

## Looking Out the Window, while Keeping a Mirror Close By: Creating a New Self-Evaluation Culture

By Dr. Julie Basler  
President  
Platt College, Aurora, CO

In graduate school, I was assigned a book to be read in one week or less, a book that one of my professors claimed was to be read for “fun.” In graduate school, there is little time to read for fun, but feeling guilty two days prior to his next lecture, I sat down on a Sunday morning with a borrowed, page-tethered copy of Jim Collins’ *Good to Great*. At the time, the concept of leadership meant no more to me than running a sorority meeting in my past or leading a discussion in my American literature class. But as I read the book, surprisingly cover to cover, I remember one specific passage where Collins’ discusses a pattern of how “Level 5” leaders, individuals who display humility and keep their ambition in check, are highly successful. Collins suggests that “Level 5” leaders are those who guide the organization and its individuals in meeting a common mission, in creating good work habits, and in contributing to the growth of the individual and the organization at the same time. More specifically, Collins makes a subtle yet powerful analogy of Level 5 leaders: he describes the key behavioral pattern of a highly effective leader as “the window and mirror.” The highly effective leader, as Collins notes, looks out a window to give credit for success to others, but retrospectively looks at him/herself in a mirror taking responsibility when things don’t go well.



In early 2007 when I accepted my leadership position at an ACCSC accredited school and moved 1,500 miles to begin my new journey, unpacking, I dusted off that borrowed, page-tethered version of Collins’ masterpiece. Young and eager to “lead” a group of 50 people to greatness, after being at Platt College for only a month I announced that in preparation for our next renewal of accreditation with ACCSC, each and every member of the team from the front desk receptionist to the Director would co-write the self-evaluation report (SER) in teams. I suppose looking back at my lack of experience, I imagined people high fiving, running to sign up with their team members for certain sections of the report, and cheering for the total inclusion of everyone that was employed in participating in accreditation. As you

might guess, the reaction I imagined did not come.

Instead, my idea was met with utter disbelief and confusion. Refrains of “we can’t include so-and-so, she knows nothing about what we do in our department,” or “listen, Julie-I don’t know how you have done things in the past, but this will never work,” or my favorite comment, “Isn’t the accreditation report thing written by management; don’t you know how to write it?” The responses didn’t exactly hurt my feelings (only because my skin got a little thicker), but the comments did suggest a lot about the predisposed ideas that many people have about accreditation and that is- “it’s something that’s written from the top and then we have a visit and hope it all goes well.” I quickly realized that my new team may not have been given enough opportunity to create and tell their own story – one unique to everyone that works at the organization – showing their success, the success of our students, and the success of the college. Regardless, I knew I would not be writing a SER in my office.

My first step in creating the new culture of Platt College was to create the teams. Each section of the SER had one team leader (elected by the team), several staff members, several faculty members, two-three students, one alumni, and at least one executive administrator who could not serve as the team leader. The only other established rules were (1) no one on the team could be from that area (in other words, SER Section V: Admissions Policies and Practices could not have an employee from admissions on the committee), and (2) each team would create a 30-minute presentation of their respective SER section to all campus constituents.



And so for 6 months, the teams met regularly, interviewed applicable colleagues that represented their section, and turned over their best draft for me to “one-voice.” In the process of “one voice” writing, I gave my word that while I would make grammatical corrections and create logical transitions, I would not alter the content of what had been written by each team.

The results were nothing short of AMAZING! I certainly don’t want to kid you—there were bumps along the way during the six months and at those times I looked in the mirror searching for new tools and approaches that might aid us along the way. Challenges included a position change or two, an “overly eager” team who wrote pages and pages and pages versus a team that struggled to put together four paragraphs. But, at the point of final submission to ACCSC for review, what had been created was the beautiful story of OUR FAMILY! It’s a story that only we could tell. And, on presentation day when we invited our families, friends, students, and PAC members to attend, we

celebrated each and every colleague as we let each group theme their presentations with costumes, music, and theater performances. Further, each and every employee embraced the on-site evaluation with confidence and ease because they were proud of the story they were telling. During the on-site evaluation and our subsequent ones since, it’s rare that I feel compelled to answer a question; honestly, I don’t have the chance. All of my colleagues (at every level of the organization) are well-informed and can eagerly articulate about the inner workings of our school and how that translates to student success. Every individual in our organization, including our students, are empowered to participate in our shared governance model.

And so, as I write this, I think about the challenges and success we have had along the way and how many student lives we have touched and impacted and I look out my window and smile and think to myself with great joy, “look at what they have done.”

*Collins, J. C. (2001). Good to great: Why some companies make the leap ... and others don't. New York, NY: HarperBusiness.*