



## Leadership by Resolve

By Michael J. O'Brien, Ed.D.

The most significant qualitative research to date on leadership and its corporate impact was featured in the January 2001 issue of the *Harvard Business Review*. The article was titled, "Level 5 Leadership, the Triumph of Humility and Fierce Resolve." It was written by Jim Collins and was based on five years of empirical study by Mr. Collins and his management research laboratory in Boulder, Colorado.

If there was ever a clarion call for enlightened new leadership, it can be found in the results of this exciting new study. The study was undertaken to discover if there was a way to determine what made good companies great. The first undertaking was to define greatness. For purposes of his study, Mr. Collins set his standards high.

He searched for companies that had gone from good to great and sustained their greatness. The defining criteria was a company that had cumulative stock returns at or below the general stock market for 15 years - and then transitioned to a company with returns at least three times the market over the next 15 years. The shift had to be a shift that was not a result of an industry trend. It had to be distinct and independent.

After reviewing 1,435 companies that appeared on the Fortune 500 from 1965 to 1995, there were only 11 companies that met the criteria.

Once they identified the 11 companies, they set out to quantify what made the companies achieve such breakthrough performance over such an extended period of time.

The results?

The results support the principles of personal mastery and the leadership practices espoused by O'Brien Group and underscore what we've discovered in our 20 years of leadership development work.

The study verified that leadership made all the difference.

Most importantly, it defined the type of leadership that transformed good companies into great ones. It was not leadership based on ego. Or power. Or charisma. The leadership found at the top of these 11 companies was defined in the article as "Level 5 Leadership." We've defined it as Authentic Leadership. Or *Leadership by Resolve*.

As hard as the researchers tried to steer clear of any patterns of performance based on an individual's contribution, they couldn't ignore the data. Executive leadership played a major

role in achieving greatness. Their research found that at the core of each company, a great leader had emerged to steward the company. Contrary to traditional thinking, the CEO had not been “brought in” to turn the company around. Most of them had risen through the ranks.

Even more interestingly, each CEO of each of the 11 companies exhibited leadership characteristics that were paradoxical. The paradox was that the CEOs weren't cut from the cloth of charisma. They were cut from a different cloth, one that was made up of equal parts personal humility and professional will.

In essence, each CEO placed the needs of the organization above his own. And each one had the discipline and professional will to forge ahead on a single, undeterred path through every trial and tribulation the economy, competition, government and industry placed before him.

The researchers found that their results flew in the face of conventional wisdom and their own expectations. “People generally assume that transforming companies from good to great requires larger-than-life leaders - big personalities like Iacocca, Dunlap, Welch and Gault, who make headlines and become celebrities.”

None of those CEOs or types of CEO surfaced.

Instead, the true leaders of greatness were found to be CEOs like mild-mannered Darwin E. Smith of Kimberly Clark, who transformed the company from an old world paper company into a leading consumer paper products company. With Smith at the helm, Kimberly Clark surpassed its chief competitors Scott Paper and Procter & Gamble. He “generated cumulative stock returns that were 4.1 times greater than those of the general market, outperforming venerable companies such as Hewlett-Packard, 3M, Coca-Cola and General Electric.”

Each steward of greatness was cut from the same cloth and became a study in duality. Each was “modest and willful, shy and fearless.” And each met with astounding success.

By leading with resolve, each leader instilled in their company, through their own humility and will, a culture of discipline. It wasn't a discipline born of forced compliance. Instead, it was a personal discipline. Born of a humble desire to see the company succeed first and foremost beyond any personal desires for success or gain or notoriety.

The culture they inspired embodies three forms of discipline. Disciplined people. Disciplined thought. And disciplined action. According to the article, “when you have disciplined people, you don't need hierarchy. When you have disciplined thought, you don't need bureaucracy. When you have disciplined action, you don't need excessive controls. When you combine a culture of discipline with an ethic of entrepreneurship, you get the magic alchemy of great performance.”

At O'Brien Group, we couldn't agree more. Our work is dedicated to finding the seeds of greatness within our clients and cultivating those seeds.

The research leaves off at precisely the point in which O'Brien Group takes over. To cultivate the seeds of greatness, the research recommends self-reflection, a mentor, .... a significant life experience, or other factors so the seed can begin to develop.”

Our approach to executive leadership development does just that. We not only help clients discover and cultivate their seeds of greatness through self-reflection and coaching, our approach provides a significant life experience. Executives gain a new perspective on their lives, their work and their impact on others. For many, the perspective is life altering.

Our approach to executive leadership is based on the Discipline of Personal Mastery, as pioneered by our founder, Dr. Michael O'Brien. This discipline was developed years before the empirical research found in the *Harvard Business Review* emerged to quantify the impact of leadership by resolve. The research proves what we've been saying and practicing all along - that leadership by resolve can significantly impact the performance of a company by creating corporate cultures of disciplined thought and action.

The Discipline of Personal Mastery evolved from earlier research by psychologist Abraham Maslow who determined that people who had lived fulfilled lives, were Self-Actualized people. Maslow found that Self-Actualized people were all committed to a cause outside their own skin. The CEOs in Mr. Collins' study, were each committed to a cause outside their own skin as well. They placed the needs of the organization above their own. They aspired to greatness for the company over themselves.

As a result, this new research underscores and reinforces our approach to Executive Leadership in helping companies achieve greater performance. The answer was, is and always will be, found in leadership. Leadership by resolve instead of command. Achieved by cultivating the seeds of self-actualization and personal mastery in each executive.

The research also underscored that greatness didn't fall upon the companies from outside the organization. A charismatic leader wasn't recruited and brought in. Instead, the leaders rose up from within each company. Therefore, growing the seeds of greatness in an organization requires cultivating greatness within the executives of the organization.

In most cases, executives must change their perspective and/or behavior in order to reach the paradoxical mix of humility and strong will required to lead by resolve. Changing perspectives and behavior isn't an easy task. But it is possible using the discipline of personal mastery.

We hope one of the results of this significant new research, is that corporations will begin to realize that focusing on the short-term, and seeking the quick fix to growth and performance, is a short-lived achievement at best. True growth, true success and true performance are directly related to the development of leadership within the organization.

The development of leaders takes time, commitment and resolve. And humility to realize that there's room for improvement. Ironically, committing to the development of executive

leadership requires the same level of humility and will demonstrated by the CEOs in the research.

If you feel the seeds of greatness stirring within your organization, maybe it's time to help them grow. The rewards, after all, may be astounding.

Contact Information:

O'Brien Group  
[achievemore@obriengroup.us](mailto:achievemore@obriengroup.us)  
513-821-9580  
1276 Sweetwater Dr.  
Cincinnati, OH 45215