

## Dick Maggiore: Lots to learn from the hedgehog and the fox

By [Dick Maggiore Special](#) to The Canton Repository

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To understand the spiny hedgehog and the sly silver fox, we must go back nearly three millennia.

It started with a verse from the 7<sup>th</sup> century BC Greek poet Archilochus: “The fox knows many things, but the hedgehog knows only one big thing.” Plato had similar views in 400 BC.

*War and Peace* by Russian-born Leo Tolstoy, one of the greatest authors of all time, blurs the line between fiction and history to get closer to the truth. He recognized we are reconciled to life as it is, foxlike, seeing multiple things in the world, while at the same time, searching for a single hedgehog-like truth.

In 1953, Isaiah Berlin’s *The Hedgehog and the Fox* was published as an essay on Tolstoy’s view of history. Berlin, one of the finest minds of his time, explores in his essay the basic difference between those who are fascinated by the infinite variety of things, foxes, versus those who relate everything through the lens of a single-focused idea, hedgehogs.

More recently, in his 2001 book *Good to Great*, Jim Collins re-popularized the concept of the hedgehog and the fox. The book was written to help figure out why some companies become great - while others don't.

Funny how [powerful ideas](#) tend to stick around.

Collins says the hedgehog deeply understands one idea and does it really well over a long period of time. How does Collins’ hedgehog-and-fox concept play out in business today?

In the original parable, the fox uses many strategies to catch the hedgehog. Every time, the fox is defeated. He gets a nose full of sharp spines. The hedgehog knows how to do one thing really well: defend itself.

Collins claims that organizations are more likely to succeed if they focus on one thing and do it very well. Such sharp focus will enable the company to defeat competitors and become a truly great business.

According to Collins, the way to find your hedgehog is to make three determinations. Find what you are truly passionate about other than making money. Next, what do you do better than anyone else. Finally, will it drive your economic engine.

Your hedgehog is where all three of the above overlap.

The whole company needs to be really passionate about something. We need to be really good at that something. That something needs to run our economic engine by drawing a strong customer following.

It's not always so cut-and-dried, however. What if you do all of the things above and something changes in the marketplace? Do we stubbornly hang on to our hedgehog? Should Kodak have hung onto photographic paper, Polaroid onto cameras and Blackberry onto phones? They did and lost. Should Xerox have held onto copiers? They didn't and lost.

Today, most marketplaces are moving in several directions at once—like a fox. Today our ears, eyes and other senses must be constantly scanning the environment.

We are proponents of Collins' hedgehog concept: one unifying idea—laser focus. Great companies have a very clear understanding of their one big idea and that single idea guides decision-making throughout the organization.

But companies are finding they need to adjust more often to their changing environment—to be nimble like a fox. If the change is significant, then a drastic move may be necessary. Perhaps a new brand name must be introduced, but more often the right response is less dramatic. We can capitalize on the brand's meaning in the minds of its customers, while adjusting its meaning.

Amazon is an example of nimble adjustment. In 1994, it launched as an online bookseller. Today, Amazon is the world's second largest overall online retailer—and not just of books. If Amazon had not adjusted, it would still be selling just books and someone else would be the fourth largest company in the world.

Collins is credited with coining several terms that have become business staples such as Level-5 leadership, BHAG (big hairy audacious goal), get the right people on the bus and then get them in the right seat, the flywheel and the doom loop, and of course the hedgehog and the fox. The ideas in his book continue to make quite an impact in the business world.

*Good to Great* is among the top 10 all-time favorite business books providing principles that can provide direction—not answers. We believe they remain relevant today. We're all looking for that silver bullet. But the world is neither black nor white. We need to heed both the hedgehog and the fox.

There are two kinds of people in the world: Those who divide the world into two kinds of people, and those who don't. – Robert Benchley

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