

## **GEEKS & GEEZERS: HOW ERA, VALUES AND DEFINING MOMENTS SHAPE LEADERS**

Warren G. Bennis & Robert J. Thomas, Harvard Business School Press, 2002

### **Terms**

Crucible - transforming events through which the person is transformed into a "leader" ; defining moments

Geeks – under 35, post internet, post computer

Geezers over 70, war era, planned for a career with one major organization or employer

Era - economic, social, military, technological, and environmental milieu of the leader's formative years

Leadership Model: suggests that the combination of the individual attributes of the person, plus the era in which the person lives, plus the crucible through which the person goes through where leadership commitment and identity are formed that leads to leadership competencies upon which the person relies

Neoteny – youthfulness in later years; excitement about taking in new information; charisma's base

### **Major Teachings (per Herb Rubenstein CEO, Growth Strategies Inc.)**

1. Adaptive capacity is one of the most essential qualities of a leader. Adaptive capacity means to be able to create "context." That is, when an event occurs (like 9/11) or some knowledge is revealed (like the deforestation of the earth may make the planet unlivable for human beings in the future), a leader can successfully find a meaning in this event or knowledge and create seize opportunities for themselves and others that would not have existed but for this event or new knowledge. Leaders find meaning and strength in adversity and create plans to deal with the adversity.
2. Leaders must have strong adaptive capacities. Life does not work out as planned and leaders must be able to deal with the new and unexpected realities with skill, nerve, unfailing commitment and strength. Leaders must have "hardiness," and a component of hardiness is optimism.
3. Both experience and having the "innocence of a child" (an open mind, an "uncontaminated wonder" per Walt Disney) are both important for leaders to possess.
4. Knowing how to learn (being able to learn to learn) and being willing to take on new challenges are essential for leaders to grow and improve as leaders. Similarly, leaders constantly develop new competencies and improve old ones.
5. Staying youthful throughout life is critical for one to continue to be a leader as one becomes older. The authors call this attribute "neoteny" (a real word that the authors "redefine" and mold in good fashion to fit their idea- the retention of youthful characteristics in adulthood. This includes the ability to recruit which youth have plus resilience, tirelessness, candor and curiosity – a hunger for experience and unwillingness to experience boredom.
6. Leaders must be excellent "noticers." Through noticing they can hold others accountable, evaluate talent, judge the commitment of others and see patterns before they become obvious to others.
7. Leaders take informed, intelligent risks.
8. Leaders engage others through rapport and the creation of shared meaning
9. Leaders are excellent communicators for themselves and those they lead and have a distinctive, compelling voice.
10. Leaders have integrity and can be counted on when they give their word or make a commitment that they will do everything possible to do as they say they would do. They have a moral compass to guide their ambition.
11. Leaders set high expectations of themselves and others.
12. Leaders look forward with eagerness, and do not dwell on the past.
13. Leaders consciously seek out tests and challenges.
14. Failure is a friend, not an enemy of a leader.
15. Leaders dream and see themselves playing a crucial role in making the dream become a reality.
16. Leaders have a sense of humor.
17. Leaders read and write voraciously.

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18. Leaders are catalysts who foster others to be creative and use their imagination to address challenges.
19. Great leaders emerge only when they can find the proper stage, a forum that allows them to exercise their gifts and skills.
20. Leadership is one of the performing arts and the leader must always sell him or herself to the audience.
21. Leaders see things through their own eyes and through the eyes of their followers.
22. Leaders respond quickly and generously to problems and challenges.
23. Leaders have genuine respect for others.
24. Leaders put the pieces in place before they make a move to change an organization.
25. Leaders know they can not accomplish anything worthy alone. Leaders recruit others to help achieve a common goal.
26. Leaders strive for greatness and settle for nothing less.
27. Leaders work for their followers, not the other way around.
28. Leaders are the authors and critics of their own lives. Leaders have the capacity for self-reflection.
29. Leadership can not be an "add on." It must be embedded in very fiber of an organization.
30. Leaders build and maintain networks of people across generations, across diverse disciplines, and constantly learn from other people.
31. Leaders believe they are lucky.
32. Leaders practice and learn while they perform.
33. Leaders are unafraid of change.

### **Conclusion**

While the interviewed leaders were diverse in age, ethnicity, gender and occupations, their stories were essentially the same:

They came to a defining moment,  
they made a decision,  
they created a context,  
a meaning that was empowering to themselves and others,  
they charted a course,  
they recruited others to join them on their journey and  
they dedicated their life to realizing the dream that they envisioned