
STILL SURPRISED

A MEMOIR OF A LIFE IN LEADERSHIP

By Warren Bennis with Patricia Ward Biederman. Jossey-Bass, 2010.

Reviewed by Jack Harris,
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As dubbed by David Gergen, Warren Bennis is, “The guru of leadership studies.” And in many ways it is true. He is responsible for many books and numerous articles from large research projects on leadership as well as at times keen observation. In the last three decades he has been a prolific writer in the field. His name is often synonymous with leadership.

I have a respect for his knowledge as I have read and used information from much of his writing through the years starting with my dissertation. In this book I got to know the man, the storyteller, behind the leadership theories. This was accomplished by his series of vignettes of learning in his life. He writes how over time he began to understand the basis for his early successes in leadership. He also shares his mistakes.

He presents a roller coaster ride of his own leadership development. At the beginning he discusses leadership as he “learned” it through practice in World War II. As an officer right out

of training his decisions could save or lose lives. After the war he used his GI benefits to go to college and was introduced to the academic and theoretical side of leadership at Antioch and MIT. Later, realizing his theoretical leanings and that the actions of leaders have consequences he left teaching for administration to “test” his theories as Provost at the State University of New York at Buffalo and President at Cincinnati University. He had successes and failures, which he freely notes. He followed this with his final 30 years of teaching at the University of Southern California. His discussion gives insights into his style and approach to leadership.

In addition to learning about Bennis learning about leadership, for those who are interested in the last 60 plus years of the growth and development of the field of “organization” social science, the book is an enjoyable romp through that era. Bennis discusses the many men and women who developed the field and how he worked with them

during his life. It is a who's who of the founders of the many ideas and practices that we teach and use today starting with things like social research during World War II and the beginning of T groups.

He even shares information that he does not realize is relevant, but in fact believes is useless. When discussing how he and Bert Nanus researched and wrote *Leaders: Strategies for Taking Charge*, he stated, "Our most unexpected and least useful discovery: almost every one of our leaders was married to his or her original

spouse" (p. 101). Without a Christian context he discounted a biblical principle about leadership in our world. His understanding of leadership is from a secular perspective. It has value, but it is incomplete.

The book is a light, enjoyable reading. He is a man of the world writing about his "ride" through the world. It is a memoir that those interested in leadership and social science will enjoy, but there will not be a sense of new learning. There may be clarity on previous learning. To a niche of people with this particular leaning, I recommend this book.