

The Nhunggabarra were “Built to Last”

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In their 1998 award-winning book *Built to Last* James Collins and Jerry Porras identified eleven key concepts for corporations that had shown consistently successful behaviours and that had survived longer than their competitors. Let us have a closer look at them and see how the Nhunggabarra would score in comparison.

1. *Be a clock builder – an architect – not a time teller.* By this Collins and Porras mean that the company itself is the ultimate creation. Business schools teach the importance of starting with a good idea and develop a strategy – then jump into a ‘window of opportunity’. But the companies Collins & Porras studied had not behaved in this way. The founders started a company first, and then came up with the products. The founders kept tinkering, persisting and experimenting with the organisation. They built an organisation first and foremost – the products came second.

I believe we can tick this one; the most impressive aspect of the Nhunggabarra recipe is its comprehensive architecture and how every element fits the whole.

2. *Embrace the ‘Genius of the AND’.* Western world thinking tends to emphasise the ‘either – or’. Instead companies that last embrace the AND. They have a purpose beyond profit AND a pragmatic pursuit of profit. They are conservative around the core AND bold, committing and risky movers. They invest for the long term AND require short-term performance. They are philosophical, visionary AND have a superb daily execution, ‘nuts and bolts’. They have an organisation aligned with a core ideology AND organisation adapted to its environment.

This is a key concept also in the Nhunggabarra recipe. They had a well-developed ability to live with ambiguity of core elements in both belief system and values. They were at ease with other people’s completely different creation stories. They lived their grand mission and also survived the day. They invested for the long-term in animal sanctuaries, breeding stock and grazing lands and made sure they killed the game they need for survival.

3. The companies that last have *core ideologies that emphasise higher goals than just making profit.* Collins and Porras exemplify with Merck, which emphasises the core value of victory against disease and help to humankind.

The Nhunggabarra mission, to Sustain the World, fits well in this category; they were on Earth for a higher purpose than just individual well-being or the success of a king or high priest.

4. The companies that last *preserve the core and stimulate progress at the same time.* Their strong culture gives the Nhunggabarra high marks on ‘preserve the core’, but because their selective approach to innovation an industrial leader would probably mark them down on ‘stimulate progress’. The Nhunggabarra model gets only half a point on this one.

5. *Set Big Hairy Audacious Goals.* The example Collins and Porras use is Boeing’s development of the first commercial jet aircraft. Their competitor, Douglas, stuck to the piston engines and took a cautious wait-and-see approach and hence lost the competitive race.

It is hard to conceive a goal ‘hairier and more audacious’ than Nhunggabarra’s Mission to ‘Sustain the World’, so they get full marks on this one.

6. *Cult-like cultures at the core* is another key concept among the companies that last. This feature probably describes the Nhunggabarra culture quite well. They had no hero cult or the cult of a God, but there was probably very little, if any, resistance against the core spiritual concepts, the values and the belief system.

7. *Test and try a lot of stuff and keep what works* is not mentioned explicitly in the 'Nhunggabarra manual', but it would have applied to the Nhunggabarra, who had to survive on daily basis. Over time they must have tested and tried all possible food stuffs and medicine applications, because we know they had found uses for virtually every plant on their territory and evidence shows that they experimented a lot with various materials for tool making. I award them full points.

8. *Growing your own leaders*. It appears that home-grown leaders are characteristic of the companies that last long. This is part of the Nhunggabarra model too, although not made explicit in the manual. They would never appoint a leader from another country; the 'imports' were mainly young women for whom it took many years of socialisation until they got into an influential position outside their own family. Full points.

9. *Never happy with good enough, (how can we do better tomorrow than we did today?)* To be discontent with the present was not Nhunggabarra style. Although we know they influenced the continent a lot through fire and improving grazing habitats and other animal sanctuaries there was no pressure to improve the world because it was perfect as it was. Also, given their mission, they must not change their world. No points here.

10. The companies that last *have a clear vision* with core values and ideology that are lived, not just words on paper. One cannot ask for a clearer expression than Nhunggabarra's mission, and as shown above, their mission was supported by a core ideology, so this is full points.

11. And finally, the long-lasting companies *seek constant alignment*. Alignment means being guided by one's own inner compass first and foremost, not by trends, fads and buzz-words. Core ideology alone can not do it; the drive for progress and innovation alone cannot do it. It is the remarkable comprehensiveness and consistency over time that distinguishes the long-lasting organisations. The companies that are built to last cluster many actions and signals that reinforce each other.

This key concept describes the Nhunggabarra model spot on; they had unrivalled inner compasses in the form of their individual spirituality, which was reinforced by the processes, values and behavioural codes in the 'manual'.

Final score: Nine and a half out of eleven is an 87% coherence between the 'Nhunggabarra manual' for sustainable organisation and the concepts that distinguish sustainable organisations.

It is interesting also to note the absence of some concepts from the sustainability list, for instance 'innovation' is not among the eleven key elements for a long corporate life. The companies Collins and Porras studied, do not even mention innovation as a success factor. Instead the companies that last tend to use terms like 'Never happy with good enough', (concept #9) and 'stimulate progress' (part of concept #4). These are also the only concepts where the Nhunggabarra do not get full score.

Apparently, innovation is not crucial for sustainability even in today's competitive corporate world.