Warren Bennis: Father of Leadership

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"No leader sets out to be a leader. People set out to live their lives, expressing themselves fully. When that expression is of value, they become leaders. So the point is not to become a leader. The point is to become yourself, to use yourself completely – all your skills, gifts, and energies – in order to make your vision manifest. You must withhold nothing. You, must, in sum, become the person you started out to be, and to enjoy the process of becoming." (Bennis, 2013)

Warren Bennis: Father of Leadership

Warren Bennis, who lived a full and robust 89 years (1925-2014), is widely

acknowledged as the "guru" of leadership. Born in 1925 in Brooklyn, NY to a blue-collar family,

Bennis served as one of the youngest infantry officers in the US Army in 1943. He earned a

Baccalaureate degree from Antioch College and a PhD from MIT in 1955 in Social Sciences and

Economics. During his career, Bennis served as provost of the State University of New York at

Buffalo, and President of the University of Cincinnati, among other accolades. During his career,

he authored thirty books and numerous articles, and in his spare time, he served as an adviser to

four US presidents, and many other public figures and FORTUNE 500 companies (Warren

Bennis, n.d.). After a robust and long-lasting career, Bennis has been hailed as "one of the

world's pre-eminent thinkers and authorities on leadership" (Bernhut, 2001, p. 1).

Bennis' Work

Warren Bennis was a highly introspective man. The overarching theme of his thought on

leaders is that they are made and develop over time; they are not just born as leaders. His

writings imply that life experiences (good and bad) are essential in shaping leaders. In fact, he

has stated that early career success is actually detrimental and may deny the potential leader the

ability to learn from failure. Throughout his entire career, he argued good leaders must first

develop as individuals. A recurring theme that Bennis characterizes a leader by is their very

"humanness." He often spoke of the five essential traits of a leader: 1. Provide direction and

meaning to followers; 2. Convey hope and optimism for the future; 3. Generate and sustain trust;

and 4. Share and engage followers in common core values and vision; and 5. Show results

(Heffes, 2002). He further defined four competencies of a leader: 1. Attention through vision

(and communicating that vision to enable followers to achieve goals); 2. Meaning through

communication (and understanding how the organization works); 3. Trust through positioning;

and 4. The development of self (the epitome of a life-long learner) (Bennis, 2002). Bennis later

captured all of this in his identification of six personal qualities of a leader: integrity, dedication,

magnanimity, humility, openness, creativity (Williams, 2012).

Bennis' writings clearly reinforced his beliefs that becoming a leader is a lifelong

journey. One article I particularly enjoyed that was written by Bennis is titled, "The seven ages

of a leader" (2004). He opens with a description of The Infant Executive where he stresses the

importance of developing a mentoring network early in your career, and continuing throughout

your career. He then discusses The Schoolboy, which stresses the implications of a leader's first

acts and that these acts can make an indelible impression on others. The Lover describes the

dilemma of dealing with followers who were former peers. Does it have to be lonely at the top?

The Bearded Soldier warns about not becoming too complacent with the leadership role as time

progresses. True leaders surround themselves by followers who can and may eventually replace

them. The General allows others to not only speak the truth, but also hear it. The Statesman

describes the leader who is preparing to pass on his or her wisdom by acting in the best interests

of the organization. Last, The Sage describes the leader serving as a mentor, which brings us full

circle. This description of the seven ages of a leader cleary illustrates Bennis' point that leaders

are developed, and evolve, not born.

Contributions to Leadership and Relevance Today

As described in Kirby's (2014) editorial published upon Bennis' death, his first piece

published in that journal was titled "Revisionist Theory of Leadership" in 1961. Kirby (2014)

stated, "A half-century later, its message does not sound so revisionist: that in a business

environment marked by increasingly complex and constant change, organizations require not

autocrats at the top, but leaders with more humanistic, democratic styles" (p. 1). In a radio interview with Dr. George Watts in 2006, Heard (2007) described how Bennis' leadership has transitioned (for the better) over the years from the "old" way of doing things, to a newer way. The old style of leadership dealt in terms of control and command, a militaristic model. In this model, followers were treated as sheep that were basically lazy and needed to be tricked into performing. The new model embraces the humanistic side of leaders and the belief that workers can grow and produce outcomes well beyond initial expectations if they are empowered.

In that same radio interview in 2006, however, Bennis was quick to point out that while the tide may be changing, the two mindsets were still alive and well (and not well in a healthy way). In an article penned by Bennis in 2007, he spoke of the US Presidential election of 2004 (where incumbent President George W. Bush defeated Democratic Party candidate John Kerry). He noted that one of the most interesting observations from that election was "that half the nation has a radically different notion of leadership than the other half" (Bennis, 2007, p. 2). So in answer to the question are Bennis' observations still valid today, I offer as evidence the unbelievable differences in leadership style in our current Presidential campaign of Clinton v. Trump. Yes, we still have a dichotomy in leadership styles in the world today.

In my own opinion, I admire the work of Bennis and still find it highly relevant in today's society. Perhaps it's the old adage "you can catch more flies with honey," but I know I'm more motivated as an employee when my leader (department chair) serves in a mentor/advisor role who encourages me and empowers me to perform even beyond what I believe I can do. Williams (2012) surveyed 183 experts in marketing in both industry and academics about the relevance of Bennis' key thoughts and hypotheses to determine if they were still relevant today.

The majority of Bennis' hypotheses were accepted by respondents as still being accepted and relevant today.

The University of Southern California memoriam summarizes the contributions of this amazing leader of leaders:

> "Bennis' work was based on the notion that truly inspiring and powerful leadership lies in promoting openness and discussion, and allowing room for others to shine. Fundamentally, he believed in valuing people, and his contributions to creating a more human and humane business world are the cornerstone of his legacy" (Reardon, 2014).

The values espoused by Bennis have revolutionized leadership in America (and worldwide). His writings and deeds have clearly demonstrated his strong sense of empathy and caring, his inquisitiveness, his great sense of humor, his love of storytelling and the thrill of life-long learning.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Bennis was an inspirational change agent who turned the nature of leadership upside down and inside out. He enjoyed a highly rewarding career, and has left a tremendous legacy that will continue to have an impact for years into the future. On a personal note, bennis sounds like he was a wonderful human being who espoused the Golden Rule; I only wish I had had the opportunity to meet him!

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