

August 6, 2014, 2:32 PM ET

What Did Warren Bennis Mean to Business Technologists?

By Thomas H. Davenport

Warren Bennis passed away last week, and his life is certainly worth remembering. He was a special person, and I was privileged to know him during the last couple of decades of his long and productive life. He was primarily known for his research and writing on leadership—[an academic field that he virtually invented](#), and certainly dominated.

Warren was full of great ideas, and he wrote more than 30 books containing them. I certainly can't summarize them all in this post, just as I can't summarize his warm and wise personality in a few paragraphs. But I thought some of his biggest notions, and some of his own laudable behaviors, might be interesting to business technologists.

Great leaders are made, not born—[As former Medtronic CEO Bill George wrote in a recent post](#), Mr. Bennis thought that leadership as being something humans are born with is one of the most dangerous leadership myths. Mr. Bennis' perspective was that the needed traits could be studied and developed by aspiring leaders. That should be of some comfort to anyone who wants to become a leader; people with almost any personality or background can move in a leadership-oriented direction.

Leadership is about what you want to do anyway—I met Warren a few times at a summer psychotherapy conference at the tip of Cape Cod. At the time I didn't know exactly why he was attending a confab on that topic, but now I think I understand. For Warren, developing leadership traits was indistinguishable from becoming a secure, well-adjusted, happy person. I never heard him say this, but I think he might discourage people from adopting leadership traits for their own sake. A good leader is simply a good person, and developing the attributes of leadership is what you want to do anyway in all aspects of your life.

Take your background and build upon it—I always found it interesting that Warren was trained as an economist at MIT. His training, however, never constrained his thinking. While a student he began to focus on the nascent field of organizational behavior—one that his mentor while in college, Douglas Macgregor, had a strong role in—and Mr. Bennis' leadership work built on that. Many of us have academic or work backgrounds that might limit us if we let them do so. Warren was a great example of how your training can be a springboard into all sorts of new territory.

It's never too late to do more with technology—Warren was no technologist, but he was very interested in the role of technology within organizations. He even embraced it in his own career.

In 2010, at the tender age of 85, he created (or at least sponsored—I doubt he wrote the HTML) [his first webpage](#). He wrote on the homepage, “You might think it’s rather late in the game for such a first...” For Mr. Bennis, this was emblematic of his lifelong curiosity and willingness to explore new domains. The Web in the 2000s was no different from the Esalen Institute experiments in the 60s in which Warren also participated; all of these were ways to expand human potential.

Academic research could be a lot more useful—Warren’s research was eminently useful by business practitioners. That’s not true of the great majority of business school research. In 2005 Warren and Jim O’Toole, a colleague at USC, published an influential—at least it should have been—article called [How Business Schools Lost Their Way](#). It decried the “rigor over relevance” approach in business school research that basically means most businesspeople ignore academic research. If only more academics produced research and writing like Mr. Bennis’, which was useful to U.S. presidents, CEOs, and countless managers and students.

The geezers are more interesting than the geeks—I didn’t write much with Warren—only a single chapter in the “festschrift” volume celebrating his work (called [The Future of Leadership](#)), but I was the “producer” of a book he did with Bob Thomas called [Geeks and Geezers](#) based on interviews with leaders under 30 and over 70. I was running a research center for Accenture at the time, and we—like seemingly everybody else at the turn of the century—were agog about the geeks who were transforming commerce and Silicon Valley. But Warren argued that people over 70 were just as interesting as those under 30, and he proved to be correct—even understating the matter. Bob Thomas, my Accenture colleague who was at the time about halfway between the two groups in age, told me that he found the geezers more interesting as well.

Warren was a geezer himself, of course, and was a fantastic example of the best of the genre. He never stopped learning, exploring, or teaching. He never stopped generating new ideas. He never stopped being graceful. I wish he had never stopped.

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