

# GREAT BY CHOICE

## Uncertainty, Chaos, and Luck- Why Some Thrive Despite Them All

By Jim Collins

“One should . . . be able to see that things are hopeless and yet be determined to make them otherwise”

--F. Scott Fitzgerald

We sense a dangerous disease infecting our modern culture and eroding hope: an increasing prevalent view that greatness owes more to circumstance, even luck, than to action and discipline—that what happens to us matters more than what we do. In games of chance, like a lottery or roulette, this seems plausible. But taken as an entire philosophy, applied more broadly to human endeavor, it's a deeply debilitating life perspective, one that we can't imagine wanting to teach young people. **Do we really believe that our actions count for little, that those who create something great are merely lucky, that our circumstances imprison us? Do we want to build a society and culture that encourage us to believe that we aren't responsible for our choices and accountable for our performance?**

Our Research evidence stands firmly against this view. This work began with the premise that most of what we face in lies beyond our control, that life is uncertain and the future unknown. And as we wrote in Chapter 7, luck plays a role for everyone, both good luck and bad luck. But if one company (*or organization*) becomes great while another in similar circumstances and with comparable luck does not, the root cause of why one becomes great and the other does not simply cannot be circumstances or luck. Indeed, if there's one overarching message arising from more than six thousand years of corporate history across all our research—studies that employ comparisons of great versus good in similar circumstances—it would be this: **greatness is not primarily a matter of circumstance; greatness is first and foremost a matter of conscious choice and discipline.** The factors that determine whether or not a company becomes truly great, even in chaotic and uncertain world, lie largely within the hands of people. *It is not mainly a matter of what happen to them but a matter of what they create what they do, and how well they do it.*

This book and the three that precede it (*Built to Last, Good to Great, and How the Mighty Fall*) are looks into the question of what it takes to build an enduring great organization. As we conducted the 10X research, we simultaneously tested the concepts from the previous work, considering whether any of the key concepts from those works ceased to apply in highly uncertain and chaotic

environments. The earlier concepts held up, and we are confident that the concepts from all four studies increase the odds of building a great company.

But do they guarantee success? No, they don't. **Good research advances understanding but never provide the ultimate answer; we always have more to learn. And life offers no guarantees.** It's always possible that game-ending events and unbendable forces – disease, accident, brain injury, earthquake, tsunami, financial calamity, civil war, or any of a thousand other possible events—will subvert our strongest and most disciplined efforts. Still, we must act.

When the moment comes—when we're afraid, exhausted, or tempted – what choice do we make? Do we abandon our values? Do we give in? Do we accept average performance because that's what most everyone else accepts? Do we capitulate to the pressure of the moment? Do we give up on our dreams when we've been slammed by brutal facts? **The greatest leaders we've studied throughout all our research care as much about *values as victory*, as much as about *purpose as profit*, as much about being *useful as being successful*.** Their drive and standards are ultimately internal, rising from somewhere deep inside.

We are not imprisoned by our circumstances. We are not imprisoned by the luck we get or the inherent unfairness of life. We are not imprisoned by crushing setbacks, self-inflicted mistakes or our past success. We are not imprisoned by the times in which we live, by the number of hours in a day or even the number of hours we're granted in our very short lives. **In the end, we can control only a tiny sliver of what happens to us. But even so, we are free to choose, free to become**

**great by choice**