



Warren Bennis: A Business Leader for All Seasons

Insights

8.14.14

I love reading the Economist and they justified my appreciation with an [August 9 Obituary on Warren Bennis](#), who they rightly described as *“the world’s most important thinker on the subject that business leaders care about more than any other: themselves.”*

I cannot do a better job than this article in describing this thoughtful and ethical man’s contributions to business theory, to leadership and to the question of *“what things matter the most?”* Is there any quality more wanting in business and government today than effective leadership? Whether I write about safety, legal compliance, avoiding discrimination claims or developing a successful workplace culture, I come back to the need for real leadership. Bennis was as practical as he was thoughtful. His ideas make sense. He saw the connections between leadership, ethics, morality and making money. And he held out hope that we could all become better leaders ... not solely those seemingly born to lead.

.I’m also a fan of Peter Drucker, and the Economist contrasts their focuses:

If Peter Drucker was the man who invented management (as a book about him claimed), then Warren Bennis was the man who invented leadership as a business idea.

Central to his thinking was a distinction between managers and leaders. Managers are people who like to do things right, he argued. Leaders are people who do the right thing. Managers have their eye on the bottom line. Leaders have their eye on the horizon. Managers help you to get to where you want to go. Leaders tell you what it is you want. He chastised business schools for focusing on the first at the expense of the second. People took MBAs, he said, not because they wanted to be middle managers but because they wanted to be chief executives. He argued that “failing organizations are usually over-managed and under-led”.

Mr Bennis believed leaders are made, not born. He taught that leadership was a set of skills—that can be learned through hard work. Bennis’ autobiography was so appropriately titled: *“Still Surprised.”* Yep. Never stopped learning and evolving. Not everyone possesses charisma and public speaking ability, but Bennis argued that they could still be developed into leaders. Granted, stubbornness, poor judgment and a determined disinterest disqualifies many from leadership, but not their personality; nor do we need this leadership only from the CEOs.

As the Economist explained, Bennis believed that “what constitutes good leadership changes over time:”

Mr Bennis was convinced that an egalitarian age required a new style. Leaders could no longer crack the whip and expect people to jump through hoops. They needed to be more like mentors and coaches than old-fashioned sergeant-majors. Top-down leadership not only risked alienating employees. It threatened to squander the organization’s most important resource: knowledge. There is no point in employing knowledge workers if you are not going to allow them to use their knowledge creatively.

A Management Labor Lawyer should love Bennis’ approach to so called business leaders over the last 25 years. If business leaders heeded his advice, there would be far fewer employee lawsuits, even lower union activity, and a safer workplace culture. The Economist explains:

The last quarter of the 20th century often saw Mr Bennis in despair. He loathed the Masters of the Universe who boasted about how many jobs they had nuked and how much money they had made. “On Becoming a Leader” is full of prophetic warnings about corporate corruption, extravagant executive rewards and short-termism. He also lamented the quality of leadership in Washington, DC.

But he became more optimistic in his last few years, at least about the corporate world. The Enron, WorldCom and Lehman disasters taught businesses the danger of hubris. And a new generation of CEOs, whom he dubbed “the crucible generation” and compared to his own second-world-war generation, were more impressive than their immediate predecessors, characterized not merely by tolerance of other people, but respect for them.

Bennis had a sharp tongue. He expected much from those who worked with him. And yet he embraced humility, and although he might not have termed himself an exponent of “servant leadership,” he rejected the arrogance and self-entitlement often on display in our society. If Bennis rejected arrogance, a guy of my comparatively minor wattage had better not become too big for my britches.

I’ll conclude my post with the Economist’s fine ending:

When Drucker came to a party at Mr Bennis’ post-modern house on Santa Monica beach in California, in the late 1990s, the two men were a study in contrasts: Mr Bennis, thin, tanned and dressed in a light suit; Drucker paunchy, pale and encased in black. Mr Bennis talked animatedly about leadership. Drucker growled that what mattered was followership. But in fact the men were brothers under the skin and worthy counterweights to each other: big thinkers who took subjects too often synonymous with platitudes and gobbledygook, and, by dint of a lot of hard twisting, wrung some sense out of them.

I'll leave it to the reader to ponder the implications of Bennis' teachings to an employer's role in workplace safety and HR.

Related People



Howard A. Mavity

Partner

404.240.4204

[Email](#)