



BRINGING OUT THE BEST IN PEOPLE: AN INTERVIEW WITH WARREN BENNIS

BY BEA MAH HOLLAND

“We are all angels with only one wing; we can fly only while embracing each other.”
—Luciano De Crescenzo

I first encountered the work of Warren Bennis, widely known as “the dean of the leadership gurus,” in 1986. With a newly minted doctorate in hand, I joined Digital Equipment Corporation, now Compaq. During my first week, I was assigned to teach managers about leadership in a week-long residential program, using Bennis and Burt Nanus’s book, *Leaders: The Strategies for Taking Charge* (Harper & Row, 1985), a classic that has been translated into 13 languages.

In the fall of 2000, I had the opportunity to interview Dr. Bennis. During our day with him, my two colleagues and I knew that we were in the presence of a cultivator of people and someone who walked his talk. With us, Bennis lived out his articulated aspiration—to be remembered as one who personally touched individual lives.

Three Requirements

In the interview, Warren Bennis spoke about three requirements needed for bringing out the best in humans individually and collectively: 1) a group of people who feel a true obligation to know and understand each other, 2) a leader who models this, and 3) a shared belief that the task engages team members’ hearts and that the project will have a positive impact on the world. Referring to the first condition—the importance of knowing and being known—Bennis related a story from his days as president of the University of Cincinnati. While participating in a staff-development exercise in which partners were instructed to

really look at each other, he came to see how, despite “knowing” a staff person for several years, he had never embraced this man as a whole person. For the first time, he noticed this person’s “pathos, the worry lines.” The lesson Bennis learned from this experience was to “be authentic, be available and more open, and feel others’ wholeness.”

Bennis’s second factor—modeling as a leader the need to know and be known by others—involves showing vulnerability and legitimating doubt.

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Bennis spoke about the capacity to subordinate one’s own ego to the talents of others, commenting that it takes great maturity and esteem to be able to say, “I can’t do that.” In a recent interview for the *LA Times*, he said, “I don’t think a leader can be great unless there’s a symbiosis between the leader and the led. Everything I’ve observed over the last 45 years is that leaders are made great by their people and their people are made great by leaders.”

The third factor—that the work needs to be engaging and important—is rooted in people’s desire to partake in “a mission that will make a dent in the world beyond what any one [person] can do.” The leader’s work is to manage the dream, to remind people what is important and how they are making a difference.

In an *Industry Week* article, “Cultivating Creative Genius,” Bennis recounts a story told by the late Nobel Prize-winning physicist, Richard Feynman, about how meaning can transform work. Initially, technicians at Los Alamos were ordered to do energy calculations without knowing the nature of the project. But “after the task had been imbued with meaning” when J. Robert Oppenheimer explained how important it was for the U.S. to build the atomic bomb before the enemy did, the group worked nearly 10 times faster than it had before: “The men were completely transformed. They found new, better ways of doing the work. They invented new programs . . . they worked through the night.” Bennis restates his friend Charles Handy when he says: “We are all hungry spirits craving purpose and meaning at work, to contribute to something beyond ourselves.”

Hardiness and “Heartiness”

When we asked Dr. Bennis to share a story of a high-point moment for him in bringing out the best in people, he spoke about his current experience coteaching an undergraduate course in the Art and Adventure of Leadership with Steven B. Sample, the president of the University of Southern California. Bennis is excited about the opportunities they are providing for students to explore who they are and to give them a unique opportunity to be reflective. The students read 1,000 pages of text; write eight papers, each of which Bennis reads and comments on; and individually lunch with Bennis for a coaching session on their writing and leadership skills. Bennis spoke about the “eternal search for our own

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voice,” and rhetorically raised the question of what leaders can do to bring that out in people, because “people don’t know what their dreams are.”

When we questioned him about the role of positive affect, such as hope, inspiration, joy, and camaraderie, in leading and sustaining change in organizations, Bennis spoke about how attractive those feelings are, in contrast to “bummer” energy. “Leadership raises the passion quotient, the intensity of attention which mobilizes, animates, and motivates people in constructive activity.” In his writing, Bennis makes several references to Martin Luther King Jr. and his efforts to realize his dream by urging others on to heroic tasks. Bennis also pointed out the genius of Ronald Reagan who, in a time of malaise in the United States, was able to lift up the country by articulating hope and inspiration.

Bennis spoke about both hardiness and “heartiness,” the second of which, he reminded us, has shared etymological roots with courage. In commenting on how positive image leads to positive action, he spoke about creating a sense of belonging, hope, and optimism about change by sharing that there is going to be a tomorrow, and by reminding people that they can do things beyond themselves. Bennis spoke about Nelson Mandela’s amazing life: his rearing in a particularly challenging culture, his 27 years in jail, and his emergence from prison with awe-inspiring strength—hardiness and heartiness—to lead the people of South Africa. He reminded us that “Leaders and the led are the most intimate allies in the most powerful partnership.”

At the same time, Bennis raised the question as to how extensively we can be socially engineered, given what we know about the “deeply ingrained stuff.” Recognizing our genetic complexities, he concludes that there are many ingredients that go into each of us, that “we are really a cocktail.” Beyond genetics, he also commented on the cultural legacies that exist around the globe; for example, he said that Belgian society with its history of outside intervention likely manifests

much less optimism than that of the United States. We need to recognize systemic complexity at individual, group, and societal levels when helping people and their organizations develop beyond their best values.

“Life Itself Is the Career”

Bennis commented on our strong heritage of competition and winning in the West, and that “testosterone is not limited to just one gender.” This ingrained pattern of behavior provides each of us with issues to work on for a lifetime. Bennis commented that leadership is about character—who we are—so the process of becoming a leader is much the same as becoming a fully integrated human being. In Bennis’s words, “Life itself is the career.” In his book *An Invented Life: Reflections on Leadership and Change* (Addison-Wesley, 1993), Bennis writes, “To be authentic is literally to be your own author . . . to discover your own native energies and desires, and then to find your own way of acting on them. . . . When you write your own life, you have played the game that was natural for you to play.”

Self-knowledge, but not for its own sake, was a recurring theme of our conversation: “Know what your strengths are, which involves a great deal of searching for who you are. But self-knowledge is not necessarily correlated with understanding others: being aware and observant of others is different from self-understanding.” Bennis spoke about humility, about taking great effort to listen and observe, which can disconfirm your

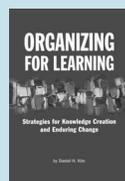
point of view. “Leaders are deep listeners; they need to understand others and be empathic.” Indeed, he seemed quite puzzled with the question as to why we do not more often show our appreciation for others. He spoke about how, in contrast, we can be “demeaning,” literally taking away meaning from people’s lives, whereas through appreciation we free people to flourish.

Our conversation with Bennis ended with the question that he regards as fundamental: How do we develop as human beings? It is the human quest for meaning. In terms of his legacy, Dr. Bennis will undoubtedly be remembered for the wisdom captured in his prolific leadership writings; for his counsel to several U.S. presidents, world leaders, and business leaders; and for his contribution to our understanding of group dynamics and social change. Yet he most wants to be remembered by how he touched people’s lives in a personal way. He would like to be remembered as a generous person. In our day with him, Warren Bennis demonstrated how he continues to live his purpose, contributing to our becoming better versions of ourselves. ■

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