Is This Really the Way We Do It In California?

By Gregory Gray, Chancellor

This month’s Leadership Line includes a great deal of input from Jim Collins (author of Good to Great). The first thing that impressed me about Mr. Collins’ new book, How the Mighty Fall and Why Some Companies Never Give In, was his quote on the back cover: “Whether you prevail or fail, endure or die, depends more on what you do to yourself than on what the world does to you.”

Having had a chance to reflect on the District’s successes and challenges from the past several years, I suggest that many of the issues arose not from outside influences such as state government and funding, but rather from inside factors. As leaders, we set the tone for those who would follow. In his book, Collins discusses the trouble at Hewlett Packard (HP) that resulted in the forced retirement of CEO Lewis Platt and the hiring of Carly Fiorina—now a candidate for the United States Senate. Hiring Fiorina did not prove an unqualified success, but Collins is able to use the Platt-Fiorina era at HP as an example of how great companies stumble—sometimes badly—but eventually recover.

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-Jim Collins
Author

How the Mighty Fall and Why Some Companies Never Give In
Give In focuses on the decline of an organization, and while I submit to you that RCCD is poised in the other direction, it is an inescapable fact that every organization is susceptible to decline. The “trick” is for leaders to react at the first signs of downward trend, thereby avoiding a steep or lingering decline and reversing the decline.

Of course, in real life it’s not as easy as it sounds. Often, organizations make the mistake of looking for a silver bullet or place their faith in a big, dramatic action or a “savior” leader. This quick fix works for a while, but when the fizz of initial excitement goes flat, the only recourse is to try something even more extreme…repeatedly.

The concept of a “leader as savior” is one of the most important discussions in Good to Great, and is revisited in Collins’ second book. The “savior” leader—often an outsider—who may have the personality but lack the depth of understanding and competence to provide true leadership. This is an issue that I will discuss with the RCC Presidential Search Committee.

One of the most important things that we will do this academic year is select the next President for Riverside City College. We must identify a person who can deal with the many challenges faced by a president of a major institution. RCC is not a small, obscure college; it is a leader in California, and it can be a leader in the country. And our Norco and Moreno Valley colleges are on the same track.

Speaking of leaders in California, the more I observe the fiasco with the state budget, the more I despair of the zero leadership coming out of Sacramento. On the whole, the individuals elected to serve as our representatives, and our appointed state leaders, are failing miserably—at least as it pertains to state finances.

Simple fact: Our District is losing valuable dollars each day because of the resulting cash flow problem. Multiply a similar amount by the number of other districts and public institutions in the state, and as taxpayers we are being forced to watch millions of dollars flushed down the sewer of incompetence.

Yet, if you ask an individual legislator, “Why?” you receive a rueful smile and shrug, followed by five words I’ve come to despise: “That’s the politics of California.”

If our legislators were leaders, they would look fiscal reality in the eye, and say, “We can no longer afford to do this. Enough is enough.” By staying mum, by allowing other legislative discussions or actions to override the budget issue, they are abdicating their voter-granted, voter-entrusted responsibilities. When, in fact, what they should be doing, day in and day out, is demanding that the Governor and Assembly and Senate leaders work 24 hours a day to resolve and approve a state budget.

Sometimes leadership needs to originate from followers. I trust that we will not continue to justify legislators’ inaction by voting the same people into office on November 2. If you read Good to Great, Collins talks about those who should be on the bus and those who need to get off at the first available stop. Failing any significant action on the budget in the next few weeks, I suggest that many of these individuals head north, south, east or west—as long as it is out of the State Capitol.

Until next time…

**UPDATE**

I am pleased to report progress on items referred to in my first communiqué:

- 20 Good to Great books are now distributed or available to faculty and staff throughout the District.
- Maureen Chavez has given me a proposal for the Leadership Academy and I will be working with Gus Segura, Art Alvarez, and others to bring it to fruition.
- The mentoring project, which I feel will be extremely important for all new employees, will kick off in the very near future. Melissa Kane and I will be meeting very shortly to develop a plan.