

Third Opinion

Great Minds Judge Alike

Saj-nicole Joni 07.07.08, 6:00 AM ET



Warren Bennis is one of the world's foremost thinkers and teachers on the subject of leadership. From his early works, including *On Becoming a Leader*, to his more recent publications, such as *Geeks and Geezers*, *Transparency and Judgment* (co-authored with Noel Tichy), Bennis explores the subject of organizational leadership with precision, insight, compassion, and, well, judgment.

Forbes.com: Your life's work has focused on leaders and leadership. What role does judgment play in this realm?

Warren Bennis: I believe that the essence of effective leadership is judgment and taste. And where judgment really counts is in consequential decisions made in three areas — strategic choices, people choices and choices made in crisis situations. When I want to take the measure of a leader, I always look at their decisions in these three areas.

As we speak, we're in the midst of a political campaign that has inevitably become, at least in part, about differing qualities of leadership. What else besides judgment seems essential to you?

The key issue facing most leaders today is figuring out what's really relevant given the kinds of changes organizations, markets and economies are experiencing. In a way, with the proliferation of C-Suite officers, it surprises me that we don't have a chief relevance officer to ask, "with all that's changing in our environment, how do we know what's really relevant to make sure we are going to exist two years from now?"

In my experience, every senior leader has to include "chief relevance officer" in their leadership portfolio. No leader can ignore the question of relevance.

Exactly. And in addition, top leadership should create a focal point for this ongoing inquiry within their organizations.

With the compression of time we are all experiencing today, speed is also going to be an important determinant. The capacity to make quick decisions is going to be an increasingly important aspect of leadership.

It seems to me that one of the primary tasks of any leader is to keep reminding people what's important. One of the great dangers of especially successful organizations is that they stop asking what's really important and so keep doing the same things over and over again.

Agreed. One of the major flaws of most human systems today is absence of reflection. Now there is one exception to that — the military. That's where they invented the word "debriefing."

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Organizations and teams need to make time and space where they routinely look at decisions, even small ones. Where they ask, what was the process like? What were the failures? What should we have done differently? What kind of information didn't we have that we should have had?

Beyond that, organizations also need to ask broader questions, like, what are we doing? Does it make sense? What if we were taken over? Or what should we be doing that we are not doing? Those are kinds of questions we should ask on a regular basis, but don't.

You and I have both spent many hours with leaders helping them to develop outside insight on the challenges they face. What do you do if you find that someone you are working with is not exercising good judgment?

You can't let that continue. Let's say you've been trying to help that person look at the decisions previously made that didn't work out very well. The fit doesn't seem to be working. Leadership involves knowing this, and asking for the resignation, looking for some kind of constructive termination, or maybe it's a matter of a bad fit in that role and that another role would be much better.

Who are a few leaders you think exemplify great judgment?

It's always easier to talk about greatness or badness through time. [Harry]Truman is a very good example. He was the only non-college educated U.S. president of the 20th century and made some of the most far-reaching decisions of any of our presidents. We went through a time when he was not thought to be very impressive — in fact, in 1948, when he was running for re-election, people said, "To err is Truman," but now historians view him as a credible president.

A current leader that I think makes good judgment calls, even with the current setbacks he faces, is Howard Schultz (founder and CEO of Starbucks). He keeps learning. He uses a wide network of people that he talks with before he makes decisions. He knows when to fold and when to hold — he's enough of a gambler, but he knows the difference between bold and reckless.

When Shakespeare's Henry IV wanted to be sure that his son Prince Hal was ready to lead, he sent Falstaff to mentor him. Falstaff said to Prince Hal, "If you want to lead people, you've got to enter their world." I think that's a profound remark.

That's what Howard does. He goes into all those Starbucks and he smells the coffee! He gets down into the customer's mind. He enters their territory. I think that's key.

And I'd like to mention Florence Nightingale. It has been said of her that the reason she was so successful in transformational leadership was that she had a deep understanding of the social etiquette of bureaucracy. Leaders who really know the intricacies of their organization can picture the consequences of judgments on the stakeholders outside, on the people within, on their own team. I believe that power of imagination is essential to successful leadership of any organization.

Can you tell us about a personal decision you made where your judgment was at stake, one that made a real difference in the world?

The hardest decision I ever had to make was when I was president of the University of Cincinnati. It was a decision that I think only an outsider could have made: changing a city university to become a state university. There was enormous local pressure to maintain the mythology that the University of Cincinnati was a city-supported university when in fact the city was supplying only 5% of the revenue. That meant we had to keep raising tuition for people who couldn't afford to pay it, because it is basically a blue-collar school.

It took three years of work to get this to happen — at which point, the new governor was going to bring in a new board that would ask for my resignation. It was hard, controversial and I didn't do it all correctly. But in the end, it was the right judgment. It was a fine moment for all when I was granted an honorary degree recently at the University of Cincinnati, now proudly a state school, 30 years after that judgment.

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