

THE TECHNOLOGY TRAP

Two incidents stand out in my mind as I write this chapter. The first is *Time* magazine's selection in 1999 of Albert Einstein as "Person of the 20th Century." If you frame the person-of-the-century selection around the question, How different would the world be today if that person had not existed? the choice of Einstein is surprising, compared to leaders like Churchill, Hitler, Stalin, and Gandhi—people who truly changed the course of human history, for better or worse. Physicists point out that the scientific community would have reached an understanding of relativity with or without Einstein, perhaps five years later, certainly ten, but not fifty.²⁰ The Nazis never got the bomb, and the Allies would have won the Second World War without it (although it would have cost more Allied lives). Why did *Time* pick Einstein?

In explaining their selection, *Time* editors wrote: "It's hard to compare the influence of statesmen with that of scientists. Nevertheless, we can note that there are certain eras that were most defined by their politics, others by their culture, and others by their scientific advances. . . . So, how will the 20th century be remembered? Yes, for democracy. And, yes, for civil rights. But the 20th century will be most remembered for its earthshaking advances in science and technology . . . [which] . . . advanced the cause of freedom, in some ways more than any statesman did. In a century that will be remembered foremost for its science and technology . . . one person stands out as the paramount icon of our age . . . Albert Einstein."²¹

In essence, the *Time* editors didn't pick the person of the century so much as they picked the *theme* of the century—technology and science—and attached the most famous person to it. Interestingly, just a few days before the Einstein announcement, *Time* announced its person of the year for 1999. Who did it pick? None other than the poster child of e-commerce, Jeff Bezos of Amazon.com—reflecting yet again our cultural obsession with technology-driven change. Let me be clear. I neither agree nor disagree with *Time*'s choices. I simply find them interesting and illuminating, because they give us a window into our modern psyche. Clearly, a key item on our collective mind is technology, and its implications.

Which brings me to the second incident. Taking a short break from the rigors of writing this book, I traveled to Minnesota to teach sessions at the Masters Forum. The Masters Forum has held executive seminars for nearly fifteen years, and I was curious to know which themes appeared

repeatedly over those years. "One of the consistent themes," said Jim Ericson and Patty Griffin Jensen, program directors, "is technology, change—and the connection between the two."

"Why do you suppose that is?" I asked.

"People don't know what they don't know," they said. "And they're always afraid that some new technology is going to sneak up on them from behind and knock them on the head. They don't understand technology, and many fear it. All they know for sure is that technology is an important force of change, and that they'd better pay attention to it."

Given our culture's obsession with technology, and given the pioneering application of technology in the good-to-great companies, you might expect that "technology" would absorb a significant portion of the discussion in our interviews with good-to-great executives.

We were quite surprised to find that fully 80 percent of the good-to-great executives we interviewed didn't even mention technology as one of the top five factors in the transition. Furthermore, in the cases where they did mention technology, it had a median ranking of fourth, with only two executives of eighty-four interviewed ranking it number one.

If technology is so vitally important, why did the good-to-great executives talk so little about it? Certainly not because they ignored technology: They were technologically sophisticated and vastly superior to their comparisons. Furthermore, a number of the good-to-great companies received extensive media coverage and awards for their pioneering use of technology. Yet the executives hardly talked about technology. It's as if the media articles and the executives were discussing two totally different sets of companies!

Nucor, for example, became widely known as one of the most aggressive pioneers in the application of mini-mill steel manufacturing, with dozens of articles and two books that celebrated its bold investments in continuous thin slab casting and electric arc furnaces.²² Nucor became a cornerstone case at business schools as an example of unseating the old order through the advanced application of new technologies.

But when we asked Ken Iverson, CEO of Nucor during its transition, to name the top five factors in the shift from good to great, where on the list