realized that great leadership comes in two forms. One form Collins describes as being the right tool in the toolbox at a particular moment in history: "The world needs a Phillips-head screwdriver, and you are a Phillips-head screwdriver. You can get exceptional results, but they tend to be less durable because when the world needs a socket wrench, you're not one." The other type of great leader adapts and grows as demands change: "When Steve Jobs got booted from Apple, a lot of people thought he was a tool in a toolbox. They were wrong."

Third, leaders need to know when to become followers, and followers need to know when to become leaders. "The ability to toggle between leading and following is critical," he says, "because circumstances change."

Ultimately, Collins says, he has come away believing more strongly than ever in the urgent need to learn how to develop great leaders. "I'm convinced that every major problem we face as a country is a leadership problem," he says. "Whether it's short-term thinking in business or a problem with government performance, every problem requires superb leadership to solve." ■