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In a detailed interview, we asked Collins about the impact of his research and ideas on the economy, the stock market, and the very nature of executive leadership. Good and great companies that you've written about all the great stock market results you've achieved over a 15-year period. Today, however, the stock market is not working. Does that mean that we will not see any good companies today? Firstly, I want to correct the great false downturn. The stock market is not down. How does the stock market look compared to 1985? The stock market is not down. What does it look like compared to the 1990s? The stock market is not down. The market was irrationally out of whack - we did not have a stock market; we had speculative casinos. The technology bubble was not a new economy - there is a new economy that has been going on for many years at a deeper level. But the cruel fact is that companies that were at the top of the tech bubble had no results. You can't make zero profit and claim that you have results. Companies that had great results before the bubble burst in case they're down in the period now, but yes, what? The bottom line is, as a Cisco company, we don't know the answer yet. It is possible that these companies are only very difficult for a period of 6- 12 months. Let me use the analogy. Let's say you have a great basketball dynasty like the UCLA Bruins under John Wooden. This is a team that is going to win 10 NCAA championships in 12 years. They're a team that went from good to great. But in 1970 they lost three games. Does that mean we're going to write them off and say they're not a great team? We need to look at it in the longer term. The same goes for companies that have fallen into a bubble. It was too short a period. It will take more time to tell which companies that are in trouble now are just going through an instant period and will have the resilience to come back. However, for many entrepreneurs, the current slowdown is a sign of the collapse of the new economy. It's one of the most amazing times in history. What was the main complaint we heard two or three years ago? It's so hard to get good people! Whining, whining, whining! Today we have the greatest chance that we're going to have decades to snag a boatload - not a busload, but a boatload - for the big people. And big companies always start with what, not what. We can finally get to the right side of Packard's Law. Packard's Law is like the law of physics for great companies. She says that no company can become or remain high if it allows its growth rate of income to exceed its growth to get the right people in a sustainable way. This is one of those timeless truths that transcend technology and the economy. Now, instead of trying to raise capital, we can build up people. If I had run a company today, I would have All other priority; buy as many of the best people as I could. I would put off everything else if I could afford it - buildings, new projects, R&A; fill your bus. Because things will come back. My grating will start to rotate. And one of the biggest limitations to growth and success of my organization is not the market, there is no technology, there is no possibility, there is no stock market. If you want to be a great company, one of the biggest limitations to your ability to grow is the ability to get and hang on to enough right people. It's also a great time to force yourself to look back. When you were breaking Packard's Law, you probably let a lot of bad people on the bus. It's a good time to turn them off. In fact, it's a little easier to do it now. We can blame this on the circumstances. What else would you do to take advantage of this reassessment period? It's also a great time to ask yourself really hard questions. Given the irrational prosperity at a time when the market will give you money, whether you deliver or not, many companies have not answered any of the three layers of questions (What can we be the best in the world? What is the economic denominator that best stimulates the engine of our economy? And who are our main people very passionate about?). They had no idea about what they could do better than any other company in the world that was sustainable, they didn't have a profit denominator, and the only thing they had a passion for was flipping company. Now we can no longer live in that fantasy land. We need to look closely at all the things we do and put them all into the three-wheel test. But what that fails the test we have to stop doing - today. I see many companies that find themselves with a lot of capital. So they wandered into all kinds of acquisitions or new companies or new directions, just because they could. But they do not necessarily fit in three circles. Today, the task is to prune them. Those who explain their three circles will come out of it just fine. Those who don't deserve to die. Managers today find themselves with little time to prove their worth. What advice would you give to the director of the hot seat? If I was on the hot seat of a take over company that I wanted to go from good to great CEO, that's what I would do. I'd take that good-to-great stock chart, and I put it in front of my directors. I would say: We're on the left side of this curve. We want to be on the right side of the curve. Right? If that's what we all want, we know what it will take to get it. You can't keep lurching from CEO CEO. If you do this, you will find yourself in the Doom Loop - and then we will find ourselves as one of the comparison companies, not one of the big companies. I don't think all directors are stupid. Most are smart, but they act out ignorance and not lack good intentions. We have to press them over the head with empirical results. Our job is to beat the market sustainably over time. We need to think about the share price over a five-year period. And we have to start doing everything it takes to get that flywheel turning. Finally, if I'm CEO, I want the board to give me the following assurance: However long or short my tenure as CEO may be who you choose as my successor has to pick up that flywheel in the middle and keep pushing in a consistent direction. I can only get a flywheel turning 16 RPM. But my successor has to take him to 100 RPM. His successor must take him to 500 RPM, and his successor at 1000 RPM. It's not about me as CEO - it's about committing to a consistent program. We're not going to do the Doom Loop. The executives who took their companies from good to high were mostly anonymous - far from the celebrity executives we read about. Is it an accident? Is this the cause and effect? I think it's more a matter of cause and effect than an accident. There is something directly related between the absence of celebrities and the presence of good and excellent results. Why? First, when you have a celebrity, the company turns into one genius with 1000 helpers. It creates a feeling that all this is really about the CEO. And this leads to all sorts of problems - if a person goes away or if a person turns out to be a genius after all. On a deeper level we have found that leaders that leaders do something good, their aspiration must be the grandeur of work and enterprise, not themselves. That doesn't mean they don't have an ego. That doesn't mean they don't have any self-needs. This means that at the point of decision after the point of decision - in critical situations where choice A would favor your ego and choice B would favor the company and its work - time and again those leaders choose Choice B. Celebrity executives, while deciding points, are more likely to favor self and ego through company and work. As anonymous executives, most companies that have made transformations from good to great are unheralded. What does that tell us? The truth is that most people don't work on the most glamorous things in the world. They do a real job - which means that most of the time they make a lot of rough heck just a few points of excitement. Some people release fried bread. Some are building retail stores. The real job in the economy gets done by people who are cars who sell real estate that run in stores and banks. So one of the great findings of this study is that you can be a great company and do it in steel, pharmacies, stores. It's just not the case that if you're not Valley, you're not cool. It doesn't matter where you are. So no one has the right to whine about their company, their industry, or the kind of business they do - again. Will the 11 companies that have made the transformation benefit from their anonymity? One of the biggest advantages that these companies have had, no one cares! Kroger began his transition; Nucor began his transition; no one expected much. They can also transmit overdelivery. In fact, if I was taking over the company and trying to make it move from good to high, I would tell my vice president of communications that his job was to make the whole world think that we were constantly on the edge of doom. In our investigation, we actually published transcripts of CEO presentations to analysts provided by good and large companies and comparison companies to analysts. We read all these. And that's amazing. Good great people always talk about the challenges they face, the programs they create, what they are worried about. You go to comparison companies, they keep hying themselves, they sell the future - but they never achieve results. If I'm not a CEO, how do good-to-great lessons apply to me? Good and great concepts apply to any situation - as long as you can choose people around you. This is a very important point. But basically, we really do - we have a lot of discretion within our lives of people, people we decide to let our bus, whether it's our department at work or our personal lives. But the main message is this: Create your own flywheel. You can do it. You can start building momentum for someone for which you have a responsibility. You create a large section. You can create a great church community. You can pick up each of the good ideas and apply them to your work or your life. What did the studio teach you about business changes in general? Is this basically a message to go back to basics? Very rarely significant changes ever lead to a sustainable result. This is one of the very important conclusions of the book. We started with 1435 companies. And 11 companies did it. Let's look at this moment of fact. The fact is that this does not happen very often. why not? Because we don't know what we're doing! And since we don't know what we're doing, we're putting in all sorts of things that don't produce results. We end up as a primitive dance around a pile of scrap chanting on the moon. I think we need science to understand what we really need to change things. Is he going back to basics? No, it's a forward-looking understanding. Why does it go back to the basics of saying that managers need to be ambitious for their companies, not themselves? Why does it go back to the basics of doing what and question first and what and where question second? Since when does it go back to the basics of a company to start with a question like, Why are we sucking 100 years ago, and what are the cruel facts that we have to face? Why are the grounds again that stop lists are more important than to-do lists? And since when has he returned to the basics to say that technology is just an accelerator, not a creator of anything? I don't think these concepts are back to basics. Because if they are, we need to be able to come back in time and find that people have used these ideas. People don't - so there are only 11 out of 1,435. So, no, it's not back to basics. It's a forward-looking understanding. What is your assessment of the new economy? We've seen a lot of changes, and we've seen a lot of backlash against change. How do you make sense at all? The enormous changes that are taking place around us make it the most exciting time in history to be alive. It's really fun. All these changes - technological change, globalisation - are cruel facts that must be integrated into any decisions we have taken. The people at Walgreens didn't ignore the internet because they were focused solely on the basics. They faced a brutal fact online and then asked: How does it fit into our three wheels, and how can we use it to spin our flywheel faster? You never ignore change - you hit them head to the facts like cruel, or you come to them with a great sense of glee and excitement. This change in this new technology opens up the way you prevail, to be even better as a company. All good and excellent companies have taken the changes and used them to their advantage, often with great glee. When the new pianos came, Mozart didn't fix his music. He didn't say, There are these new pianos! Harpsichord is out of the way, so I washed away as a composer! He thought it was so cool! I can do it out loud with a piano fort! It's really neat! He kept writing great music discipline and, at the same time, embraced the invention with great glee and excitement for pianos. With all the changes around us, we have to be like Mozart. We maintain a great discipline about our music, but at the same time we can accept things that can allow us to make even more music. Alan M. Webber (awebber@fastcompany.com) is the founder of Fast Company. Jim Collins (jimcollins@aol.com) wrote an essay on Built Flip in the March 2000 issue of Fast Company. His new book, Good Great: Why Some Companies Make a Leap... And other No, will be available in October. October.

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