

# First “Who”, then ‘What’

In his bestselling book ‘Good to Great’, in which Jim Collins and his team share their findings on the secret ingredients that enable ‘great’ companies to outperform their competition, he identifies the principle of **‘first who, then what’** - *“The key point here is not just the idea of getting the right people on the team. The key point is that “who” questions come before “what” decisions - before vision, before strategy, before organisational structure, before tactics.”*

The most transformational leaders do not first figure out where to drive the bus and then get people to take it there. No, they first get the right people on the bus (and the wrong people off it!) and then figure out where to drive it. They say, in essence, *“Look, I don’t really know where we should take this bus. But I know this much: if we get the right people on the bus, the right people in the right seats, and the wrong people off the bus, then we’ll figure out how to take it someplace great.”*

The best (‘good-to-great’) leaders understand three simple truths:

First, if you begin with “who,” rather than “what,” you can more easily **adapt** to a changing world. If people join the bus primarily because of where it is going, what happens if you get ten miles down the road and you need to change direction? You’ve got a problem. But if people are on the bus because of who else is on the bus, then it’s much **easier to change direction**: *“Hey, I got on this bus because of who else is on it; if we need to change direction to be more successful, fine with me.”*

Second, if you have the right people on the bus, the problem of how to motivate and manage people largely goes away. **The right people don’t need to be tightly managed or fired up; they will be self-motivated by the inner drive to produce the best results and to be part of creating something great.**

Third, if you have the wrong people, it doesn’t matter whether you discover the right direction; you still won’t have a great company.

... First, get the right people on the bus (and the wrong people off the bus) before you figure out where to drive it... **people are not your most important asset. The right people are.**

The best companies **place greater weight on character attributes** than on specific educational background, practical skills, specialized knowledge, or work experience. Not that specific knowledge or skills are unimportant, but they view these traits as more teachable (or at least, learnable), whereas dimensions like character, work ethic, basic intelligence, dedication to fulfilling commitments, and values are more ingrained.

### Be 'rigorous' not 'ruthless'

To be ruthless means hacking and cutting, especially in difficult times, or wantonly firing people without any thoughtful consideration. **To be rigorous means consistently applying exacting standards at all times and at all levels.**

How to be rigorous:

1. When in doubt, don't hire – keep looking
2. When you know you need to make a people change, act.

*(The moment you feel the need to tightly manage someone, you've made a hiring mistake. The best people don't need to be managed. Guided, taught, led – yes. But not tightly managed)*

3. Put your best people on your biggest opportunities, not your biggest problems

Adherence to the idea of 'first who' might be the closest link between a great company and a great life. For no matter what we achieve, if we don't spend vast amounts of our time with people we love and respect, we cannot possibly have a great life. But if we spend the vast majority of our time with people we love and respect – people we really enjoy being on the bus with and who will never disappoint us – then we will almost certainly have a great life, no matter where the bus goes.

- Jim Collins, 'Good to Great' 2001