From Great to Good Enough: Embracing the Ordinary in Leadership

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Abstract

This paper examines the influence of Jim Collins’ best-selling Good to Great (Collins, 2001) and suggests reversing his oft-quoted sequence through insights from the child psychiatrist, Donald Winnicott, who pioneered the concept of good enough parenting. The paper describes Collins’ Level 5 leaders, who demonstrate a paradoxical blend of personal humility and professional will. It acknowledges critiques that have been made of Collins’ work, before going on to explore whether the concept of ‘greatness’ represents an unachievable ideal, which is actually disempowering. Winnicott’s work is then introduced, and examples of his approach described in a number of fields, including politics and education. This provides the background to an introduction to good enough leadership, using insights from psychology, consultancy practice (Bains et al., 2007), and an Ashridge research project (Binney, Wilke and Williams, 2005), which explored the ordinary in leadership. The work of Winnicott on holding environments, and his colleague John Bowlby on secure bases, is then considered, and suggestive links found with organisational and leadership insights from the complexity sciences. The paper concludes by suggesting that the humble determination described by Collins may be found in ordinary people in ordinary situations, and that the term ‘good enough’ may be more empowering than an unachievable ideal implied by ‘greatness’.
Good to Great

Collins and Level 5 Leadership

One of the best-selling books on leadership in the 21st century is Good to Great (Collins, 2001). In it, Jim Collins explores what contributes to sustained success in companies. Using a longitudinal comparative methodology similar to that seen in his earlier Built to Last (Collins & Porras, 1994), Collins describes a hierarchy of leaders from highly capable ‘Level 1’ individuals to ‘Level 5’ leaders, who ‘[build] enduring greatness through a paradoxical blend of personal humility and professional will’ (2001: 20). Collins’ work has been highly influential in the leadership field: he contributed a monograph focused on the social sector (Collins, 2006), and echoes continue to be seen in places well away from the original business setting (Bonem, 2012).

Critiques of Good to Great

The purpose of this paper is not to critique Collins’ approach, although it is important to acknowledge significant criticisms that have been made of his work. Areas of criticism include:

Methodology. For all the collated data, especially with so-called comparison companies, academic researchers question the rigour of data collection, which, despite large volumes, tends to the self-selecting and anecdotal (Rosenzweig, 2014).

Data analysis. Niendorf and Beck (2008) draw attention to ‘fatal errors’ in data mining (p14). They identify a further fatal error in linking cause and effect, arguing that association [of greatness with Collins’ identified principles] does not imply causation (p15f).

CEO agency. In the context of leadership studies, one of the five common themes identified by Collins deserves special attention. Tourish (2013) notes the tendency ‘to over-attribute either success of failure in business, politics, sport and elsewhere to the role of those who hold a handful of top positions’, adding that, ‘In business, this error is particularly pronounced in the influential work of Jim Collins’ (p10f).

1 Good to Great was chosen as one of the Top Ten leadership books of the 21st century by a panel of practitioners and academics I chaired (MODEM, 2011).
As someone who inhabits the overlap between academic and practitioner communities, I can readily acknowledge these criticisms. But I do not want to throw out the pedagogical baby with the methodological bathwater. In particular, I am sure that the 'blend of personal humility and professional will' is a paradox of leadership that is worth exploring, and even aspiring to.

Instead, I want in this paper to explore a potentially negative and disempowering side-effect of Collins’ work. If all should aspire to 'level 5' leadership, what of the large numbers of managers who feel excluded, unable to achieve such heights? Indeed, does the perceived impossibility of achieving the ideal have a negative impact on individuals and the organizations they seek to lead? To explore this question, I wish to introduce insights from a discipline where perceived failure to reach impossible ideals has been examined and applied for some time: parenting.

**Good Enough?**

**Winnicott and Good Enough Parenting**

The concept of ‘good enough’ parenting was developed by the British paediatrician and child psychiatrist Donald Winnicott (1896-1971) (Winnicott, 1991 [1957]). In a blog written in the run up to the card industry’s Mother’s Day bonanza of idealizing and idolizing mothers, Kunst (2012) summarises what a good enough parent looks like:

> Winnicott’s good enough mother is sincerely preoccupied with being a mother. She pays attention to her baby. She provides a holding environment. She offers both physical and emotional care. She provides security. When she fails, she tries again. She weathers painful feelings. She makes sacrifices. Winnicott’s good enough mother is not so much a goddess; she is a gardener. She tends her baby with love, patience, effort, and care.

Kunst goes on to say how a mother feels under pressure and strain. She is ambivalent, being both selfless and self-interested, turning both toward and away from her child. Mothers (I would add, parents and carers) are capable of great dedication yet are prone to resentment. Kunst highlights how Winnicott even dared to say that a good enough mother loves their child but also has room to hate them. Mothers are real (ibid).
In the same way that Winnicott reassured parents that they were doing a fine job in bringing up their children when things seemed less than ideal, I wish to explore whether similar comments be applied to managers who see their efforts as falling short of a fantasized ideal. Before doing so, we can briefly look at where ‘good enough’ approaches have been applied in a range of settings.

**Examples of Good Enough Approaches**

Examples of the ‘good enough’ concept have been applied to a number of fields beyond Winnicott’s original conception of parenting (strictly motherhood). Examples include:

**Politics.** Ross (2000) applies Winnicott’s work to the fraught area of ethnic conflict management. Exploring questions of success, identity, empowerment and relationships, he suggest that ‘good-enough conflict management’ recognises inherent tensions, but encourages a developmental, transformative process. Samuels (2001) recognises that political leaders are often perceived through extremes of idealization or denigration. He identifies the possibility of failure as a key insight from the good enough vocabulary, and suggests that bottom-up, networked, collaborative organisational models may be more appropriate than top down hierarchies (p82).

Two recent books from rather different stables – a political historian and a former CEO – do not explicitly refer to the good enough concept. But they do challenge assumptions about singular ‘great’ leaders. Brown (2014) challenges the myth of the strong leader, while Hytner (2014) explores the role of consiglieri, who lead from the shadows.

**Education.** Swanwick (2008) explores the educational and social contexts in which teachers and students work, aiming to draw up criteria to identify the ‘good-enough’ teacher. Such teachers are seen in more ill-defined roles than those expected by the conventional teacher. A typical teacher’s blog is right in Winnicott territory - ‘granting permission to let go of perfection’ – but makes no explicit reference to the originator of the term in 61 blog entries (Anon., 2013)
Healthcare. Noting that the idea of being ‘good enough’ in medicine has been explored, but not gained acceptance in the general medical community, Ratnapalan and Batty (2009) call for a path to excellence through being ‘good enough’:

We should not confuse good enough with merely good... Good enough is not mediocrity. It has to do with rational choices as opposed to compulsive behaviour. The good enough approach is a way to drive ongoing improvement and achieve excellence by progressively meeting, challenging, and raising our standards as opposed to driving toward an illusion of perfection (p240).

Pastoral practice. Writing autobiographically from her experience as a mother and parish priest, Percy (2014) asks if ‘the concept of being good enough [could] provide a more honest understanding and evaluation of the role of parish clergy’ (p30). While not all would wish to identify with such a calling, topics identified in a concluding chapter – guilt, confusing success and failure, using inappropriate measurements, dealing with growth, and especially a holistic view of being and doing (pp143-162) – appear to have a wider resonance as we move on to consider leadership more generally.

Good Enough Leadership

So, might we posit a concept of Good Enough Leadership? Kets de Vries and Miller (1985), in discussing narcissistic leaders from a psychoanalytic perspective, draw attention to the importance of understanding the difference between the ideal of perfection and just being ‘good enough’. French (2001) draws a parallel between a child’s development in physical, emotional, mental and spiritual terms and a ‘good enough’ mother, and the demands of change, which require ‘good enough’ managerial and leadership capabilities.

More recently, Storch and Shotter (2013) highlight such questions as relationships and finding security in the bodily environment. Citing Barker (1997), they highlight the dynamic, developmental role of leadership and make explicit links with Winnicott around such questions as unrealistic ideals and the need for sensitivity and responsiveness in interactions (p2). They draw attention to the importance of knowledge (Antonacopoulou, 2009) and conclude a thoughtful article thus:
rather than laying out explicit but de-contextualized plans or ‘recipes’ ahead of time for others to follow – no matter how well-intentioned or well-fashioned – the task of ‘imperfect or good enough leaders (or consultants)’ is to help to create the occasions or circumstances in a company within which (and through which) employees can develop their own ways of orienting or relating themselves to the situations within which they must work. (p15, italics orig.)

They add, ‘However, we see contemporary leadership and consultancy practices outlined in the mainstream literature doing the exact opposite’ (ibid).

Storch and Shotter’s work is aimed at practitioner-consultants, and it is from that field that some of the most sustained writing advocating good enough leadership comes. Bains and colleagues (2007), from their experience in the YSC consultancy, describe how the good enough mindset is good enough². They offer an example of a parallel between a good enough parent’s ability to tolerate destructive impulses and a good enough leader’s ability to process multiple conflicting agendas. Another suggestive parallel is between a parent promoting learning by holding up a mirror to a child and a manager offering feedback and coaching. Parallels in likely outcomes include children with a realistic sense of their own power matched against co-workers who are neither meek nor arrogant, and children in touch with their own selves, reflected in authentic workers whose professional and personal lives are aligned (pp106-112).

So, how helpful is the concept of good enough leadership? When seeking talent, can we envision world leading institutions advertising for ‘good enough’ candidates to join their ‘great’ organizations? Or will expensive company leadership development programmes aim to produce ‘good enough’ leaders? Perhaps not. But there is one particular aspect of Winnicott’s work on good enough parenting to which I should like to draw attention. It is noticeable that, although the language of ‘good enough’ is widely used in the literature, Winnicott (1991 [1957]) chose a rather different phrase when addressing parents through a series of BBC radio talks.

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The Ordinary in Leadership

Winnicott (1991 [1957]) continually refers to ‘the ordinary’, a phrase applied to practical leaders in an Ashridge research project (Binney, Wilke, & Williams, 2005)\(^3\). Indeed, Binney and colleagues conclude their summary thus: ‘A child thrives on “good enough” parenting. A group will, we believe, thrive on “good enough” leadership’ (p244). Two representative quotes from (Winnicott, 1991 [1957]) provide further links to the leadership literature:

First, ‘In the ordinary things you do you are quite naturally doing very important things’ (p16) has echoes of Alvesson and Sveningsson (2003), who draw attention to the ‘extraordinarization of the mundane’.

Secondly, ‘The ordinary good mother and father do not want to be worshipped by their children’ (p84). The literature on narcissistic leaders and critical approaches to charismatic and transformational leaders often finds itself using language that is close to that of worship (Höpfl, 1991; Tourish & Pinnington, 2002).

As Harle (2011) shows, consistency in a leader’s actions from everyday occurrences to strategic announcements produces repeating patterns, fractals, at different levels in an organisation. Might this be where good enough meets great, and where group leadership meets corporate leadership? In particular, consistency promotes a sense of psychological security: here we encounter another insight from the work of Winnicott and his colleagues.

Beyond Good Enough

The Holding Environment

Barrett (2012), writing as a management professor and jazz musician, draws attention to another aspect of Winnicott’s legacy: the holding environment. ‘Jazz players look for and notice instability, disorder, novelty, emergence, and self-organization for their innovative potential rather than as something to be avoided, eliminated or controlled’ (p68). Barrett’s language is suffused with complexity theory: indeed, he sees jazz bands as ‘chaordic systems’ (p68, after Hock (1999)). But he laments that ‘We have been socialized in the other

\(^3\) Binney et al’s Living Leadership features in the same list of best leadership books as Collins’ Good to Great (see n1).
direction: to assume that systems need hierarchy to organize and have some stable order. Mechanistic forms of organizing feed the belief that the individual leader is the most important factor in keeping an organization on track’ (p68). He identifies Jim Collins’ ‘mega-bestseller’ Good to Great as a prime culprit in this trend (n1, p187).

Barrett notes that the holding environment relies on the group, rather than an individual: ‘A healthy group creates a good holding environment for all members, a space in which they can experiment with the awareness that they will receive empathy, understanding, support, and also challenge. In such holding environments, adults are better able to advance in learning and development’ (p131).

Another author who draws attention to Winnicott’s holding environment in a group context is Ralph Stacey (2001): ‘we might think of a good-enough holding environment as enabling groups of people to operate as a transitional group, a group in a state of not knowing what its task is yet, a group that must therefore employ creative imagination, fantasy, and play’ (p103). Given Barrett’s identification of complexity theory, it is surely significant that Stacey has been at the forefront of applying complexity thinking to organisations in the UK, especially through the concept of complex responsive processes. Note, too, the echoes of ‘not knowing’ (French, 2001).

(Stapley, 2001) also develops Winnicott’s concept of the holding environment, using it to understand how organizational culture develops. He identifies physical, social and psychological aspects: ‘The organisational holding environment consists of a physical and social part, which is particularly influenced by factors such as the leader or ruling coalition, policies structures and strategies. In addition, it also includes a psychological part, which is largely unconscious’ (p158f). Note, for our purposes, the role of the leader as one among several possible influencing factors.

Secure Bases

Harwood (2003) links Winnicott’s work with that of his colleague, John Bowlby (1907-90), to address charismatic leaders in groups. In particular, she draws attention to insights from attachment theory (Game, 2011). Here we encounter another aspect of the ordinary in parenting and leadership: the importance of consistency of actions. Such secure bases
(Kohlrieser, Goldsworthy, & Coombe, 2012) allow change to be embraced and innovation encouraged. Kohlrieser and colleagues define a secure base as:

a person, place, goal or object that provides a sense of protection, safety and caring and offers a source of inspiration and energy for daring, exploration, risk taking and seeking challenge (p8).

Robertson (2005) first drew attention to how attachment need not be restricted to people, coining the term ‘matter’ for such attachment (see also Manning, Harle, and Robertson (2011)). Kohlrieser and colleagues note something similar: ‘In an organization, a secure base may be a boss, peers, colleagues, the corporation itself, the work or even the product’ (pxix). Also, given the use of complexity theory made by Barrett and Stacey, Robertson is also strong on this perspective.

Before moving on, we can note that Winnicott’s concept of the holding environment and Bowlby and Ainsworth’s secure base, have affinities with ‘zones of psychological safety’ identified by Amy Edmondson (Edmondson, 2012; Edmondson, Bohmer, & Pisano, 2001)

Towards Conclusions

A blog which appeared while this paper was being written provides a good example of how language and expectations intersect. I must confess that the Collins-esque title Strive for Greatness (Stoner, 2014) hardly enthused me. But I was surprised:

‘The secret to greatness lies in the small actions we each take every day.’

So we conclude where we began. Collins’ ‘Level 5’ leaders may well display a paradoxical blend of personal humility and professional will. But such humble determination may also be displayed in ordinary ways in ordinary situations by ordinary people for whom the epithet ‘good enough’ may be liberating.

It is important to flag an important limitation of Kohlrieser et al’s work. In a footnote, they state ‘We recognise that there may be negative secure bases... For the purposes of this book, we are focusing on the secure bases that influence us to achieve positive things in our lives.’ (n5, p287). The fact that they were referring to the Jonestown massacre shows the dangerous power of inappropriate attachment. I believe such considerations should form an integral part of introducing the power of secure bases (see also Tourish (2013)).
Bibliography


