

## **Watch-makers, cult leaders and NHS librarians: reviewing the business management classic “Built to last” in a post-Covid world.**

The 1990’s was the golden era of business management textbooks. I should know; authors like Peter Drucker and Charles Handy were pretty much required reading when I was at library school back then. But just how many of these books have weathered the test of time? Precious few I’d guess. In a post-COVID world where any kind of certainty and permanence seems illusory at best, setting one’s store by any fixed set of business ‘rules’, no matter how ‘universally acknowledged’ (to misquote Austen) would seem naively irresponsible.

So, a review of Jim Collins and Jerry Porras’ 1994 best-seller “Built to last: successful habits of visionary companies” might well be seen as the ultimate waste of time. After all, whilst Collins’ previous work “Good to great” had offered sound yet conventional advice for business growth, “Built to last” took on a unique approach by focusing solely on the most prestigious ‘blue-chip’ companies of the 1990s; honourable institutions renowned for their longevity and reliable profits, in the hope to learn the secrets of their enduring success. Given the extremes of economic and political instability we’ve experienced in subsequent years, which has resulted in the failure or financial downgrading of so many of these ‘blue-chip’ companies, surely there is nothing left to learn from any book with a title as ill-fated as “Built to last”?

I guess you could say I’m playing devil’s advocate here, but I think we’d all agree that if you asked 100 people at random to name three institutions that will last forever, they’d probably plump for the Royal family, the BBC and - yes, you’ve guessed it - the NHS. And if any organisation has a fighting chance of being ‘built to last’, it’s one that has weathered the storm of the COVID pandemic and come out of the other side with a higher public approval rating than ever before, even if its front-line staff have utterly exhausted themselves in the process.

But how and why has the NHS survived this, and every other political upheaval during its illustrious 73-year history? Not every year of the NHS has been an ‘heroic’ one and not every government has lent it their wholehearted support. How has it stayed eternally beloved in the eyes of the public and, more significantly, those who work for it year in, year out? Is it complacency? A sense of outmoded tradition? The draw of a decent salary and the once attractive, though long-since scrapped, final salary pension scheme?

Collins and Porras believed they knew the answer. And even though the companies they analysed to draw this conclusion did very different things to make their money, that answer remained the same in each and every case: **Core values.**

While acknowledging that the world we live in is unpredictable to say the least (as if we didn’t know that already in 2021) the authors of “Built to last” go to great lengths to explain that the key difference between successful firms and enduringly successful firms is a set of core values that underpin what they do. To give an example, the Walt Disney company has moved into dozens of different business ventures over the years, but it has one core value: to make people happy. And it has outlasted all its competitors by sticking by that principle in every business decision it makes. Surely no-one would deny that the NHS has a related core value: to make people better. But how can a core value like this apply to the library staff of an NHS Trust? Collins and Porras suggest a startlingly novel approach, to see ourselves as watch-makers and as cult leaders!

### **1) The librarian as watch-maker**

One of the keys to an enduringly successful company is 'watch making' rather than 'time telling'. 'Time telling' is the ability to accurately predict the great idea or hire the visionary leader that dominates the market, but it is a fleeting thing in this changeable world. 'Watch making' is the ability to create something enduring and capable of being used and reused (assuming maintenance and repair) to **regularly** 'tell the time'; in other words, an organisation which will generate ideas and foster the creation of inspiring leaders ('time tellers') in its ranks for years to come. Successful companies don't create leaders, products or services, they create themselves, and the rest naturally follows.

Walt Disney didn't just create Mickey Mouse, he created the Walt Disney company – an organisation encompassing a wide variety of changing products and services which, to this day, fulfil the single timeless vision of making people happy, and that vision didn't die with him.

Compare this to a modern NHS Trust which co-ordinates multiple functions. The trust's 'products and services' change over the years subject to medical and technological advances and higher patient expectations, but the vision of patient care doesn't die when a procedure is updated or replaced, or a new leader is appointed. Similarly, an NHS library shouldn't sell itself solely on its 'products and services' as they too will modify and change. Instead, the librarian is a watch-maker. We champion a dynamic information service that meets the clinician where they are in their learning journey through continuing professional development and evidence-based practice. There are many 'time telling' actions necessary to fulfil that vision, but only one set of fundamental core beliefs that generate these: our ultimate focus on improved patient care.

## **2) The librarian as cult leader**

It's difficult to conceive of a librarian joining a cult, much less leading one, but Collins and Porras believe that the core values of an enduring company act as a powerful draw for its members, and certainly as powerful as any cult might have on its 'faithful followers'. Surely no-one can doubt that the Herculean efforts our front-line staff have undergone in recent times show a dedication beyond the call of duty or the lure of pay packets? But what does this mean for the NHS library service, often tucked far away from the COVID wards?

The first thing an enduring core value can do is to provide a sense of solidarity and certainty in an uncertain world. If we are all working towards the same thing, then we can join with others towards leading both revolutionary and evolutionary changes:

### **Leading the revolution**

NHS Trusts set goals. It's what they do. It's what all organisations do. Goals provide accountability, responsibility and neat little milestones along the way. That doesn't sound very much like a revolutionary idea, but few would deny that the very principle that the NHS is based on: to provide healthcare for all, irrespective of the ability to pay, was an incredibly revolutionary idea when it was founded in 1948. It's tempting to take this for granted, but comparing our co-ordinated response to the pandemic compared to other countries whose health services lacked this core belief, shows how important it is to acknowledge and celebrate the revolutionary nature of that enduring goal.

Having a goal as revolutionary as that allows us to set other goals cast from the same mould. Collins and Porras call these BHAGs (Big Hairy Audacious Goals). These are incredibly ambitious targets that can take years to strive for and require the efforts of an entire organisation to achieve. On the surface, it may seem that NHS Trusts avoid such goals, but – given how ambitious even balancing the books can be in our current economic climate – we can start to appreciate just how large and furry

our often modest-sounding Trust goals truly are. And what of the NHS library? Again, you may scoff at the very idea that we contribute meaningfully to such goals, but Health Education England's "Value proposition: the gift of time" report (2020) clearly demonstrates that we contribute to the balancing of those NHS books to the tune of £77 million a year, an achievement we should all be justly proud of. When viewed in that context, there aren't many Big Hairy Audacious Goals we couldn't help to tackle on behalf of our wider NHS organisations if we put our minds to it.

However, it's important to appreciate that leading the revolution isn't all about manning the barricades and making grand speeches, a fact not lost on Collins and Porras who consider 'Mission statements' as useful soundbites but nothing more unless backed up by incremental improvements. Which brings us rather neatly to:

### **Ripping a page from Darwin's book**

No, I'm not advocating plagiarism, or – worse still – vandalism, but rather acknowledging that our contribution to Big Hairy Audacious Goals needs to be put into the context of our library's contributions to the core value of the NHS. Enhanced patient care through improving evidence-based practice surely helps to 'make people better', but doing that is always going to be an ongoing journey, and never a final destination. Just as evidence changes, so too the tools we deliver to access that evidence and the way we train others to do likewise will change.

If you doubt this, then just consider the fundamental shift due next year when the Healthcare Database Advanced Search (HDAS) is phased out and the incredible amount of work that will be needed to not only access research, but to try and improve that access by making the best use of the new tools that we'll be provided to exploit it, such as the National Discovery Service currently under development. NHS librarians in Trusts up and down the land will work hard to discover ways to squeeze the very best out of these new systems, they'll share this freely with their colleagues, and they'll doubtless propose ways to make those systems even better in subsequent releases of the interface.

It cannot be stressed too strongly that these kinds of changes are revolutionary in their own way, but the incremental changes needed to learn, share and improve are – like a clinician's use of the evidence-based practice we find for them - also a process of gradual evolution towards improvement. We need to draw on the power of reflective practice to evaluate how things are done, experiment with new methods, test these out and then re-evaluate through that process of continuing professional development we all learned from CILIP's model of certification, chartership, fellowship and revalidation.

Moreover, no improvement (whether evolutionary or revolutionary) is possible without us all feeling fully integrated into our NHS cult, into that core belief of patient care that allows us to candidly experiment and, at times, fail in that attempt without undue censure. In other words, we need to trust each other as a team of committed professionals ready to make difficult decisions in the name of our core values.

### **Deserving your medal**

In conclusion, "Built to last" is a book very much of its time. The corporate world that Collins and Porras were familiar with has changed beyond recognition. But, to quote the French maxim: "The more things change, the more they stay the same." and just as the core values of the NHS will doubtless stay the same for decades to come, so will the enduring wisdom at the heart of this book.

In our NHS trust, each member of staff was recently sent a medal in the post as a thank you for their contributions in whatever form during the COVID crisis. It's difficult not to feel that someone in authority took that oft-used phrase "You all deserve a medal" a little too seriously. But, in truth, our NHS is an institution where medals ARE important.

Front-facing wards and teams are quite rightly celebrated for improving patient care, and that often happens as a result of the evidence we make available to them. We would do well to remember, when struggling with an uncooperative literature search, grinding through a dull systematic review or haggling with suppliers on journal subscriptions, that by improving the ways that we do all of these things, we are ultimately helping achieve our shared vision to 'make people better', and by doing this, we too may justly deserve our medals.

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### **Bibliography**

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