

The New York Times

Warren G. Bennis, Scholar on Leadership, Dies at 89



Warren G. Bennis in 2012. *Phil Channing*

By Glenn Rifkin

WARREN G. BENNIS, an eminent scholar and author who advised presidents and business executives on his academic specialty, the essence of successful leadership — a commodity he found in short supply in recent decades — died on Thursday in Los Angeles. He was 89.

The University of Southern California, where he had been a distinguished professor of business administration for more than 30 years, announced his death on Friday. He lived in Santa Monica, Calif.

Professor Bennis wrote more than 30 books on leadership, a subject that grabbed his attention early in life, when he led a platoon during World War II at the age of 19.

“I look at Peter Drucker as the father of management and Warren Bennis as the father of leadership,” William W. George, a professor at the Harvard Business School and a former chief executive of the medical device company Medtronic, said in an interview in 2009.

As a consultant, Professor Bennis was sought out by generations of business leaders, among them Howard D. Schultz, the chief executive of Starbucks, who regarded him as a mentor. Presidents John F. Kennedy, Lyndon B. Johnson, Gerald R. Ford and Ronald Reagan all conferred with him. As an educator, he taught organizational studies at Harvard, Boston University and the M.I.T. Sloan School of Management.

Professor Bennis believed in the adage that great leaders are not born but made, insisting that “the process of becoming

a leader is similar, if not identical, to becoming a fully integrated human being,” he said in an interview in 2009. Both, he said, were grounded in self-discovery.

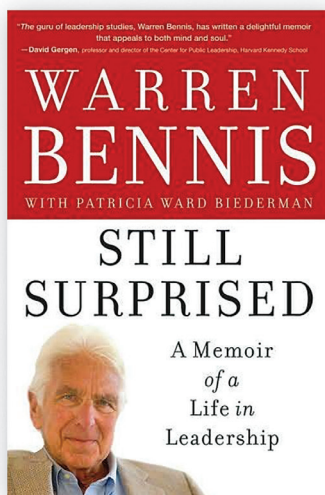
In his influential book “On Becoming a Leader,” published in 1989, Professor Bennis wrote that a successful leader must first have a guiding vision of the task or mission to be accomplished and the strength to persist in the face of setbacks, even failure. Another requirement, he said, is “a very particular passion for a vocation, a profession, a course of action.”

“The leader who communicates passion gives hope and inspiration to other people,” he wrote.

Integrity, he said, is imperative: “The leader never lies to himself, especially about himself, knows his flaws as well as his assets, and deals with them directly.”

So, too, are curiosity and daring: “The leader wonders about everything, wants to learn as much as he can, is willing to take risks, experiment, try new things. He does not worry about failure but embraces errors, knowing he will learn from them.”

But Professor Bennis said he found such leadership largely missing in the late 20th century in all quarters of society — in business, politics, academia and the military. In “On Becoming a Leader,” he took aim at corporate leadership, finding it particularly ineffectual and tracing its failings in part to corporate corruption, extravagant executive compensation and an undue emphasis on quarterly earnings over long-term benefits, both for the business itself and society at large.



Still Surprised by Professor Bennis.

He worried until recently about what he called a “leadership vacuum” in America, a problem he said was caused to a great extent by a lack of high-quality leadership training at the nation’s business schools.

A dearth of visionary business leaders, he said, meant that companies were being led more by managers of the bottom line than by passionate, independent thinkers who could steer an organization effectively.

“We are at least halfway through the looking glass, on our way to utter chaos,” he wrote in “On Becoming a Leader.” “When the very model of a modern manager becomes C.E.O., he does not become a leader, he becomes a boss, and it is the bosses who have gotten America into its current fix.”

Warren Gamaliel Bennis was born in the Bronx on March 8, 1925. He grew up in Westwood, N.J., during the Great Depression. In 1933, his father, a shipping clerk, was fired “with no appeal and no justification,” Professor Bennis recalled in an interview for this obituary in February.

“I was struck at how he was left in a situation where you are helpless, where the next morning you are out of work,” he added. “For the next three or four months, he was loading illegal booze on the Mafia’s trucks to keep food on the table.”

The experience taught him about the power of organizations and their impact on lives. “That will never happen to me,” he recalled thinking. “I will never lose my power to affect my own life.”

With the outbreak of World War II,

he enlisted in the Army and completed officers’ training at Ft. Benning, Ga. In 1944, as a newly commissioned 19-year old lieutenant, he became one of the youngest platoon leaders to serve in Europe, arriving just as the Battle of the Bulge was concluding. He was awarded both a Purple Heart and a Bronze Star.

After the war he enrolled at Antioch College in Ohio and earned a bachelor’s degree in 1951. Its innovative president, Douglas McGregor, a social psychologist, had taken him under his wing and recommended him to M.I.T. for postgraduate work. There he completed a doctorate in economics, studying under Paul A. Samuelson, Franco Modigliani and Robert M. Solow, all of whom were later awarded the Nobel in economic science. Organizational behavior was an emerging academic discipline, and Professor Bennis immersed himself in it.

In the late 1960s Professor Bennis took a break from theoretical work and accepted an appointment as provost of the State University of New York at Buffalo for four years. That was followed by a seven-year stint as president of the University of Cincinnati.

A heart attack in 1979 during an academic conference in England sidelined him for three months of recuperation. After returning to the United States he joined U.S.C. in 1980 as a business professor.

Reinvigorated, Professor Bennis wrote a series of influential books, including “Leaders: Strategies for Taking Charge” and “Why Leaders Can’t Lead,” and began advising business and political leaders more regularly.

Professor Bennis’s first marriage, in 1962, to Clurie Williams, ended in divorce. He is survived by his wife, Dr. Grace Gabe, a physician he married in 1992; his children from his first marriage, Katherine, John and Will Bennis; his stepdaughters, Nina Freedman and Eden Steinberg; six grandchildren; and four step-grandchildren.

Since 1999 Professor Bennis had been chairman of the advisory board of the Center for Public Leadership at the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard. His memoir, “Still Surprised,” was published in 2010.

In recent years Professor Bennis became more optimistic about the next wave of business leaders, labeling it “the Crucible Generation,” which he said compared favorably to his own World War II generation.

Rather than hubris and arrogance, he said, this new generation’s brand of leadership may well be characterized by “respect, not just tolerance.” He saw signs that business leaders in the decades to come, inheriting a diverse and complex global environment, would have a better understanding of the territory in which they lead — what he called “contextual intelligence.”

“The truth,” he wrote in an essay in *Forbes* magazine in 2009, “may be that history, in its kindness, gave this new generation a grand crucible challenge, as it did my own. The young of today have been summoned to receive that same kindness through the collective failures of their elders.”