

# On Becoming A Leader

*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.* That is just one of many examples of the kind of exceptional wisdom and perspective found in Warren Bennis' book *On Becoming a Leader*. With every turn of the page or swipe of the screen, the reader is provided with the seasoned insights from one of the most respected names in the field of leadership theory and practice.

I invite you to take a look at these Book Notes to whet your appetite for how this book can further refine the way you think and act as a leader.

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**Title:** *On Becoming A Leader*

**Author:** Warren Bennis

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## **Book Description:**

Deemed “the dean of leadership gurus” by *Forbes* magazine, Warren Bennis has for years persuasively argued that leaders are not born—they are made. Delving into the qualities that define leadership, the people who exemplify it, and the strategies that anyone can apply to achieve it, his classic work *On Becoming a Leader* has served as a source of essential insight for countless readers. In a world increasingly defined by turbulence and uncertainty, the call to leadership is more urgent than ever.

Featuring a provocative new introduction, this new edition will inspire a fresh generation of potential leaders to excellence.

## **Book Quotes:**

One thing we know is that a more dangerous world makes the need for leadership, in every organization, in every institution, more pressing than ever. LOCATION: 263

The crucible is an essential element in the process of becoming a leader...Some magic takes place in the crucible of leadership...The individual brings certain attributes into the crucible and emerges with new, improved leadership skills. Whatever is thrown at them, leaders emerge from their crucibles stronger and unbroken. No matter how cruel the testing, they become more optimistic and more open to experience. They don't lose hope or succumb to bitterness. LOCATION: 270

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In addition to the qualities I describe in *On Becoming a Leader*, all leaders have four essential competencies. First, they are able to engage others by creating shared meaning. They have a vision, and they can persuade others to make that vision their own. LOCATION: 281

Second, all authentic leaders have a distinctive voice. By voice, I mean a cluster of things—a purpose, self-confidence, and a sense of self, and the whole gestalt of abilities that, thanks to Daniel Goleman, we now call Emotional Intelligence. Voice is hard to define but terribly important. LOCATION: 286

The third quality that all true leaders have is integrity. Recently, we have been reminded how important integrity is because we have perceived its lack in so many corporate leaders—the corporate weasels, as they have been called. One component of integrity is a strong moral compass. It need not be religious faith, but it is a powerful belief in something outside one's self. LOCATION: 292

But the one competence that I now realize is absolutely essential for leaders—the key competence—is adaptive capacity. Adaptive capacity is what allows leaders to respond quickly and intelligently to relentless change. LOCATION: 301

First, they all agree that leaders are made, not born, and made more by themselves than by any external means. Second, they agree that no leader sets out to be a leader per se, but rather to express him- or herself freely and fully. That is, leaders have no interest in proving themselves, but an abiding interest in expressing themselves. The difference is crucial, for it's the difference between being driven, as too many people are today, and leading, as too few people do. LOCATION: 396

But of all the characteristics that distinguished the individuals in this book, the most pivotal was a concern with a guiding purpose, an overarching vision. LOCATION: 411

At bottom, becoming a leader is synonymous with becoming yourself. It's precisely that simple, and it's also that difficult. LOCATION: 458

Twentieth-century America started to build on the promise of the nineteenth, but something went terribly wrong. After World War II, America was chiefly notable for its bureaucrats and managers, its organization men, its wheeler-dealers who remade, and in some cases unmade, the institutions and organizations of America, in both the public and private sectors. There have been bright spots, including the rise of the civil rights movement and extraordinary American accomplishments in science and technology. But even though we emerged from World War II as the richest and most powerful nation on earth, by the mid-1970s, America had lost its edge. America lost its edge because it lost its way. We forgot what we were here for. LOCATION: 660

While the 1960s saw the birth of such important contributions to our country as the civil rights movement and the women's movement, too many of its so-called breakthroughs became breakdowns. We talked about freedom and democracy, but we sometimes practiced license and anarchy. People were often not as interested in new ideas as they were in recipes and slogans. Gurus Abraham Maslow and Carl Rogers told us we could create our own reality, and we did, with everyone insisting on having it his or her way. LOCATION: 669

The United States stock market has imploded twice in this young century, erasing trillions of dollars of wealth in the process. But the gap between the rich and the poor in the United States remains dangerously wide. The American middle class, which once trusted in its future because of swollen 401(k)s and soaring home equity, has been devastated by the recent crash. Growing numbers of have-nots and have-too-littles worry daily about the skyrocketing cost of health care, ignoring symptoms and splitting pills. Afraid of another Great Depression, some Americans cling to jobs they hate, fearful that their children won't be able to afford college. Meanwhile, certain social and environmental problems continue to haunt us. Poverty and drug addiction perpetuate an

American underclass that fills our prisons to overflowing, and the oceans continue to rise. LOCATION: 689

American business has become the principal shaper and mover in contemporary America—even more so than television—and has, in an odd irony, by zealously practicing what it preaches, sandbagged itself. Having captured the heart and mind of the nation with its siren songs of instant gratification, it has locked itself into obsolete practices. Before the flameout of the New Economy and the equally spectacular fall from grace of the American CEO, corporate leaders had achieved a popularity such as they had never experienced before in history. But even as we fawned over these corporate superstars, we failed to ask a crucial question: How much genuine leadership was being practiced inside even the most successful companies? LOCATION: 727

Listening to the inner voice—trusting the inner voice—is one of the most important lessons of leadership. LOCATION: 906

The first step toward change is to refuse to be deployed by others and to choose to deploy yourself. LOCATION: 936

The first basic ingredient of leadership is a guiding vision. LOCATION: 948

The second basic ingredient of leadership is passion—the underlying passion for the promises of life, combined with a very particular passion for a vocation, a profession, a course of action. LOCATION: 951

The next basic ingredient of leadership is integrity. I think there are three essential parts of integrity: self-knowledge, candor, and maturity. LOCATION: 956

Leaders never lie to themselves, especially about themselves, know their faults as well as their assets, and deal with them directly. You are your own raw material. When you know what you consist of and what you want to make of it, then you can invent yourself. LOCATION: 960

Integrity is the basis of trust, which is not as much an ingredient of leadership as it is a product. It is the one quality that cannot be acquired, but must be earned. It is given by co-workers and followers, and without it, the leader can't function. LOCATION: 969

Two more basic ingredients of leadership are curiosity and daring. Leaders wonder about everything, want to learn as much as they can, are willing to take risks, experiment, try new things. They do not worry about failure, but embrace errors, knowing they will learn from them. LOCATION: 972

As countless deposed kings and hapless heirs to great fortunes can attest, true leaders are not born, but made, and usually self-made. Leaders invent themselves. They are not, by the way, made in a single weekend seminar, as many of the leadership-theory spokesmen claim. LOCATION: 977

Billions of dollars are spent annually by and on would-be leaders. Many major corporations offer leadership development courses. And corporate America has nevertheless lost its lead in the world market. I would argue that more leaders have been made by accident, circumstance, sheer grit, or will than have been made by all the leadership courses put together. Leadership courses can only teach skills. They can't teach character or vision—and indeed they don't even try. Developing character and vision is the way leaders invent themselves. LOCATION: 980

I tend to think of the differences between leaders and managers as the differences between those who master the context and those who surrender to it. There are other differences, as well, and they are enormous and crucial:

- The manager administers; the leader innovates.
- The manager is a copy; the leader is an original.
- The manager maintains; the leader develops.
- The manager focuses on systems and structure; the leader focuses on people.
- The manager relies on control; the leader inspires trust.
- The manager has a short-range view; the leader has a long-range perspective.
- The manager asks how and when; the leader asks what and why.
- The manager has his or her eye always on the bottom line; the leader's eye is on the horizon.
- The manager imitates; the leader originates.
- The manager accepts the status quo; the leader challenges it.
- The manager is the classic good soldier; the leader is his or her own person.
- The manager does things right; the leader does the right thing. LOCATION: 1062

Leaders have nothing but themselves to work with. LOCATION: 1120

What is true for leaders is, for better or for worse, true for each of us: we are our own raw material. LOCATION: 1124

Codifying one's thinking is an important step in inventing oneself. The most difficult way to do it is by thinking about thinking—it helps to speak or write your thoughts. Writing is the most profound way of codifying your thoughts, the best way of learning from yourself who you are and what you believe. LOCATION: 1133

By the time we reach puberty, the world has reached us and shaped us to a greater extent than we realize. Our family, friends, school, and society in general have told us—by word and example—how to be. But people begin to become leaders at that moment when they decide for themselves how to be. LOCATION: 1188

Know thyself, then, means separating who you are and who you want to be from what the world thinks you are and wants you to be. LOCATION: 1205

Nothing is truly yours until you understand it—not even yourself. Our feelings are raw, unadulterated truth, but until we understand why we are happy or angry or anxious, the truth is useless to us. LOCATION: 1305

Socrates said, "The unexamined life is not worth living." I'd go a step further: The unexamined life is impossible to live successfully. LOCATION: 1415

To free ourselves from habit, to resolve the paradoxes, to transcend conflicts, to become the masters rather than the slaves of our own lives, we must first see and remember, and then forget. That is why true learning begins with unlearning—and why unlearning is one of the recurring themes of our story. LOCATION: 1424

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. LOCATION: 1999

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. LOCATION: 2000

Leaders who trust their co-workers are, in turn, trusted by them. Trust, of course, cannot be acquired, but can only be given. Leadership without mutual trust is a contradiction in terms. Trust resides squarely between faith

and doubt. Leaders always have faith in themselves, their abilities, their co-workers, and their mutual possibilities. But leaders also have sufficient doubt to question, challenge, probe, and thereby progress. In the same way, his or her co-workers must believe in the leader, themselves, and their combined strength, but they must feel sufficiently confident to question, challenge, probe, and test, too. Maintaining that vital balance between faith and doubt, preserving that mutual trust, is a primary task for any leader. LOCATION: 2409

Leadership is first being, then doing. Everything the leader does reflects what he or she is. LOCATION: 243

Leaders are, by definition, innovators. They do things other people have not done or dare not do. They do things in advance of other people. They make new things. They make old things new. Having learned from the past, they live in the present, with one eye on the future. And each leader puts it all together in a different way. To do that, as I noted earlier, leaders must be right brain, as well as left-brain, thinkers. They must be intuitive, conceptual, synthesizing, and artistic. LOCATION: 2437

Learning to lead is, on one level, learning to manage change. As we've seen, a leader imposes (in the most positive sense of the word) his or her philosophy on the organization, creating or re-creating its culture. The organization then acts on that philosophy, carries out the mission, and the culture takes on a life of its own, becoming more cause than effect. But unless the leader continues to evolve, to adapt and adjust to external change, the organization will sooner or later stall. LOCATION: 2464

The leader does it better and better and better, but is never satisfied. LOCATION: 2474

Leaders learn by leading, and they learn best by leading in the face of obstacles. 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 leaders' basic curriculum. LOCATION: 2476

A major challenge that all leaders are now facing is an epidemic of institutional malfeasance, as we read nearly every day in the news. And if there is anything that undermines trust, it is the feeling that the people at the top lack integrity, are without a solid sense of ethics. The characteristics of empathy and trust are reflected not just in codes of ethics, but in organizational cultures that support ethical conduct. LOCATION: 2732

Leaders are not made by corporate courses, any more than they are made by their college courses, but by experience. Therefore, it is not devices, such as "career path planning," or training courses, that are needed, but an organization's commitment to providing its potential leaders with opportunities to learn through experience in an environment that permits growth and change. LOCATION: 3057

Corporate vision operates on three levels: strategic, which is the organization's overriding philosophy; tactical, which is that philosophy in action; and personal, which is that philosophy made manifest in the behavior of each employee. LOCATION: 3119

Chaos is all around us now, but the leader knows that chaos is the beginning, not the end. Chaos is the source of energy and momentum. LOCATION: 3169

There are ten factors, ten personal and organizational characteristics for coping with change, forging a new future, and creating learning organizations. LOCATION: 3183

1. Leaders manage the dream. All leaders have the capacity to create a compelling vision, one that takes people to a new place, and then to translate that vision into reality. Not every leader I spoke with had all ten of the characteristics I'm about to

describe, but they all had this one. LOCATION: 3187

2. Leaders embrace error. LOCATION: 3218
3. Leaders encourage reflective backtalk. Norbert Wiener told me, “I never know what I say until I hear the response.” Leaders know the importance of having someone in their lives who will unfailingly and fearlessly tell them the truth. One of the most intriguing discoveries I made in the original interviews for Leaders was that almost all of the CEOs were still married to their first spouse. I think the reason may be that the spouse—for both men and women—is the one person they can totally trust. The backtalk from the spouse, the trusted person, is reflective because it allows the leader to learn, to find out more about him- or herself. LOCATION: 3223
4. Leaders encourage dissent. This is the organizational corollary of reflective backtalk. Leaders need people around them who have contrary views, who are devil’s advocates, “variance sensors” who can tell them the difference between what is expected and what is really going on. LOCATION: 3228
5. Leaders possess the Nobel Factor: optimism, faith, and hope. LOCATION: 3248
6. Leaders understand the Pygmalion effect in management. LOCATION: 3263
7. Leaders have what I think of as the Gretzky Factor, a certain “touch.” Wayne Gretzky, the best hockey player of his generation, said that it’s not as important to know where the puck is now as to know where it will be. Leaders have that sense of where the culture is going to be, where the organization must be if it is to grow. LOCATION: 3285
8. Leaders see the long view. They have patience. LOCATION: 3293
9. Leaders understand stakeholder symmetry. LOCATION: 3301
10. Leaders create strategic alliances and partnerships. They see the world globally, and they know it is no longer possible to hide. LOCATION: 3319

*Note: should you wish to find any quote in its original context, the Kindle “location” is provided after each entry.*