A couple months ago at our department head meeting, we reviewed an article entitled "Leadership and the Profession: Where to from here? Be reformers or be reformed?" by Bob O'Neill, Executive Director of the International City/County Management Association (ICMA).

We had a good discussion about the article and how it related to our leadership, in particular our Committee of the Whole meetings which have emphasized taking a long-term and communitywide perspective. And these meetings have had a profound impact on decision-making at both the staff and City Council levels.

I wrote about the article in a November 2013 column, so I won't review our discussion here today. But a question near the end of the department head meeting caught me by surprise, "What's all this about buses and hedgehogs?"

The article had a sidebar listing twelve questions based on the work of Jim Collins, author of the business classic Good to Great. Mr. Collins had been the keynote speaker at the ICMA annual conference the year before, so the sidebar was a link between his keynote address and the article. But it certainly did look out of place if you weren't familiar with his terminology.

In today's column, I'll touch on three of the sidebar's twelve questions and how they relate to Evansville.

Do we want to build a great community, and are we willing to do what it takes?

I hope the answer is yes. Mr. Collins describes, "A great organization is one that delivers superior performance and makes a distinctive impact over a long period of time." He also says, "Greatness is largely a matter of conscious choice and discipline."

City leadership has been emphasizing a Drive for Excellence. Not satisfied with the status quo, this means deliberately focusing on continuous improvement. We have been leading change, and we're seeing results from the city's commitment to Top-Notch Service and continuous improvement.

Improvement may be in the services we provide such as adding wing blades to the plow trucks and pre-treating with salt brine to do a better job when snowplowing. Another example is adding the convenience of online and phone payment options for utility bills. Or emphasizing customer service when interacting with the public by phone or in person. Or expanded (and creative) outreach by the Eager Free Public Library to connect with the pool, the farmers market, youth center, and small businesses.

Improvement may be in making our operations more efficient such as reducing duplicated effort by consolidating two accounting systems – one for the utility department and the other for general municipal activities – into a single set of books. Or the city's investments in energy efficient lights and pumps to reduce long-term operating

costs. Or outsourcing the stuffing and mailing of envelopes to free up staff time for more valuable priorities.

Some improvements can be readily measured. For example, last year our Electric Utility earned Reliable Public Power Program (RP3) designation by the American Public Power Association. Less than ten percent of the public electric utilities in the country earn this distinction for providing customers with the highest degree of reliable and safe electric service.

And earlier this year, our Police Department was awarded with accredited status by the Wisconsin Law Enforcement Accreditation Group (WILEAG). Evansville is one of only thirty-four agencies in the state to earn accredited status, and Evansville Police Department is the smallest accredited department in the state. And both the RP3 and WILEAG reviews provided us with objective, third party assessments on areas to focus our efforts for further improvement.

Even when not calibrated to specific metrics, there is evidence of great results in other city services. For example, our historic character and architecture are iconic features of our community. State and federal designation of two additional historic districts, a number of private properties' use of historic tax credits for rehabilitation projects, and local presenters speaking at state conferences are evidence of distinctive impact where specific measurements are more subjective.

Do we have the right people on the bus and in the key seats?

Mr. Collins advises first getting the right people "on the bus" and getting them in the right seats, then figuring out where to drive it. Whether someone is the right person has more to do with character traits and innate capabilities than with specific knowledge, background, or skills.

For several years, we've approached vacant positions as a clean sheet of paper. We review and update the job descriptions based not only on the technical skills but also the character traits we expect. And we write the job descriptions not only on the duties today but to grow into what we envision the position for the future.

For example, the job description for the Water & Light Superintendent includes these responsibilities: lead with integrity and honesty at all times; maintain and enhance positive relationships beyond the utility; and continuously work to improve service quality, system reliability, and process improvements. These character traits are so important that we made them explicit in the job description.

A year and a half ago, when hiring a Community Development Director, I actually re-read the bus chapter in Good to Great to help focus my thoughts on hiring the right person.

Last year when filling several vacant positions at city hall, we certainly looked for technical skills in accounting. But we also focused on soft skills, especially customer service. One skill set wasn't enough; we required both technical and soft skills. And we paid attention to character traits such as initiative, an interest in seeing how different job duties are related and fit together, and ability to figure things out. This sets us up with an office flexible to meet unexpected and varied job duties and adaptable to pursue continuous improvement.

What is our hedgehog?

The Hedgehog Concept is a metaphor derived from an ancient Greek parable. The hedgehog (unlike the cunning fox) has a simple approach: focus on what is essential and stick to it.

Mr. Collins describes, "The pivot point in Good to Great is the Hedgehog Concept…deep understanding of three intersecting circles: 1) what are you deeply passionate about, 2) what you can be the best in the world at, and 3) what best drives your economic engine." And the three circles reinforce each other.

The first circle (passion or purpose) should be fairly easy in the public sector, since the work itself is service work. The city provides essential goods and services. And when done well, the public benefits. I am most pleased and impressed when employees take pride in their work because it is for our community.

The second circle (achievement as the best in the world) is both the pursuit of high-level, Top-Notch Service and also the Drive for Excellence to continuously improve. It is the repeated, ongoing striving to do (even a little bit) better than the last time. Earlier this year we conducted a citywide survey as part of the upcoming update to our Smart Growth Plan. A key section of the survey was something of a report card asking for feedback on basic city services like police and street maintenance and on quality of life services such as the pool, library, and youth center. When the results are reported later this spring, you can trust we will take them to heart.

The third circle (economic engine) would better be described as a resources engine. Services do cost money, but money is not the only resource we use. We have deep wells of volunteers in this community; their time and expertise are tremendous resources for promoting entrepreneurship, dredging lakes, building disc golf courses, supporting library programs, and providing vision for the community. And going beyond the vision, our brand / our identity which makes Evansville special for so many also gains us the emotional commitment which may be the most fundamental resource.

The intersection of these three circles is the focus of the hedgehog. I am sure these concepts will be reflected in our next Committee of the Whole meeting this spring, in daily city operations and services, and in the update of or Smart Growth Plan during the next year.

This is where we set our goals and our strategies. None of these are one-time shots. They are ongoing and dedicated efforts. City leadership has been emphasizing Top-Notch Service. And we have notable successes. But that is not enough; there is more to improve.