

The Handy Guide to the Gurus of Management

Episode 4 - Warren Bennis

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Warren Bennis:

Warren Bennis changed my life. I met him when I spent a year at the Sloan School of Management at MIT in Boston. It was 1966. I was a student. He was a Professor and already well-known for his studies of groups and the leadership of change. His ideas fascinated me then and have continued to do so ever since.

Warren Bennis persuaded me that the real challenge of our future societies was to harness the talents and skills of every individual in ways that could benefit us all. That has been the focus of my own life ever since.

Warren calls this the challenge of leadership and he has devoted most of his life to the study of leaders of every description. He's been an adviser to four presidents of the United States, including both Kennedy and Reagan, has written more than twenty books on the topic and lectured and consulted all over the world. Most unusually, he's even practised what he preached. At the age of 42 he gave up a secure academic position at MIT to be an

executive vice-president at the State University of New York in Buffalo and went on from there to spend seven years as president of the University of Cincinnati.

It wasn't to be a wholly pleasant experience but, he says, 'I wouldn't have missed it for the world. In becoming a leader I learnt a number of important things about both leadership and myself.' Warren is rare indeed among gurus in having put his theories to the test in real organizations and it shows. It shows in his understanding of the complexities of the job of the leader. It shows in his warm humanity, in his sympathy for our human frailties and weaknesses, and in his interest in everything.

He likes to quote the British philosopher, Isaiah Berlin who distinguished between the hedgehog, who he said knows one big thing, and the fox who knows many small things. Warren sees himself as a fox, with a lingering admiration, he says, for the hedgehogs of this world. As a result he sprinkles his books and lectures with stories from all sorts of people. A baseball coach has as much to contribute to an understanding of leadership, he thinks, as Jack Welch the legendary boss of General Electric.

A quotation from Sophocles jostles for a place in his pages with a

verse from the poet WB Yeats and a nugget of wisdom from the hockey star Wayne Gretzky. It makes his books fun to read, his talks a joy to listen to.

Warren's seminal work on leadership is his book *Leaders*, which he wrote with his colleague Burt Nanus in 1985. For this book he interviewed 90 leaders in America. 60 of them were from business but another thirty were from non-profit organizations of one sort or another. They included unusual characters such as the astronaut, Neil Armstrong and Karl Wallenda, a tightrope walker. Warren says that he was looking for the common characteristics among these successful people. But initially he found more differences than sameness. 'There are some who dress for success he said and some who don't; well-spoken, articulate leaders and laconic, inarticulate ones, some John Wayne types and some who are definitely the opposite.' There were only a few obviously charismatic personalities. That's good news for most of us, I thought.

Warren started his analysis of these leaders by stating what he saw as the difference between a leader and a manager: 'Leaders, he said, are people who do the right thing; managers are people who do things right.' Both roles are crucial, he says,

but profoundly different. Like most of us he has seen too many people in top positions doing the wrong thing superbly well. America, in the was, he felt, over-managed and underled.

Warren's research was impressionistic rather than statistical. He didn't get his leaders to fill in questionnaires or tick boxes but to sit and talk with him, usually for four or five hours, but sometimes for days on end. He says that the process was rather like drilling for oil, prodding here and there in the hope of a sudden gusher. In the process he came up with some intriguing findings, such as the fact that all the 60 corporate leaders were still married to their first spouse and seemed enthusiastic about the institution of marriage. But the real joy of this method of research is that it results in a huge number of stories, stories that often mean more than the analysis that the authors impose on them.

It was encouraging to find that there is no one right way to lead, that we each have to find our own best style, but Warren did come up with some common characteristics or competencies. He called them

- the Management of Attention
- the Management of Meaning
- the Management of Trust, and

- the Management of Self.

I find it intriguing that having made an important distinction between leaders and managers, Warren Bennis finds it necessary to describe the job of the leader in managerial language. It suggests that leadership is a skill that can be developed if the leader is willing to put in enough effort. Leaders, in other words, can be developed as well as born.

But to get back to his four competencies, which do need a bit of explaining.

By the management of attention he means the need to find a compelling cause or vision that will focus the minds and the energies of everyone involved. The leader needs a dream, in fact, and the determination to live that dream. Warren tells how he was once giving a talk about the leadership of institutions while he was still president of the University of Cincinnati. He thought the talk was going down rather well, until someone asked a question. 'Warren', this man said, 'do you enjoy being president of the university?' Warren paused, then said, 'I don't know.' 'I realised then,' he said later, 'that I had wanted to BE president, I hadn't wanted to DO president.' He didn't want to live his dream.

The story is a nice example of Warren's ability to use his own experience to illuminate his theories.

By the management of meaning Bennis means an ability to communicate the dream so that it has meaning for others.

The management of trust requires that a leader be consistent and honest in all that he or she says or does, while the management of self means that the leader must be aware of his weaknesses as well as his strengths.

Leaders also need to be strong enough to accept criticism when it is valid, to know when to change and when to plough on regardless. Warren tells how he asked Harold Williams, then president of the Getty Foundation to name the experience that did most to shape him as a leader. Williams replied that it was being passed over for the presidency of Norton Simon, a big corporation. When it happened he was furious and demanded reasons, most of which he considered idiotic. Finally, a friend told him that some of the reasons were valid and that he should change. He did, and a year later became president of the Getty.

If you have just joined us, I'm Charles Handy and we are discussing Warren Bennis, one of the gurus in the handy guide to the gurus of management, from BBC World Service.

The book, 'Leaders', established Bennis as the leading authority in this field. It was written in a very accessible style and came out at a time, in the mid-eighties, when America was worrying about her competitive strength compared with the rising tigers of Asia.

In the nineties, Bennis turned his attention to the leaders in these countries and came away convinced that the key was going to be a leader's ability to create an environment that generates intellectual capital. Leading and managing talented and creative people was, he said, like herding cats, because these sort of people were independent spirits, artists of a sort, who resented authority yet needed to work together to produce anything of substance. To find out what this sort of leadership involved, Bennis once again went on the trail, this time to investigate the Great Groups of the past and the present. He called the book that resulted 'Organizing Genius'.

Here he looked at the Manhattan Project, the group that produced the first atomic bomb, he went to Xerox' Palo Alto Research Center to meet the computer revolutionaries there, to

the Walt Disney studios, and the Apple Mackintosh team and other famous groups. Every great group, he concluded, is extraordinary in its own way, but once again he was able to identify some common principles. They have a shared dream, for instance, and are ready to sacrifice personal egos in the pursuit of that dream. Their members are usually young, see themselves as winning underdogs and are prepared to put up with long hours and spartan conditions to achieve their dream. They do, however, need protection from the 'suits' who run the main organization and who see them as dangerous rebels, so one job of the leader is to provide that cover.

The leader has other tasks too. Leaders constantly remind people of why their work is important - 'you are changing the world' Steve Jobs told the people at Apple Computers in the early days, and in a way they were. The leader has to create an atmosphere of trust so that people can disagree, argue and even quarrel but still work together. There has to be a culture where curiosity, experiment and risk-taking is encouraged, not punished - and this must be the responsibility of the leader. Finally, perhaps most importantly, leaders create hope, because without hope it can be difficult to go on when everything seems to be going wrong, as at times it inevitably does.

After studying these great groups and pondering the way the new organizations were working Bennis began to worry that he had been guilty of concentrating too much on the role of the individual leader. Leadership, he now believes, is increasingly a shared task and he talks now of partnership rather than leadership. Organizations, he notes, are increasingly going to be federations, collections of semi-autonomous groups, with power spread round rather than centralized. The new leaders, he says, understand the Power of Appreciation, they can no longer make things happen, but they can fertilize and encourage anything good that does happen.

In typical Bennis fashion he relates a story from British history about the two nineteenth century political leaders, Gladstone and Disraeli. It was said that when you had dinner with Mr. Gladstone you felt that he was the most brilliant and intelligent person that you were ever likely to meet. But when you dined with his opponent, Mr. Disraeli, you felt that YOU were the most brilliant and intelligent. You can guess which of the two Bennis thinks would make the better leader in today's world.

Nevertheless, the dream and the trust are still vital. Without them all is mere mechanics. But the dream and the trust can no longer be imposed by one person from above, they have to be coaxed out of the group as a whole. Ultimately, perhaps, the most important role of the new leader may be the choice of who goes into the group. You need a Rolodex in the sky to find the people you need, is the way Warren puts it.

I can't help ending this talk by quoting from a poem by Bertolt Brecht that Warren Bennis uses to make his point about shared leadership, it is called 'Questions from a Worker':

Who built the town of Thebes of Seven Gates?

The names of kings are written in the books.

Was it the kings who dragged the slabs of rock?

And Babylon, so many times destroyed,

Who built her up again so many times?

Young Alexander conquered India.

All by himself?

Caesar beat the Gauls.

Not even a cook to help him with his meals?

Philip of Spain wept when his Armada

Went down. Did no one else weep?

Frederick the Great won the Seven Years War. Who
Else was the winner?

[You get the point, I hope!]

In my next talk, we discuss the ideas of Sumantra Goshal, who
adds an Indian dimension to the study of organizations.