

The Journal

Perspectives on Effective Leadership

By Bill Durkin

The Synergy Companies, LLC

For thirty years I have been fascinated with the study of leadership. During that time, I have had the pleasure of meeting and learning from some extraordinary leaders. One of the individuals I've admired most is Warren Bennis. Warren has interviewed more than 150 of the nation's top executives and coaches. His goal was to explore the qualities shared by the most effective leaders he could find. When launching his research, Bennis initially viewed business as analogous to a successful symphony orchestra--both being driven by great leaders directing highly skilled professionals committed to creating harmony. He soon realized that with enormous changes taking place in our world, the image of a predictable symphony is not an apt comparison to a corporation. More appropriately, organizations today need to model their efforts after a fine jazz ensemble, as the sound of the jazz represents surprise and shared leadership. In today's business environment, we are being forced to confront an endless stream of surprises--from the competition, customers, suppliers, and employees. To deal with these surprises successfully, companies will need to attract, develop and retain more leaders. In a seminar I attended, Bennis discussed his vision for achieving successful leadership.

A New Framework of Business

Bennis suggests that the key to sustaining a competitive advantage is to find leaders at all levels who are capable of creating meaningful change in the organizations they serve.

This new framework of business requires leaders who are able to create a work environment that is fast, focused, flexible, and fun. ▶

Releasing Brain Power

Among the major challenges for today's business leaders is learning how to release the brain power of co-workers and employees. While interviewing Jack Welch, Bennis discovered that one of Welch's top priorities during his days at GE was to develop ways of transferring good ideas "with the speed of light" from one division to the next. He was constantly listening to employees to determine what they were learning, and he continually shared success stories with everyone in the organization.

Reinventing Key to Success

Bennis believes that success should not be limited to restructuring and reengineering organizations. Although both are important, they will not produce long-term prosperity. The key to success is reinvention...generating new ideas, creating better ways of doing business, and pooling resources to serve customers efficiently. This requires leaders who are able to get intelligent people to enjoy working together. A Disney executive once told him that, "At Disney, our inventory goes home every night." He went on to say that he considered Disney employees their most valuable product.

If the focus on "people as your product" is to be a priority, beliefs about power must change. To create the social architecture that will attract and keep the very best people, we will need to eliminate any command and control leadership that still exists.

Aligning, Creating and Empowering

In today's world of overwhelming chaos, turmoil and confusion, the command and control mindset does not work for employees or customers. Living in the midst of an era of unprecedented transformation, we can no longer control, organize and predict. The only solution is to adopt a whole new concept of leadership.

As discussed by Bennis, the organizations that are going to survive in the future will be much better at -- Aligning, Creating and Empowering (ACE). While the old paradigm was built on ensuring that control mechanisms, policies and rule books were in place to keep employees in line, the new framework relies on smarter tools. The most effective businesses will be built not on bureaucracy, but on creation of an empowering vision and established direction.

Making the Shift to Success

The new framework will cause a shift in leadership responsibilities from:

- micromanagement to alignment with a vision, mission and strategy
- direction with rules to guiding and creating shared values
- establishing position power to establishing relationship power
- managing performances to gaining commitment
- focusing on numbers and tasks to serving customers with quality
- confronting and combating to collaborating and unifying
- stressing independence to fostering interdependence
- encouraging ol' boy networks to promoting diversity
- changing as a result of crisis to continuously learning and innovating
- being internally competitive to becoming globally competitive ►

Unlearning the Present

Over 75% of Fortune 1000 companies agreed that making this shift is the way to be successful in business today. Yet only 7% of the same companies are actually implementing the changes. According to Bennis, the reason that change occurs slowly is that it requires unlearning. Change is especially difficult for those individuals and organizations that have enjoyed success.

Bennis suggests that the best approach to success in the future is to disturb the present. This is often a difficult concept for anyone who has been successful over a long period of time. Many believe they can continue to do what they've always done, or simply employ some fine tuning. To change this course of thinking, although difficult, requires exceptional leadership.

The Criteria for Leadership

In assessing people for executive leadership, the key criteria commonly used include:

1. Technical competency -- business literacy
2. People skills -- knowledge in how to motivate and empower
3. Conceptual skills -- ability to handle multiple responsibilities and knowing how each action will affect those involved
4. Taste -- the capacity to choose people well and guide their growth without feeling threatened
5. A track record -- a history of getting results
6. Judgment -- the ability to make tough decisions with imperfect data
7. Character

Character Plays a Vital Role

Viewing “character” as being the most important quality in executive leadership, Bennis chose to examine its elements. Foremost in developing the level of character required for exceptional leadership is a clearly defined sense of purpose. This is not a corporate mission – the purpose statement he is referring to is personal. Several aspects should be considered in its creation.

- The statement should be specific, offering a personal mission both concrete and measurable.
- There must be a willful determination to achieve the mission. It must be strong enough to convert your intentions into actions.
- The purpose should convey tangible meaning to you and the people you are leading.

Effective leaders must communicate a vision that will motivate people to achieve the extraordinary. Once established, it is important that the focus is maintained. It is the role of the leader to affirm that the direction has meaning for the people who want to follow. ▶

A Balance of Trust

Another dynamic element of character is the capacity of the leader to sustain trust. Trust relies on predictability. For some people, there is little that they can depend on. The amount of change and severity of problems in the world compels many to stop trusting.

Good leaders are responsible for building trust in an atmosphere of change. Bennis compares the three components of trust to the legs of a tripod. Each relies on the other. To sustain trust, the successful leader knows that all three legs must be in balance.

1. Competence
2. Ambition and drive
3. Integrity

The Power of Optimism

In examining a third important element of character, Bennis notes the significant role that optimism and hope play in effective leadership. The most successful leaders have learned how to expect the best from themselves and others.

Facing the Facts

Most economists predict we have another couple of years before we see real growth. However, what happens to the economy over the next 12 months will not impact the growth of your business more than what happens to your growth as a leader. ■

About the Author



Bill Durkin
Vice President of Leadership Development

Bill Durkin is Vice President of Leadership Development for Synergy and Founder of One Positive Place. He specializes in helping leaders create work environments that produce profitable growth and meaningful change.

This article is one in a series of contributions by ACG Chicago's Sponsors and was taken from ACG Chicago's publication, *The Journal*, April 2010 issue. We appreciate Synergy's platinum support.

Since 1989 Synergy has been improving the profitability of their small to mid-size clients by providing outsourced Human Resource services typically available only in large organizations. These efforts- focusing on both financial improvements and loss prevention- are provided by their staff of highly experienced HR professionals at a small fraction of the investment that would be necessary to gain this expertise on one's own. Their typical growth oriented clients place a high value on their employees, and they recognize that small HR improvements can dramatically increase profits, as easily as HR mistakes can devastate the bottom line.

Synergy has offices in Illinois, Indiana, and Wisconsin. www.mysynergy.com
One Postive Place also works with Synergy on leadership issues. www.onepositiveplace.com