
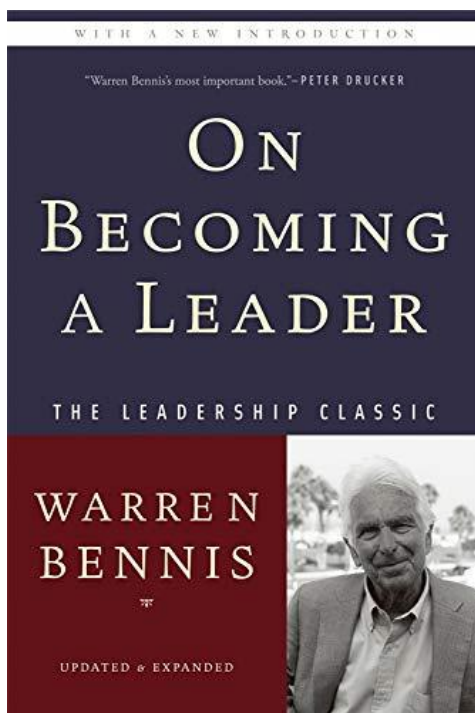


<p>THE CENTRE FOR ARMY LEADERSHIP</p> <p>Book Review</p> <p>No.25 November 2021</p>		<p><i>The Centre for Army Leadership (CAL) is the British Army's custodian of leadership debate, thinking and doctrine. It seeks to stimulate discussion about leadership and so further the institution's knowledge of best practice and experience.</i></p> <p><b>Book Reviews</b> are written by and for serving soldiers and officers, summarising a wide range of notable leadership-related books.</p>
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## *On Becoming a Leader* by Warren Bennis

Reviewed by 2Lt Edward Barrett



In this book, Warren Bennis – described by Forbes as ‘the Dean of Leadership Gurus’ – examines what qualities leaders possess and what strategies all of us can adopt to become leaders ourselves. Bennis argues that leaders are made, not born, and that it is within all of us to become great leaders.

Bennis starts by making the case for the increased need for good leaders in today’s world. Today, according to Bennis, there is greater instability and therefore a greater need for good leadership. He explains the higher degree of complexity and instability in a technologically advanced world. Bennis breaks down the components of what makes a good leader: knowing the context and basics; knowledge of yourself and the world; how to operate; working in organisations; and finally thinking

about the future direction of the world. Bennis concludes his introduction by stating that becoming a leader is synonymous with becoming yourself; a simple, but difficult task.

To help us know the context, Bennis looks back at recent history. He describes US President Ronald Reagan as a ‘disappointing leader’ (p. 2). Later in the same chapter, Bennis refers to President George W. Bush’s controversial presidential election against Al Gore, despite Al Gore winning the popular vote. For Bennis, the context we are living in is an era of leaders who have fallen short of being truly

great. To demonstrate the importance of understanding and mastering the context, Bennis remembers when he attempted to coach someone, who he refers to as 'Ed'. Ed was a highly ambitious company man, who performed well but lacked people skills. Ed was trialled for a CEO role at a company in Minnesota and Bennis attempted to develop his people skills, which were extremely task-focused and abrasive. Eventually, Bennis recommended to the company that Ed not to be given the CEO role as he believed Ed was not suited. This is what Bennis refers to as 'surrendering to the context', in that Ed was unable to overcome his weaknesses in leadership and it cost him the role he wanted. To become a leader, we need to 'master the context', which is done by becoming 'self-expressive, listening to the inner voice, learning from the right mentors and giving oneself over to a guiding vision' (p. 29). Bennis explains the basics of leadership and highlights the ingredients he considers essential: integrity, passion, a guiding vision, curiosity and daring. It may be worth pointing out that Bennis makes a curious error for someone who had military experience in WWII: he refers to US Army General Eisenhower as America's 'only 5 star general', despite The US having had five 5 star generals and even two 6 star generals.

Bennis' next chapters, *Knowing Yourself* and *Knowing the World*, examine the importance of learning. There are two main motivators for learning: a hunger for knowledge and lack of fulfilling one's own potential which causes a need to fill that potential. To learn properly, one must accept full responsibility and avoid the tendency to place blame on others. One must be unafraid of failure and reflect on one's own experiences, strengths, and weaknesses. This point is highlighted by using the example of Marty Kaplan. As Disney Productions' vice-president, Kaplan watched countless Disney films before reflecting on what he had watched, in order to understand what the Company's desired outcomes were in film production. Bennis reinforces the importance of innovative learning, which includes being active and imaginative, listening to others and helping to shape events, not being shaped by them.

Bennis' next step is looking at how to operate. Managers tend to be left-brain thinkers; research and development departments tend to be right-brain thinkers. Corporate culture rewards left-brain thinking (the logical side of the brain). Bennis's advice to CEOs is to combine the administrative, left-brain skills with imaginative, right-brain skills. He stresses the importance of reflection, and he highlights the need for reflecting on success as well as on failure. Bennis encourages the reader to keep their perspective rather than be swept up by the opinions around us. He refers to TV talk-show host Morton Downey Jr, who expressed his controversial opinions without apology, and was respected for it. On operating, Bennis also argues that chaos can open a space for learning and for new approaches and ideas. He speaks about banks collapsing and the opportunity of learning by reacting to unforeseen upheaval and chaos.

Finally, Bennis takes us into how to work with others and in organisations. Leaders must get people on their side; Bennis believes they must have 'constancy' (not creating surprises for their team) and 'congruity' (not espousing theories they do not practice themselves). Crucially, in Bennis's view, the

best way for organisations to work effectively is to move away from the traditional hierarchical structure and towards a more equal one that contains autonomous units and highly skilled leaders at all levels.

Bennis's closing thoughts look towards the future. The author reminds us to take the long view, embrace mistakes, and encourage different opinions and views. He ends on another political note, stating that the then US President Barack Obama must reach out to the rest of the world and overcome what Bennis refers to as the 'isolation' of the Bush era.

Overall, while the structure of the book is clear as each chapter sets out the core the idea being discussed. However, the use of so many anecdotes and examples can be confusing and less easy to follow. The anecdotes begin to jump from one example to the next without a clear pattern, giving the impression of using more than necessary to fill out the chapters. Additionally, Bennis' evident political biases towards liberal politicians are not always necessary to the content. Nonetheless, the book provides some useful ideas on how to develop your own leadership and how to operate in any organisation, particularly in terms of empowering individuals to be more autonomous and to encourage leadership at all levels. This is of course not a new concept to the British Army, as efforts to create this kind of environment have increased in recent years.

*On Becoming a Leader* is a pleasant read and it provides interesting anecdotes upon which the reader might want to reflect. However, it is certainly not ground-breaking and the long-winded structure can make the reader lose sight of the key ideas being discussed.

Edward Barrett

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