



What makes a researcher ‘good’ to ‘great’?

Dong-Wook Song¹

Published online: 22 August 2023
© World Maritime University 2023

“Good is the enemy of great. And that is one of the key reasons why we have so little that becomes great.”

Jim Collins (2001, p. 1)

In his bestselling book entitled *Good to Great*, Collins (2001), together with his seventeen research team members, has made a comprehensive effort towards finding what makes a good company to be a great company: in other words, factors and/or attributes that transform good results to great results. He posits that doing so is like opening a black box of those great companies, having an implicit implication that his endeavour, however deep and hard efforts made, cannot discover all aspects of great-making factors and/or attributes. It is therefore claimed that a comprehensive grasp of the myriad constituents that contribute to the transition of a company from goodness to greatness can be a challenging and intricate pursuit. It can be also stated that we are unable (or its being almost impossible) to fully understand what makes a company to become great from good.

Literally speaking, ‘good’ means of a high quality or standard or level, while ‘great’ is used to describe an achievement of someone whose actions, knowledge or skill are highly regarded and recognised (Dictionary 2003). Having put these meanings of two terms into a business-world context, we (at least myself) are surprised at one of his observations that ‘... you’d be struck by the utter absence of talk about ‘competitive strategy’. Yes, they [CEO or senior managers of those great companies] did talk about strategy, and they did talk about performance, and they did talk about becoming the best and they even talked about winning. But they never talked about in reactionary terms and never defined their strategies principally in response to what others were doing. They talked in terms of what they were trying to create and how they were trying to improve relative to an absolute standard of excellence’ (Collins 2001, p. 160). This flabbergasting point leads us to think about the true meaning of becoming and being great. An extension of the literal and business-world meanings can be that to become ‘great’ does naturally demand us to produce a series of high quality works in a continuous, consistent and importantly accumulative manner over the long period of time.

✉ Dong-Wook Song
joma@wmu.se

¹ World Maritime University, Malmö, Sweden

Turning to the researching world, however, we are all aware of fundamental differences between what a company pursues for and what a researcher does. In a broad sense, the company is to meet customer's needs for its (economic and financial) sustainable presence, while the researcher is to generate a knowledge for a society in general. In other words, the goal business people work for looks rather straightforward—generating profits in a sustainable manner, while the objective researchers attempt to meet is not the case—see more in Song (2021). Such differences make it onerous to reflect the Collins point within a research context.

Your editor-in-chief does, however, opt in a view that there is still, to some extent, a degree of reflective commonality. We (academic and scientific researchers) do all notice (or have already experienced) that initially 'becoming' a good researcher requires us to firstly learn and digest a bunch of knowledge and skills, and to gradually embrace them into our daily researching activities. Doing these intellectual exercises in a circular and cumulative way for a certain period of time (note that doing PhD research needs at least 3–4 years in social sciences and a few more years afterwards as a post-doctoral researcher) has eventually transformed us to a stage of 'being' a good researcher. 'Being' a good researcher is naturally expected to produce a series of good (viz., idea-provocative or result-impactful) research outputs over a noticeably long period of time (at least, for 10 years or so in a certain field of his/her research theme).¹

Being a good researcher can be achievable and maintainable by our effort in a persevere manner. It can be manageable and controllable by us. Becoming and subsequently being a great researcher is, however, of a different dimension. It requires to survive (in terms of ideas and knowledge produced) a series of challenges and tests by others (including real-world practitioners for applicability), and subsequent recognitions, if successfully survived from those challenges and tests, by peers in the same or cross-disciplines. An example is getting a high level of citations in a modern academic term or an award from scientific or learned societies like Nobel prizes. In other words, becoming/being a great researcher seems beyond our own control—personal luck, timing or societal trend might play a role towards it.

Summing up all the above discussion as a viewpoint, your editor-in-chief is confidently able to conclude that we researchers are making a due effort, in a continuous and persevere manner, towards both becoming and being 'good' in our chosen field(s) of research, while acknowledging that becoming and being 'great' is not our concern or goal, at least until we are reaching to a late stage of our academic/research career. This synoptic summary is interestingly in line with one of Collins' conclusions that '... to create great results requires a nearly fanatical dedication to the idea of consistency within the Hedgehog Concept' (Collins 2001, p. 139). This notion is already reflected in my previous editorial (Song 2022) that hopes to see more hedgehogs in the research domain of maritime affairs.

¹ Detailed and elaborate accounts as academic career stages or rhythms can be found at Frost and Taylor (1996). Both young and seasoned academics will find insightful and refreshing their book composed of 59 well-established academics as contributors having shared their experiences individually as well as collectively in a retrospective way.

Finally, a quotation from Collins (2001) is again worth mentioning herein: 'it is impossible to have a great life unless it is a meaningful life. And it is very difficult to have a meaningful life without meaningful work (p. 208)'. What kind of research is meaningful? How to then produce such a meaningful research work?.....you could raise more questions. Your editor-in-chief shall attempt or try to answer one of those questions at the next editorial, at least based on his own experiences—*how to produce a good research paper?* or *how to conduct a good research?*

Of course, your usual comments and counter-ideas are always welcome.

Dong-Wook Song
Editor-in-Chief
joma@wmu.se

References

- Collins J (2001) Good to great: why some companies make the leap... and others don't. Random House Business Books, London
- Dictionary C (2003) Advanced learner's English dictionary. HarperCollins Publisher, Glasgow
- Frost P, Taylor MS (eds) (1996) Rhythms of academic life: personal accounts of careers in academia. SAGE Publications, London
- Song D-W (2021) Editorial – what is research? WMU J Marit Aff 20(4):407–411
- Song D-W (2022) Editorial – a fox vs. a hedgehog: two types of researchers. WMU J Marit Aff 21(3):277–281

Publisher's note Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.