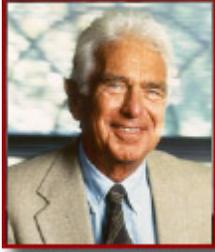


Interview with:
Dr. Warren Bennis

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Warren Bennis

is University Professor and Distinguished Professor of Business Administration at the Marshall School and Founding Chairman of The Leadership Institute at the University of Southern California. He is also Visiting Professor of Leadership at the University of Exeter and a Fellow of the Royal Society of the Arts (UK). He has written 27 books, including the best-selling *Leaders* and *On Becoming a Leader*, both translated into 21 languages. The *Financial Times* recently names *Leaders* as one of the top 50 business books of all time. In 1993 Addison-Wesley published a book of his essays *An Invented Life: Reflections on Leadership and Change*, which was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize, and Jossey-Bass just republished an updated version of his 1968 path-breaking book, *The Temporary Society*, co-authored with Phil Slater. Almost two million copies of his books are in print. His latest books, *Organizing Genius*, 1997, *Co-Leaders*, 1999 and *Managing the Dream*, 2000, summarize Bennis' major concerns: Leadership, Change, and Creative Collaboration.

Bennis has not only studied and reflected on leadership, he has also done it, first as the youngest infantry commander fighting in Germany at age 20, decorated with the Bronze Star and Purple Heart and then as President of the University of Cincinnati from 1971-97.

He has served on the faculty of MIT's Sloan School of Management where he was Chairman of the Organizational Studies Department. He is a former faculty member of Harvard and Boston University, former provost and Executive Vice President of State University of New York at Buffalo. He has served on the boards of The American Chamber of Commerce, Claremont University Center and currently serves on the board of the Salk Institute. Bennis has consulted for many Fortune 500 companies and has advised four U.S. presidents. The Wall Street Journal named him as one of the top ten speakers on management in 1993 and in 1996, FORBES magazine referred to him as the "Dean of Leadership Gurus."

One of his most cherished dreams is to write a terrific one-act play.

TRANSCRIPT

THE FEMALE SPEAKER: A famous book on Leadership Training is titled, “On Becoming a Leader,” and it’s written by a man who has studied leadership for thirty years: Dr. Warren Bennis. He’s the author of twenty books including, “Why Leaders Can’t Lead,” and, “Leaders; The Strategies for Taking Charge,” plus hundreds of articles on organizational development. His most recent book, “An Invented Life” was just released two months ago and contains his reflections and observations of a life long pursuit of individual excellence and group leadership. He has served on the faculties of MIT, Harvard, and Boston University among others. He was the president of the University of Cincinnati and has been an adviser to four presidents. Currently he holds a chair as the distinguished professor of Business Administration at USC. I reached him last month at his home in California for this interview.

INTERVIEW

THE FEMALE SPEAKER: Dr. Bennis, thank you for agreeing to talk with us. In our introductory remarks, Scott and I just talked about how we need to be better leaders in education and how the old methods of management simply don’t apply anymore. In your books, you frequently wrote that “we are over-managed and underled”. What do you mean by that?

DR. BENNIS: Well, I have to go back a step before that to make that distinction pretty clear. I make a distinction between leading and managing, and before we can talk about over-managed and underled, we have to understand what I mean by the difference between leading and managing, because leading really has to do with doing the right things, and management has to do with doing things right. And that’s a very simplistic, but I think very seminal, distinction between leading and managing. And by leading what I mean by doing the right things is a sense of vision, a purpose, a strategic intent, a dream, a mission. Call it what you want, but it has to do basically with purpose and objectives. Whereas management has to do with doing things right.

That means they are concerned about efficiency; about control mechanisms; about the short run; about how do you do. The difference between leading and managing is a difference between asking what and why, which is what leaders ought to be doing, verses asking the how.

Effective leaders really do not tell their direct report to the subordinates; how. What they do is they try to create a set of intentions, a tapestry of intentions.

THE FEMALE SPEAKER: In your book “Leaders; The Strategies for Taking Charge” you reveal that studies of leaders show they have some common characteristics: what are some traits that they share?

DR. BENNIS: Well, there are a number of things, and I’ll rattle off just a few of them. The first is that they have a great deal of self-knowledge; that they know who they are, and I think that’s essential; that they have a strong sense of who they are as a human being, because basically leadership is character. And character is knowing who you are. What the ingredients of yourself are. So that’s one thing.

The second thing is that they have a strongly defined sense of purpose. That they really have a -- if you look at the difference between achieving, successful, leaders and those who are not successful, it seems to me that they always know what’s important, and they are always reminding people of what’s important, so it isn’t just having the vision. It isn’t just knowing your objectives. It’s being able to continually create an environment where people are aware of why they are there. You can see even in a university setting at times when we’ll gather in the faculty club and talk about the place and occasionally someone will say, always in jest, but sometimes a jest conceals a basic truth. He said, “Wouldn’t this be a good place to be if only there weren’t students around.” Well, why are we there? Why are we administering school systems and universities? Primarily because we’re there to help educate students who are going

to be successful in life; everything else is a cost factor; everything else is a commentary. That's the essential ingredient, so a sense of purpose, self-knowledge.

Thirdly, the capacity to generate and sustain trust. And the way we tend to generate and sustain trust is through being candid, through effective communication, through a sense of constancy, and through caring. It seems to me if leaders can somehow communicate, and also in that communication show that they care, show that they are candid, and also indicate their competence, it seems to me we can generate and sustain trust.

And, finally, what leaders have is a bias toward action. They have to actually get up to bat. It makes no sense to just be in the dugout or kibitzing from the balcony or being on the Omni on-deck circle. The only way, in my experience, leaders that are really effective are at bat, and they make errors, and they learn from their errors, but basically those are some of the qualities: self-knowledge, sense of purpose, capacity to generate and sustain trust, and a bias towards action which will lead to results.

THE FEMALE SPEAKER: Not only do leaders have some common characteristics, but people have some common myths about leadership, according to your research. What do you see as some of the most dangerous myths we in education may hold?

DR. BENNIS: Well, one of the most dangerous myths of all the one's that I've written about and talked about has to do with the fact that leaders, there are some sort of qualities that we're born with; that there is a genetic factor that we either have it or we don't have it; that leaders are basically not developed and made, but that we're born with certain usually called "charismatic qualities", and I think that's a lot of nonsense and rubbish. There's no genetic marker for a leader. Basically, we learn about leadership through life experiences, not even through university degrees. I mean it isn't the AB after your name or PhD or MBA, the only initials that really count are j-o-b or l-i-f-e. What we learn at the job; what we learn in life's experiences.

And our studies have helped people develop leadership. It's very clear that it developed through on the job education; through role models; through experiences which were often difficult and where they faced adversity. Through the pain and agony of having to come up with -- in some cases it was being fired. In some cases, it was having to downsize. In other cases it was taking over a totally inexperienced group of direct reports and subordinates, but people -- the only way people learn about leadership is through putting them in situations from which they can really learn and get feedback from their colleagues and valued sources. And it doesn't come from genes. It doesn't come from reading. It doesn't come from listening to lectures. It comes through the hard earned experience in the arena, not in the balcony. So that's one of the myths.

THE FEMALE SPEAKER: Educational leaders face the challenge of introducing change to those who frequently see no need for change. From your research into effective leaders, what can we educational leaders learn about introducing change into education?

DR. BENNIS: The first is to be very clear about what are the strategic goals, the strategic vision, of the institution, and to make that simple and clear and compelling, and that's got to be communicated ceaselessly, indefatigably, and endlessly, in all sorts of ways. It isn't just enough to do it through memos or put it in a newsletter or even put it on video or satellite. A lot of it has got to be done eyeball to eyeball. That's one thing.

The second thing is, that vision has to be anchored into organizational realities. Most organizations, I must say, have terrific vision statements. I mean they put them on these three by five cards, laminated cards, and they have visions and values, and they are just terrific. I remember once consulting for a large utilities firm in southern California, and they had a terrific vision statement. It was called, "The Six Commitments," and every single office in this huge company had in a Lucite, gorgeous Lucite frame, the Sixth Commitments. And the reality is that

none of them, not one of them, was really implemented and anchored in the organizational reality.

For example, they had one -- one of their commitments was, "We believe in the autonomy of the worker and in self-managed work teams and in empowerment." In that same company, you had to have six signatures to take a twenty-five mile trip out of the offices in downtown Los Angeles. Another company I knew about they said, "We believe in teamwork," and yet there was an implicit norm in that company that you never surfaced conflict or dissent or disagreement. Well, how can you create teamwork when you never surfaced differences and healthy dissent and creative conflict? So that, often times I believe that these visions, this zealotry of vision, has to do with, maybe have been prompted by Lucite makers who manufacture those frames more than the reality that is facing organizations.

THE FEMALE SPEAKER: Dr. Bennis, one final question on behalf of our administrators, school board members, and community supporters of public education: what advice do you have for the leaders of our future leaders?

DR. BENNIS: Well, I think school administrators have a particularly difficult and interesting, and I suppose, most challenging kind of role as a change agent, as a leader, because they're basically working in an organizational system that not only has a lot of noisy, eloquent stakeholders that are continually scrutinizing and looking over their shoulder. But they are also working within a system that I guess we can best characterize with the oxymoron, an organized anarchy, because most of the individuals in a school system, teachers, especially faculty, are basically individuals with a lot of education. They are what we call "knowledge workers" and they are all highly individualistic. I thought when I was a university president that presiding over the faculty was like "herding cats" and I remember once saying to a faculty member that, "you meet one; you meet one." We have highly individualistic workers, and on the faculty especially.

And that's what makes it so exciting. And how do you actually get those individuals aligned behind an over-arching and compelling vision?

We have so many different disciplines; so many different silos of expertise. I hate to think that running an organization was like very equivalent to a symphony orchestra. But I don't think that's quite it. Because it's more of jazz, more improvisation. You know, someone once wrote that the sound of surprise is jazz. And if there's anything that we live in, in this world it has to do with surprise, and the unexpected. So that there are two features that I think university – that school administrators – have to be concerned with. One is that they're dealing with highly trained, highly educated, individuals where teamwork is rarely rewarded. And the second thing is to bring together these people to work as one firm, one organization. I think that's the daunting thing, but it seems to me that school administrators then have to do a couple of things. Again, they have to articulate a clear, simple, compelling vision, and they have to then discover the individuals within that system, who are what I call, excuse the jargon, "variance sensors." People whose expectations are beyond reality; who are people you can depend on to see the need for change; who have the future in their bones, and to work with those allies, and to work with the health, and to try to create a reward system that will encourage change, and basically, that's what it's all about. A clear, simple, compelling vision, rewarding those individuals who are aligned behind that vision and keep at it ceaselessly, indefatigably, and endlessly.

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