



GREAT BY CHOICE

A Review by Dr. Randall Spence

***"We cannot predict the future.
But we can create it."***

- Jim Collins & Morten Hansen

Great by Choice: Uncertainty, Chaos and Luck—Why Some Thrive Despite Them All
by Jim Collins and Morten Hansen
HarperBusiness, \$29.99, 320 pp.

In the world of business literature, there is none finer than Jim Collins. His years of thorough research and analysis and his uncanny ability to translate those mountains of data into succinct, memorable and practical principles make him extremely effective and relevant when applied to the business world, even the business of the church.

His leadership advice has become a way of life in many professional circles. Those who have read Collins' *Good to Great* (and even those who haven't) have doubtless heard of and probably applied his principle of "getting the right people on the bus, the wrong ones off, and those who remain in the right seats." His analysis and findings are expressed in ways we find not only interesting and memorable, but translatable into our own contexts.

Collins and author and business professor Morten Hansen have done nothing less in their latest book, *Great by Choice*. Based on a nine-year research project that began in 2002 with a simple question: Why do some companies thrive in uncertainty, even in the midst of chaos, and others do not?

Their methodology was to look for companies that began in a position of vulnerability but showed spectacular performance over time. They then looked at comparable companies in the same industries with the same set of circumstances that ultimately failed to achieve greatness. In comparing and contrasting the two, they then investigated the distinguishing factors.

Collins and Hansen labeled the high-performing cases as "10Xers" because they didn't just barely survive, but rather they beat their industry index by at least 10 times. Since

this newsletter is for leaders, I will focus on what the research discovered about the 10X leaders who led their companies to greatness to highlight some of the leadership principles that helped them to excel.

As told in the second chapter of *Great by Choice*, the story of Roald Amundsen and Robert Falcon Scott, the explorers in the 1911 race to be the first in history to reach the South Pole, illustrates the difference between mediocre and great leaders. For one team, it would be a race to victory and a safe return home. For the others, it would be a devastating defeat resulting in a tragic loss of life.

Both Amundsen and Scott were similar in age, experience, and both had set out within days of one another on their trek to the pole. Despite their equal start, Amundsen safely led his team to the South Pole and back, while Scott arrived at the pole more than a month after Amundsen, and on his return journey he died just 10 miles from his supply depot. What differentiated Amundsen and Scott were their behaviors, not circumstances.

And so it is with 10X leaders compared to those who “also ran.” The authors compare and contrast the behaviors of Amundsen and Scott against modern day examples of 10X leaders. What they found is a triad of core behaviors that govern 10X leaders' nature: fanatic discipline, empirical creativity, and productive paranoia. Animating these three core behaviors is a central motivating force that the authors call “Level 5 Ambition.” It is these behavioral traits that correlate with achieving 10X results in chaotic and uncertain environments.

Fanatic discipline.

Essentially, discipline is consistency of action. This consistency is applied to values, long-term goals and performance standards. The 10X leaders examined for this study were unshakeable when it came to discipline in these areas. Chapter Three of the book is titled “20 Mile March” and explores the discipline Amundsen exhibited in his quest for the South Pole. This is the same discipline exhibited in the 10X leaders studied. Chapters Two and Three alone are worth the price of the entire book.

Empirical creativity.

By “empirical” the authors mean “relying upon direct observation, conducting practical experiments, and/or engaging directly with evidence rather than relying upon opinion, whim, conventional wisdom, authority, or untested ideas.” Leaders with 10X characteristics are “show me” people.

Productive paranoia.

This means that 10X leaders differ from others in that they maintain hyper-vigilance in good times as well as bad. They are always scouring the horizon and considering that events could turn against them at any time thus making necessary that they be prepared if and when it does. They are always asking, “What if?”

One of the surprises from this study is that the 10Xers are not the fastest to change with every new opportunity, nor do they pursue aggressive growth at all costs or undertake recklessly big leaps. Instead they are more likely to stick to the “20 Mile March” approach in which day-in and day-out they seek to march their 20 miles, no more and no less, in good times and in bad, as Amundsen did in his successful race to the South Pole and back.

Couple the above traits with Level 5 Ambition, and you have a 10X leader. The concept of Level 5 Leadership is from Collins' *Good to Great*, in which ambition is identified as a Level 5 leader's most important trait. These leaders are “incredibly ambitious, but their ambition is first and foremost for the cause, the company, for the work, *not themselves*.” In this book, they expand on the concept, saying, “Every 10Xer we studied aimed for much more than just ‘becoming successful.’ They didn’t define themselves by money. They didn’t define themselves by fame. They didn’t define themselves by power. They defined themselves by impact and contribution and purpose.”

Is it possible to become a 10X leader? I believe Collins and Hansen would encourage us each to begin the journey, to adopt the 10X behaviors for our organizations, and ourselves and let time be the judge. After all, time is the great revealer.