

***On Becoming a Leader* by Warren Bennis, 1989**

Reviewed by Lisa Abbott

This book travels a lot of distance in a short time. Bennis bemoans the lack of leadership in our society where many think in narrow terms of self-interest, short-term profit, and individual rights. But his book is loaded with insights from leaders who have taken another path – those who strive towards a vision of the common good.

According to Bennis, these leaders have moved beyond a limited “me-first” mindset by 1) becoming self-expressive, 2) listening to their inner voice, 3) learning from the right mentors and 4) giving themselves over to a larger vision.

For Bennis, becoming a leader is the process of becoming and fully expressing oneself. He stresses the importance of taking charge of your own learning, urging us to blame no one for your circumstances and reflect deeply on our experiences. Bennis notes that we become leaders by seeking to understand the world, listening to others, and participating.

Bennis identifies several key ingredients of leadership, including:

- A guiding vision
- Passion (hope and inspiration)
- Integrity (self-knowledge, candor and maturity) and trust
- Curiosity and daring

While this book lacks examples of effective leadership development programs or strategies, its central message is consistent with the philosophy of many grassroots social change organizations. Namely, Bennis believes that becoming a leader is a process of becoming fully alive. Leaders are people who become actors rather than observers in their own lives, families, communities and world.

The book offers a challenge to organizations to create more time for personal and collective reflection about people’s life experiences. Bennis strongly believes that self-reflection is the critical way leaders learn and develop a genuine sense of themselves. He places a high premium on striving to know oneself fully, including our strengths, weaknesses, values, motivations and guiding vision.

In his final chapters Bennis names steps organizations can take to help or hinder the growth of new leadership. While many of his suggestions are overly broad (“offer leadership opportunities to new people”), they make an important point: a commitment to leadership development requires more than pretty words on a page. Effective organizations must invest substantial time and financial resources *and* create policies and an organizational culture that lift up new voices.

“Followers need from their leaders three basic qualities: they want direction, they want trust, and they want hope.” (page xiii)

“At bottom, becoming a leader is synonymous with becoming yourself. It is precisely that simple, and it’s also that difficult.” (page 9)

“Most psychologists have virtually nothing to say about mental life, learning and growing, in our adult years. For whatever reason, we tend to associate creative behavior and learning with the young...The best information we have suggests that adults learn best when they take charge of their own learning.” (page 6)

“True learning must often be preceded by unlearning, because we are taught by our parents and teachers and friends how to go along, to measure up to their standards, rather than allowed to be ourselves.” (page 63)

If you believe that growth comes from risk taking, that you can’t grow without it, then it’s essential in leading people toward growth to get them to make decisions and mistakes.” (page 97)

“To do anything well requires knowing what it is you are doing, and you can only know what you’re really doing by making the process conscious – reflecting on yourself, reflecting on the task, and coming to a resolution.”

“Reflection gets to the heart of the matter, the truth of things. After appropriate reflection, the meaning of the past is known and the resolution of the experience – the course of action you must take as a result – becomes clear.” (page 116)

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