

The Four Competencies of Leadership

From: *An Invented Life: Reflections on Leadership and Change* (Chapter 5)

By Warren Bennis

Much of what I've learned in decades of studying leadership was first distilled in this essay from 1984. The standard criteria for choosing top-level managers are technical competence, people skills, conceptual skills, judgment, and character. And yet effective leadership is overwhelmingly the function of only one of these —character. (Judgment is an important secondary criterion.) If you ask subordinates what they want in a leader, they usually list three things: direction or vision, trustworthiness, and optimism. Like effective parents, lovers, teachers, and therapists, good leaders make people hopeful.

For nearly five years I have been researching a book on leadership. During this period, I have traveled around the country spending time with 90 of the most effective, successful leaders in the nation; 60 from corporations and 30 from the public sector.

My goal was to find these leaders' common traits, a task that has required much more probing than I expected. For a while, I sensed much more diversity than commonality among them. The group comprises both left-brain and right-brain thinkers; some who dress for success and some who don't; well-spoken, articulate leaders and laconic, inarticulate ones; some John Wayne types and some who are definitely the opposite. Interestingly, the group includes only a few stereotypically charismatic leaders.

Despite the diversity, which is profound and must not be underestimated, I identified certain areas of competence shared by all 90. Before presenting those findings, though, it is important to place this study in context, to review the mood and events in the United States just before and during the research.

Decline and Malaise

When I left the University of Cincinnati late in 1977, our country was experiencing what President Carter called 'despair' or 'malaise.' From 1960 to 1980, our institutions' credibility had eroded steadily. In an article about that period entitled 'Where Have All the Leaders Gone?', I described how difficult the times were for leaders, including university presidents like myself.

I argued that, because of the complexity of the times, leaders felt impotent. The assassinations of several national leaders, the Vietnam war, the Watergate scandal, the Iranian hostage crisis and other events led to a loss of trust in our institutions and leadership.

I came across a quotation in a letter Abigail Adams wrote to Thomas Jefferson in 1790: 'These are the hard times in which a genius would wish to live.' If, as she believed, great necessities summon great leaders, I wanted to get to know the leaders brought forth by the current malaise. In a time when bumper stickers appeared reading 'Impeach Someone,' I resolved to seek out leaders who were effective under these adverse conditions.

At the same time that America suffered from this leadership gap, it was suffering from a productivity gap. Consider these trends:

In the 1960s, the average GNP growth was 4.1 percent; in the 1970s, it was 2.9 percent; in 1982, it was negative.

The U.S. standard of living, the world's highest in 1972, now ranks fifth.

In 1960, when the economies of Europe and Japan had been rebuilt, the U.S. accounted for 25 percent of the industrial nations' manufacturing exports and supplied 98 percent of its domestic markets. Now, the U.S. has less than a 20 percent share of the world market, and that share is declining.

In 1960, U.S. automobiles had a 96 percent market share; today we have about 71 percent. The same holds true for consumer electronics; in 1960 it was 94.4 percent, in

1980 only 49 percent. And that was before Sony introduced the Walkman!

In addition to leadership and productivity gaps, a subtler 'commitment gap' existed, that is, a reluctance to commit to one's work or employer.

The Public Agenda's recent survey of working Americans shows the following statistics. Less than one out of four jobholders (23 percent) says he or she currently works at full potential. Nearly half say they do not put much effort into their jobs above what is required. The overwhelming majority, 75 percent, say they could be significantly more effective on their job than they are now. And nearly 6 in 10 working Americans believe that 'most people do not work as hard as they used to.'

A number of observers have pointed out the considerable gap between the number of hours people are paid to work and the numbers of hours they spend on productive labor. Evidence developed recently by the University of Michigan indicates the gap may be widening. They found the difference between paid hours and actual working hours grew 10 percent between 1970 and 1980.

This increasing commitment gap leads to the central question: How can we empower the work force and reap the harvest of human effort?

If I have learned anything from my research, it is this: The factor that empowers the work force and ultimately determines which organizations succeed or fail is the leadership of those organizations. When strategies, processes or cultures change, the key to improvement remains leadership.

The Sample: 90 Leaders

For my study, I wanted 90 effective leaders with proven track records. The final group contains 60 corporate executives, most, but not all, from Fortune 500 companies, and 30 from the public sector. My goal was to find people with leadership ability, in contrast to just 'good managers'—true leaders who affect the culture, who are the social architects of their organizations and who create and maintain values.

Leaders are people who do the right thing; managers are people who do things right. Both roles are crucial, and they differ profoundly. I often observe people in top positions doing the wrong thing well.

Given my definition, one of the key problems facing American organizations (and probably those in much of the industrialized world) is that they are underled and overmanaged. They do not pay enough attention to doing the right thing, while they pay too much attention to doing things right. Part of the fault lies with our schools of management; we teach people how to be good technicians and good staff people, but we don't train people for leadership.

The group of 60 corporate leaders was not especially different from any profile of top leadership in America. The median age was 56. Most were white males, with six black men and six women in the group. The only surprising finding was that all the CEOs not only were married to their first spouse, but also seemed enthusiastic about the institution of marriage. Examples of the CEOs are Bill Kieschnick, chairman and CEO of Arco, and the late Ray Kroc of McDonald's restaurants.

Public-sector leaders included Harold Williams, who then chaired the SEC; Neil Armstrong, a genuine all-American hero who happened to be at the University of Cincinnati; three elected officials; two orchestra conductors; and two winning athletics coaches. I wanted conductors and coaches because I mistakenly believed they were the last leaders with complete control over their constituents.

After several years of observation and conversation, I have defined four competencies evident to some extent in every member of the group. They are:

management of attention;
management of meaning;
management of trust;
management of self.

Management of Attention

One of the traits most apparent in these leaders is their ability to draw others to them, because they have a vision, a dream, a set of intentions, an agenda, a frame of reference. They communicate an extraordinary focus of commitment, which attracts people to them. One of these leaders was described as making people want to join in with him; he enrolls them in his vision.

Leaders, then, manage attention through a compelling vision that brings others to a place they have not been before. I came to this understanding in a roundabout way, as this anecdote illustrates.

One of the people I most wanted to interview was one of the few I couldn't seem to reach. He refused to answer my letters or phone calls. I even tried getting in touch with the members of his board. He is Leon Fleischer, a well-known child prodigy who grew up to become a prominent pianist, conductor and musicologist.

When I called him originally to recruit him for the University of Cincinnati faculty, he declined and told me he was working with orthopedic specialists to regain the use of his right hand. He did visit the campus, and I was impressed with his commitment to staying in Baltimore, near the medical institution where he received therapy.

Fleischer was the only person who kept turning me down for an interview, and finally I gave up. A couple of summers later I was in Aspen, Colorado, while Fleischer was conducting the Aspen Music Festival. I tried to reach him again, even leaving a note on his dressing room door, but I got no answer.

One day in downtown Aspen, I saw two perspiring young cellists carrying their instruments and offered them a ride to the music tent. They hopped in the back of my jeep, and, as we rode, I questioned them about Fleischer.

'I'll tell you why he is so great,' said one. 'He doesn't waste our time.'

Fleischer finally agreed not only to be interviewed but to let me watch him rehearse and conduct music classes. I linked the way I saw him work with that simple sentence, 'He doesn't waste our time.' Every moment Fleischer was before the orchestra, he knew exactly what sound he wanted. He didn't waste time because his intentions were always evident. What united him with the other musicians was their concern with intention and outcome.

When I reflected on my own experience, it struck me that when I was most effective, it was because I knew what I wanted. When I was ineffective, it was because I was unclear about it.

So, the first leadership competency is the management of attention through a set of intentions or a vision, not in a mystical or religious sense, but in the sense of outcome, goal or direction.

Management of Meaning

To make dreams apparent to others, and to align people with them, leaders must communicate their vision. Communication and alignment work together.

Consider, for example, the contrasting styles of Presidents Reagan and Carter. Ronald Reagan is called 'the great communicator'; one of his speech writers said Reagan can read the phone book and make it interesting. The reason is that Reagan uses metaphors with which

people can identify.

In his first budget message, for example, Reagan described a trillion dollars by comparing it to piling up dollar bills beside the Empire State Building. Reagan, to use one of Alexander Haig's coinages, 'tangibilized' the idea. Leaders make ideas tangible and real to others, so they can support them. For no matter how marvelous the vision, the effective leader must use a metaphor, a word or a model to make that vision clear to others.

In contrast, President Carter was boring. Carter was one of our best informed presidents; he had more facts at his finger-tips than almost any other president. But he never made the meaning come through the facts.

I interviewed an assistant secretary of commerce appointed by Carter, who told me that after four years in his administration, she still did not know what Jimmy Carter stood for. She said that working for him was like looking through the wrong side of a tapestry; the scene was blurry and indistinct.

The leader's goal is not mere explanation or clarification but the creation of meaning. My favorite baseball joke is exemplary: In the ninth inning of a key playoff game, with a 3 and 2 count on the batter, the umpire hesitates a split second in calling the pitch. The batter whirls around angrily and says, 'Well, what was it?' The umpire barks back, 'It ain't nothing until I call it!'

The more far-flung and complex the organization, the more critical is this ability. Effective leaders can communicate ideas through several organizational layers, across great distances, even through the jamming signals of special interest groups and opponents.

When I was a university president, a group of administrators and I would hatch what we knew was a great idea. Then we would do the right thing: delegate, delegate, delegate. But when the product or policy finally appeared, it scarcely resembled our original idea.

This process occurred so often that I gave it a name: the Pinocchio Effect. (I am sure Geppetto had no idea how Pinocchio would look when he finished carving him.) The Pinocchio Effect leaves us surprised. Because of inadequate communication, results rarely resemble our expectations.

We read and hear so much about information that we tend to overlook the importance of meaning. Actually, the more bombarded a society or organization, the more deluged with facts and images, the greater its thirst for meaning. Leaders integrate facts, concepts and anecdotes into meaning for the public.

Not all the leaders in my group are word masters. They get people to understand and support their goals in a variety of ways.

The ability to manage attention and meaning comes from the whole person. It is not enough to use the right buzz word or a cute technique, or to hire a public relations person to write speeches.

Consider, instead, Frank Dale, publisher of the Los Angeles afternoon newspaper, The Herald Examiner. Dale's charge was to cut into the market share of his morning competitor, The LA. Times. When he first joined the newspaper a few years ago, he created a campaign with posters picturing the Herald Examiner behind and slightly above the Times. The whole campaign was based on this potent message of how the Herald Examiner would overtake the Times.

I interviewed Dale at his office, and when he sat down at his desk and fastened around him a safety belt like those on airplanes, I couldn't suppress a smile. He did this to remind me and everybody else of the risks the newspaper entailed. His whole person contributed to the message.

No one is more cynical than a newspaper reporter. You can imagine the reactions that traveled the halls of the Herald Examiner building. At the same time, nobody forgot what Frank Dale was trying to communicate. And that is the management of meaning.

Management of Trust

Trust is essential to all organizations. The main determinant of trust is reliability, what I call constancy. When I talked to the board members or staffs of these leaders, I heard certain phrases again and again: 'She is all of a piece.' 'Whether you like it or not, you always know where he is coming from, what he stands for.'

When John Paul II visited this country, he gave a press conference. One reporter asked how the Pope could account for allocating funds to build a swimming pool at the papal summer palace. He responded quickly: 'I like to swim. Next question.' He did not rationalize about medical reasons or claim he got the money from a special source.

A recent study showed people would much rather follow individuals they can count on, even when they disagree with their viewpoint, than people they agree with but who shift positions frequently. I cannot emphasize enough the significance of constancy and focus.

Margaret Thatcher's reelection in Great Britain is another excellent example. When she won office in 1979, observers predicted she quickly would revert to defunct Labor Party policies. She did not. In fact, not long ago a London Times article appeared headlined (parodying Christopher Fry's play) 'The Lady's Not for Returning.' She has not turned; she has been constant, focused and all of a piece.

Management of Self

The fourth leadership competency is management of self, knowing one's skills and deploying them effectively. Management of self is critical; without it, leaders and managers can do more harm than good. Like incompetent doctors, incompetent managers can make life worse, make people sicker and less vital. (The term iatrogenic, by the way, refers to illness caused by doctors and hospitals.) Some managers give themselves heart attacks and nervous breakdowns; still worse, many are 'carriers,' causing their employees to be ill.

Leaders know themselves; they know their strengths and nurture them. They also have a faculty I think of as the Wallenda Factor, the ability to accept risk.

One CEO told me that if she had a knack for leadership, it was the capacity to make as many mistakes as she could as soon as possible, and thus get them out of the way. Another said that a mistake is simply 'another way of doing things.' These leaders learn from and use something that doesn't go well; it is not a failure but simply the next step.

When I asked Harold Williams, president of the Getty Foundation, to name the experience that most shaped him as a leader, he said it was being passed over for the presidency of Norton Simon. When it happened, he was furious and demanded reasons, most of which he considered idiotic. Finally, a friend told him that some of the reasons were valid and he should change. He did, and about a year and a half later became president.

Or consider coach Ray Meyer of DePaul University, whose team finally lost at home after winning 29 straight home games. I called him to ask how he felt. He said, 'Great. Now we can start to concentrate on winning, not on not losing.'

Consider Broadway producer Harold Prince, who calls a press conference the morning after his show opens, before reading the reviews, to announce his next play. Or Susan B. Anthony, who said, 'Failure is impossible.' Or Fletcher Byrum, who, after 22 years as president of Coopers, was asked about his hardest decision. He replied that he did not know what a hard decision was; that he never worried, that he accepted the possibility of being wrong. Byrum

said that worry was an obstacle to clear thinking.

The Wallenda Factor is an approach to life; it goes beyond leadership and power in organizations. These leaders all have it.

Empowerment: The Effects of Leadership

Leadership can be felt throughout an organization. It gives pace and energy to the work and empowers the work force. Empowerment is the collective effect of leadership. In organizations with effective leaders, empowerment is most evident in four themes:

People feel significant. Everyone feels that he or she makes a difference to the success of the organization. The difference may be small —prompt delivery of potato chips to a mom-and-pop grocery store or developing a tiny but essential part for an airplane. But where they are empowered, people feel that what they do has meaning and significance.

Learning and competence matter. Leaders value learning and mastery, and so do people who work for leaders. Leaders make it clear that there is no failure, only mistakes that give us feedback and tell us what to do next.

People are part of a community. Where there is leadership, there is a team, a family, a unity. Even people who do not especially like each other feel the sense of community. When Neil Armstrong talks about the Apollo explorations, he describes how a team carried out an almost unimaginably complex set of interdependent tasks. Until there were women astronauts, the men referred to this feeling as 'brotherhood.' I suggest they rename it 'family'.

Work is exciting. Where there are leaders, work is stimulating, challenging, fascinating and fun. An essential ingredient in organizational leadership is pulling rather than pushing people toward a goal. A 'pull' style of influence attracts and energizes people to enroll in an exciting vision of the future. It motivates through identification, rather than through rewards and punishments. Leaders articulate and embody the ideals toward which the organization strives.

People cannot be expected to enroll in just any exciting vision. Some visions and concepts have more staying power and are rooted more deeply in our human needs than others. I believe the lack of two such concepts in modern organizational life is largely responsible for the alienation and lack of meaning so many experience in their work.

One of these is the concept of quality. Modern industrial society has been oriented to quantity, providing more goods and services for everyone. Quantity is measured in money; we are a money oriented society. Quality often is not measured at all, but is appreciated intuitively. Our response to quality is a feeling. Feelings of quality are connected intimately with our experience of meaning, beauty and value in our lives.

Closely linked to the concept of quality is that of dedication, even love, of our work. This dedication is evoked by quality and is the force that energizes high-performing systems. When we love our work, we need not be managed by hopes of reward or fears of punishment. We can create systems that facilitate our work, rather than being preoccupied with checks and controls of people who want to beat or exploit the system.

And that is what the human resources profession should care most about.

Reprinted by permission of Warren Bennis.