

Be a Hedgehog! Achieving Greatness Through Simplicity

By Brian Carter, MSCi, LAc

The theme of this month's article is taken from a chapter of the book *Good to Great* by Jim Collins. This phenomenal bestseller summarizes five years of team-based analysis of the organizations that went from being just good to truly great.

The most successful companies focused on doing just one thing really well.

They were like the hedgehog, whose only defense (raising his quills) always defeats whatever new strategy the clever fox comes up with. These companies found their niche and stuck with it.

What's that got to do with you, the acupuncturist? If you find your own "hedgehog concept" and stick with it, you'll excel. You'll discover what activities you can profit from by doing them passionately and better than anyone else. That statement sounds simple, but it contains three important points.

To become great, you must do only what:

- you are passionate about;
- you can do better than anyone else; and
- you can make money at.

Without *all three factors*, you are doomed to what Collins calls "mere competence." You may be busy right now doing suboptimal tasks, or you may be trapped in what I call "two-thirds" activities:

- **The Lost Soul:** You're passionate about making money at something *you aren't very good at*.
- **The Starving Artist:** You're passionate about being the best at something that *doesn't make you any money*.
- **The Heartless Capitalist:** You're the best at something profitable that *you don't really care about*.

Those who become great do one thing very well and very passionately. Most observers think these people go too far - but what do they know?

In our profession, look at John Chen and the work he's done with herbal pharmacology; Bob Flaws and his accomplishments at Blue Poppy; Nigel Wiseman and Chinese medical translation; and Dan Bensky's achievements with herbal reference texts. How great would any of them have been if they'd tried to do everything? Not very. As the saying goes, "Jack of all trades; master of none."

Finding Your Hedgehog Concept

I recently did some writing exercises to generate my own hedgehog concept. I'll show you how I did it, then you can get the blank forms from my Web site (the link is at the end of this article) and do it yourself.

First, make a table with five columns, then list the following items in the first column:

1. your current activities;
2. your skills;
3. what you want to do that you're not doing;
4. what you're passionate about doing;
5. what you already do or want to do that makes money; and
6. what you're supposed to be doing that you're not.

You may come up with a few redundancies. Cross those out so each activity is listed only once.

Passion, Power and Profit

Next, go back and fill in the second, third and fourth columns. Ask yourself these questions about each activity in each column:

- Am I passionate about this? Yes or No (second column)
- Could I be the best at this? Yes, No, or Maybe (third column)
- Does this, or could this, realistically make money? Yes, No, or Maybe (fourth column)

In most cases, it's easy to answer whether you're passionate about something. If in doubt, you're probably not passionate about it. You may be surprised to find you lack the interest or patience for what seems like a really good idea. Better to find that out now!

You may be tempted to put "maybe" in the third (ability) or fourth (profitability) columns. That's fine. A firm "yes" or "no" makes for easier planning, but you may not be that sure, especially about things you've never done.

The third (ability) column may give you additional concerns. Just ask yourself if you have the skills and resources to be better at this task than anyone you can think of. If you can't answer "yes" to any of your activities, you probably haven't gotten specific enough. Use the reporter's questions: who, what, when, where, and how. For example: Could you be the best after-hours gynecological herbalist in Illinois? Some people (like Californians!) may need a more specific niche than others. Fortunately, our profession is still small enough that we don't have that problem as much as, say, chiropractors.

Some things could make you money indirectly. For example, writing a free article could lead to money-making seminars and workshops, so, it's OK to put "yes, indirectly" in the fourth column.

Next, in the fifth column, go back and evaluate what you wrote in the second, third and fourth columns. At this point, you may want to print your table and get a highlighter. Next to the activities with 3 yes's, write "Go!" as in "Go for it!" Next to the activities with three "no's," write "Stop!" Next to the rest, write either "Wait" or "Maintain" (the latter for those activities you have to do anyway). At this point, if you've done this in a word processing program like Microsoft Word, you can sort the whole table based on your fifth column. This puts all your "Go's," "Stop's," "Wait's" and "Maintain's" next to one another.

The great thing about this Hedgehog Inventory is that it tells you to stop some things, and to wait on (and not worry about) others. That gives you more time to do more effective things.

Your Hedgehog Concept

Let's take the results and find your Hedgehog Concept. You already have all your "Go's." Now organize them into an outline. Ask yourself: Do any of these activities or ideas fall under an umbrella defined by another?

For example, among my "Go's" were:

1. increasing the skills and expanding the vision of the Chinese medicine (CM) profession;
2. getting CM classics and modern CM from Chinese, to English, to practitioners;
3. getting CM to the public; and

4. speaking on the radio.

As I looked at the list, I saw that activity #2 came under the heading of #1; that is, getting the CM classics to practitioners was a subgoal of improving the CM profession. Similarly, it is more likely that I will speak on the radio to the general public than to the small audience of CM professionals, so activity #4 went under #3.

The point of the outline is to find the biggest umbrellas among your activities. It turned out that my two major hedgehog concepts were (1) transforming people by communicating to them, and (2) helping people live better and better lives.

I'm sure I could streamline and enhance this further, but it's already given me a lot of clarity and peace of mind. While the specific "Go" activities tell me what specific things would be most effective, these general umbrellas help me see if any new ideas fit my hedgehog concept. That way, I'm more likely to avoid any new "two-thirds" activities.

To get started with this new way of doing things, you may want to list two or three of your strongest, most immediate "Go's." These items that were definite "yes's" or across-the-board items must be done now. Consider this your super-powered to-do list.

This process helps you confront the truth. By clarifying and simplifying your goals and activities, you will improve your quality of life and increase your chances of success and happiness. Enjoy!

Editor's note: blank copies of the Hedgehog Inventory can be downloaded for free at www.pulsemed.org/hedgehog.htm.

Reference

1. Collins J. *Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap ... and Others Don't*. Harper Business, 2001.
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