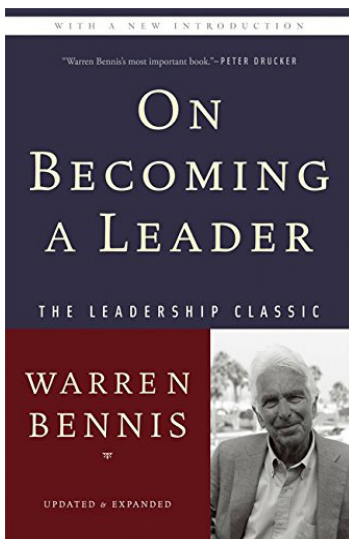


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On Becoming A Leader

THE SUMMARY

Introduction

On Becoming A Leader is a book about **how**—how people become leaders, how they lead, and how organizations can encourage or stifle potential leaders. This is not a book about how to gain a position or prominence—while those may be part of the trappings of leadership, they are not the same—many people have those who are not truly leaders in any significant way.

This book is based on the assumption that leaders are people who are able to express themselves fully—they know who they are, and what their strengths and weaknesses are—and they know how to put their strengths to work and compensate for their weaknesses. They know who they are, what they want, and why, and they know how to communicate that desire to others in a way that gains their help, and ultimately enables them to achieve their goals.

Bennis assumes that each of us has the capacity for leadership, and that becoming a leader is not an impossible task. That doesn't mean it is an easy one, but the path is similar for all—and it is the same path as the one to becoming fully ourselves. Indeed, becoming a leader is synonymous with becoming yourself!

Leaders learn to define themselves, rather than be defined by other people or the expectations or demands of the world they live in. By reflecting on their experiences and the world they live in, by trusting their instincts and being willing to take risks, make mistakes, and even fail, leaders come to a deep self-understanding, which births passion, direction, and commitment—the very

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things that others look for in leaders. As they pursue those passions, they learn over time how to magnify their impact by getting others on their side and marshalling more resources than they possess in themselves—and thus making a difference in their world, and in the lives of others.

Mastering the Context

America is a unique institution. Over the last few decades our leaders have pulled through some impossible situations and have also failed to lead us with outstanding integrity and vision. In the last 10 years America has experienced a leadership vacuum in our political, economic and social spheres. However detrimental to our society at the present, this creates a vast opportunity for leaders to rise up in our current situation and make the decisions necessary to get us back on track. At the same time, the times we live in—our context—are complicated and difficult. Change is continuous and accelerating, our economy is in flux, social mores are in transition, and over it all the shadow of terrorism grows.

There are three reasons leadership is important: leaders are responsible for the effectiveness of organizations (of all kinds—community groups, International businesses, churches, etc); in times of change and upheaval, leaders provide anchors—a guiding purpose, if you will; and third, the lack of integrity of many of our institutions—it seems that every area—business, politics, even churches, have been touched significantly by scandal—cries out for leaders who can lead with honor and restore credibility where it has been lost.

The result? Both the opportunities and the challenges for leaders are boundless. The first step in becoming a leader is to recognize the context for what it is—a breaker, not a maker, a trap, not a launching pad—and declare your independence. The world around you would try to shape you, define you, squeeze you into a mold; real leaders must master their context—the times we live in and the situations they face—rather than being defined by it, controlled by it, or limited by it; they must master it and become their own person, not letting others define them but defining themselves. There are four steps in the process of mastering the context: (1) becoming self-expressive; (2) listening to the inner voice; (3) learning from the right mentors; and (4) giving oneself over to a guiding vision.

Some people challenge and conquer their context, and even change it in fundamental ways. Others surrender to it and never become the leader—or the person—they could be.

Understanding the Basics

All leaders, although different in many ways, share some basic ingredients. There are five key qualities that every leader must have:

The first basic ingredient of leadership is a guiding vision—the leader has a clear idea of what he wants to do, and the strength to persist in the face of obstacles. They know what they want to do and have the strength to withstand opposition and failure. Second is passion, enabling them to stick it out for the long haul. Third, a leader loves what they do enabling them to give hope and inspiration to others.

The next ingredient is integrity, which has three parts: self-knowledge, candor, and maturity. You cannot succeed if you don't know yourself, your strengths and weaknesses, what you want and why you want it, etc. Candor is the key to knowledge—an honesty of thought & action, combined with a steadfast devotion to principle. Maturity comes with experience and following others, and brings the ability to lead other people into what they have learned.

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Finally, leaders must be people of curiosity and daring. Leaders wonder about everything, and aren't afraid to take a risk and try new things, knowing that even if they fail they will learn from it.

Although basic, these are not inborn traits. True leaders invent themselves—they are made, not born—and usually self-made, by developing character and vision. There are actually two kinds of self-made leaders—"once made" and "twice made." Once made leaders carry the qualities we have discussed, but are those that had very little adversity in their lifetime. They have experienced an easy transition from home and family to independence. Twice born leaders are those who experienced suffering. They felt isolated at times in their lives and developed an elaborate inner life which left them with strong inner direction, self-assurance, and charisma. Twice born leaders are often the stronger of the two.

Leadership is about being authentic and self-inventing in the process. It is organic and intentional. It is the full development of your gifts and talents, full deployment of them and the ability to adapt along the journey. As Norman Lear states "the goal isn't worth arriving at unless you enjoy the journey". Leaders are those who work hard to be their best, continue to self-develop and who enjoy the process. They are the men and women who are continually pushing forward, and free of the fear of failure, they continue to risk along the way.

Many have the potential to be leaders, but those who become leaders have embraced self-invention. 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. To become a leader you must become yourself—become the maker of your own life.

Knowing Yourself

Talk to every major leader and you will get an acute sense of who they are as a person. They may also have a story of disappointing the people around them as they became fully themselves. In order to know oneself completely you must be able to separate yourself from who the world thinks you are and who they want you to be, and simply be who you want to be. No one can teach you how to become yourself. Because this is such a huge factor in being a leader, Bennis gives four lessons of self-knowledge: You are your own best teacher; you must accept responsibility and blame no one; you can learn anything you want to learn; and true understanding of yourself comes from reflection on experience. Once you understand yourself, then you know how to move forward.

We are shaped more than we realize by our families, schools, and society in general. We are all products of our past environments and relationship. We must therefore acknowledge the results of our upbringing and past experiences, reflect on them, and learn from them. Though all people are shaped by their elders and peers, leaders are self-directed; they learn from others but are not made by them. True learning must begin by unlearning. Leaders must be able to examine the past and reflect on what is relevant in their memories and feelings of past behaviors, so as not to be controlled by them.

People start to become leaders at the moment they decide for themselves how to be. That isn't easy, but is necessary. Knowing yourself means making a distinction between who others think you are and who you want to be. It is a lifetime process, not an event, and no one can teach you how to do it.

No one can teach you how to become you. But there are some useful patterns that seem consistent over different people's experiences. The first is that you are your own best teacher. Leaders saw a gap—they knew they had to learn and grow, or admit that they had settled for less than they were capable of. That leads naturally to the second

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pattern—taking responsibility for that learning—and for yourself—rather than waiting for someone to provide it for you.

Pattern three: you can learn anything you want to learn, which means embracing new experiences, and diving into the unknown, to embrace it, absorb it, and then understand it. The final lesson is that true understanding comes from reflecting on your experience. “Nothing is truly yours until you understand it—not even yourself.” Reflection leads to understanding.

Knowing the World

Besides knowing themselves, leaders need to know the world they live in. Leaders are those who learn from every life experience. They are continually developing themselves by reading and reflecting on life experience.

The two sources of learning that are most common in our society are maintenance learning and shock learning. Maintenance learning is the kind most often found in classrooms—the acquisition of information and methods to maintain an established way of life. Shock learning is learning from an event which shocks you after living in an overconfident state. For example, the effects of 9/11 on most of our nation’s security and government systems sent our country into a wave of shock learning. Both types of learning accept someone else’s models and methods. Leaders will learn from both; however they must be *innovative* learners as well. Innovative learning is a means of exploring life and your own freedoms and power and is unlimited in breadth. Innovative learning is the learning of leaders.

Most types of learning don’t prepare people to be leaders, but innovative learning—learning marked by anticipation (being active & imaginative rather than passive and habitual), learning by listening to others, and participation (shaping events, rather than being shaped by them) enables people to shape their life, rather than be shaped by it, since they understand how the world—and how their world—operates.

Certain experiences are especially valuable for learning about the world: broad & continuing education, extensive travel, a rich private life, and having mentors. In addition, adversity—mistakes—are tremendous sources of learning, *when they are reflected on*. There are lessons in everything, and the learning can be drawn from them when you think about them, analyze them, examine, question, reflect on them, and finally understand them.

Leaders embrace the world they live in, and learn from their experiences. Learning from experience means:

1. Consciously seeking the kinds of experiences that will enlarge you.
2. Taking risks as a matter of course, knowing that failure is both vital and inevitable.
3. Seeing the future as an opportunity to do things you haven’t done, rather than as a trial or test.

Some of America’s greatest leaders have had little formal education. Leaders are not always marked by their education; in fact education is not a necessary requirement. Education and practical experience make the perfect combination for the development of a leader.

Operating on Instinct

Another common factor in leaders is their innate ability to follow their inner voice. Leaders trust their instincts, and above pleasing the crowd or shareholders, the leader follows their instinct, despite popular opinion, and takes

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responsibility for their actions. This is not to say that they disregard wise counsel and do not consider the impact of their decisions on others. However, leaders learn to follow their inner voice and they are able to carry others with them and take risks. Leaders often take a left and right brain approach at problem solving using both their strategic thinking and their creative thinking abilities. They are able to problem solve in the moment while keeping the ultimate goal and vision before them in the same breath. The point of leadership is not to learn someone else's techniques, but to be yourself, fully developed and fully deployed, to be yourself and use yourself completely.

Deploying Yourself: Strike Hard, Try Everything

Leadership is first being, then doing, so “Letting the Self emerge” is the essential task for leaders. It is how one takes the step from being to doing, and taking that step in a way that is more about expressing who you are than proving something to someone. There is a natural progression of expression that ultimately results in someone becoming a leader.

The first step in the progression is to learn from the past, and reflecting on it is the most pivotal way we learn. Reflection can be hard work, which is why so few do it. Looking back, thinking back, viewing an experience from different perspectives, talking it out, etc. are all ways that we reflect—ways we make learning conscious. Through reflecting, we start to understand the meaning of the past, and the course of action we need to take as a result. In other words, we find a resolution—an understanding of what has happened, and what we should do because of it. Once you have learned to reflect on your experiences and found a resolution, you begin to develop your own perspective.

Perspective is simply how you see things—your frame of reference or your point of view. It is knowing what you think and what you want, what you believe and where you want to go. All leaders have a perspective, and it is their own, not one borrowed from someone else. Anyone who really wants to express themselves must have a point of view—an opinion, a way of seeing things. Too many people today don't have that—they often want to become “leaders” because they want position or power, but without a perspective, the truth is they don't actually lead—because they aren't going anywhere.

Once you have a perspective or point of view, the question becomes “Now what?” What do you do with that? Or to put it another way—how can *you* best express *you*? Understanding your life and having developed a perspective, you can now begin to answer the question of what are you going to do with your life? Some steps to answering that include:

1. Knowing what you want, and knowing your abilities and capacities—and recognizing the difference.
2. Knowing what drives you and what gives you satisfaction
3. Knowing what your values and priorities are, and the values and priorities of the organization you are part of—and evaluating the difference between them.

Once you can evaluate that difference, you can see if where you are is a good fit. If it isn't, you have a decision to make. It is quite possible to be successful and unhappy by being in a place that isn't a good fit; it is also possible to be successful and happy, when you and the organization you are part of are in alignment in the most important areas.

As the process becomes clearer—you start to identify your point of view and sort out where and how to give expression to it—desire or passion begins to emerge. You **know** what you want to do! Desire leads naturally to

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mastery. Leaders are people who have mastered their vocation or profession, by giving themselves fully to it. They put in the time to study, learn, and practice, until they achieve a high degree of competence.

That mastery leads naturally to strategic thinking—how to move forward. While every leadership situation is in some way unique, there are some basic steps in the process that are common across the board.

1. Know the goal—where you want to end up.
2. Identify the possible routes to your goal, including both rewards and potential problems
3. Re-examine your map as objectively as possible
4. Go!

Leaders combine all the different means of expression in order to act effectively. It starts with being and leads naturally to doing—and others often follow.

Moving Through Chaos

Learning to lead is, on one level, learning to manage change. Whether it is setting direction, establishing a philosophy, or creating a culture, change is part of the process, and effective leaders learn how to manage change and adapt to it. Simple to say, but challenging to do!

Leaders grow by leading, especially when facing obstacles. There is no substitute for experience. “As weather shapes mountains, so problems make leaders. Difficult bosses, lack of vision and virtue in the executive suite, circumstances beyond their control, and their own mistakes have been the leader’s basic curriculum.” (p. 136)

One thing that stood out in interviews with leaders was their experience with bosses on the way up the ladder. Many commented on the valuable lessons they learned from difficult, or even bad, bosses. (Bad bosses teach you what not to do; difficult bosses are a mixture of good and bad that has to be navigated). Probably the best boss for a growing leader is a good boss with major flaws, so they can learn the complex lessons of what to do or not do simultaneously.

Getting People on Your Side

A basic truism of leadership is that if no one is following—you aren’t leading. Effective leaders are able to get people on their side, and because of that, are able to make changes in their organizations, and turn their visions into reality.

There are many ways to do that, and it isn’t necessarily the charismatic leader who is best at it. People follow leaders for a variety of reasons:

CBS executive Barbara Corday identified empathy as a key characteristic—she cares about the people around her, and people respond to that. Several leaders described giving people ownership—a sense of being partners in the project, of being part of a team—that caused people to follow.

Sydney Pollack said this: I think you can lead out of fear or intimidation, as awful as that sounds. But he identified two other, more positive qualities to follow someone: an honest belief in the person you’re following, or a somewhat selfish reason—that following is the best thing for you at this time—that you will be better off, or go further, by following you than they would get on their own.

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It is possible to be a leader without a position; in those cases you lead by your “voice,” exercising influence based on who you are and what you say. The underlying issue here is trust—trust is what gets people on your side, and keeps them on your side. There are four ingredients to generating and sustaining trust:

1. Constancy—Leaders face surprises, but they don’t create surprises—they are steady and don’t constantly change course.
2. Congruity—Leaders walk their talk; they live what they believe.
3. Reliability—They are there when it counts
4. Integrity—Leaders honor their commitments & promises.

When those four factors are present, people will trust you and follow you—they will be on your side. If any are lacking, trust will be lost, and eventually your followers will be as well.

Organizations Can Help—or Hinder

Organizations can help or hinder the development of leaders. The challenges that organizations of all kinds face today are daunting—everything seems to be changing! But change does not have to be the enemy—it can be a source of growth and leadership development.

There are massive waves of change sweeping the world right now, propelled by new technologies, global interdependence, demographic changes, cultural and value changes, etc. Everything seems to be up in the air—very few things, if any, are set in stone. In times like these, every organization’s primary resource is its people. Only a handful of organizations have begun to truly tap into that resource, much less give them the means to do what they are capable of doing. So how do organizations encourage leadership?

As we have seen, the basis for leadership is learning, and especially learning from experience. The organization must offer its employees the kinds of experiences that will enable them to learn, and ultimately, to lead. Leaders are not made by taking courses—they learn by experience. That means it is the organizations commitment to providing potential leaders with opportunities to learn by experience that permits growth and change. Those opportunities build drive, trigger a can-do spirit, and inspire self-confidence.

Options include special projects, job rotation, new ventures, etc—things that give them new experiences or that require the development of new skills. The higher the stakes, the more opportunities for learning—and for failures and mistakes. But as we have seen, there is no growth without risks and no progress without mistakes. An organization must develop a healthy attitude towards mistakes, an attitude where risk-taking is encouraged, mistakes are considered normal, and correction, not censure, follows when mistakes are made.

Forging the Future

As we look to the future, a future filled with change and ambiguity, what are the factors individuals and organizations need to exhibit in order to cope with change and create a new future? There are ten:

1. Leaders manage the dream: Every leader has the ability to create a compelling vision, and then translate that dream into reality.

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2. Leaders embrace error: they create an atmosphere where risk-taking is encouraged, they aren't afraid to make mistakes, and they admit them when they do.
3. Leaders encourage reflective backtalk: they know the importance of having people around them who will tell them the unvarnished truth
4. Leaders encourage dissent: they welcome contrary views and devil's advocates.
5. Leaders possess optimism, faith, and hope: these qualities are contagious and lift organizations to new heights.
6. Leaders understand the Pygmalion effect: People will live up (or down) to what is expected of them—leaders expect the best, but are not unrealistic about what that is.
7. Leaders have the "Gretzky factor": Gretzky said "it's not as important to know where the puck is as to know where it will be. Leaders have a sense of where the organization needs to go if it is to grow.
8. Leaders see the long view; they have patience: they aren't controlled by short-term thinking.
9. Leaders understand stakeholder symmetry: they know they need to balance the interests of all the different groups with a stake in the organization
10. Leaders create strategic alliances: they don't feel the need to do everything; rather they create partnerships with others who can get things done.

That's how the leaders and organizations of the future will thrive. As they express themselves, they will make new movies, new products, and maybe a new world.

On Becoming a Leader explores the successes and failures of our past and present leaders and creates a clear model of what leadership needs to be for the future. Through conversations with various leaders over the past twenty years, Warren Bennis compiles the necessary ingredients for successful leadership in our changing society. As a leader himself, he inspires would be leaders to develop themselves completely, independent of the world, to develop a passion and a vision, maintain integrity and trust with those around you, and to risk often, in order to be the leaders who will move America forward in this challenging era.