

WARREN BENNIS
STEVEN B. SAMPLE

with ROB ASGHAR

The ART *and*
ADVENTURE

of

LEADERSHIP

FOREWORD BY BILL GEORGE

WILEY

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Understanding Failure,
Resilience, and Success

WILEY

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Praise for *The Art and Adventure of Leadership*

“The impact of Steve Sample and Warren Bennis has been enormous, here at USC and across academia and the world of management. But some of their most enduring impact came not simply in their roles as leaders, but as teachers who were deeply committed to building up new leaders. *The Art and Adventure of Leadership* distills their many lively conversations and debates into one compelling volume that can continue to educate attentive students of leadership for years to come. It’s a fitting exclamation mark on their joint legacy.”

—James G. Ellis, dean, Marshall School of Business,
University of Southern California

“Of all the people I’ve ever met, Steve Sample and Warren Bennis are the master teachers of leadership. Both lived it and studied it for most of their lives. Their friendship and decades-long collaboration produced some of the most important insights in the field. *The Art and Adventure of Leadership* captures what only a handful of students have experienced so far. Its wisdom spans generations. You should get it and read it, and more importantly, talk with others about it.”

—Dave Logan, author of *Tribal Leadership* and
coauthor of *The Three Laws of Performance*

The ART *and*
ADVENTURE
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Dedicated with love to Grace Gabe and Kathryn Sample



FOREWORD



Warren Bennis and Steve Sample argued passionately for years that leadership is an art, not a science. Having studied and practiced leadership at the highest levels, they concluded that there were no surefire formulas, no one-size-fits-all approaches that could be dispensed to aspiring leaders.

As Warren wrote years ago, “The process of becoming a leader is . . . similar to becoming a fully integrated human being.” He and Steve believed that leaders develop through their life experiences and emerge ever stronger—ready and equipped to take on the true responsibilities of leadership.

It’s as simple as that. And as wonderfully mysterious as that. Warren and Steve likened this process to an adventure, one that involves unique twists, unexpected turns, and personal “crucible moments” that forge each person who sets out on the journey.

Fittingly, “The Art and Adventure of Leadership” is the title of a course they co-taught at the University of Southern California each spring for 15 years. It was the most sought-after course at

the university. Only the most outstanding students with demonstrated leadership potential could hope to get a seat in this extraordinary class of learning from two masters who offered their wisdom of more than 100 years of leading.

Warren invited me several times to be a guest speaker for the course. By far the most significant was in April 2014, the next-to-last class Warren ever taught. Can you imagine teaching a full course at age 89? That was Warren, although beset with bodily ills, as sharp and wise as ever mentally. Though his speech was halting, the students watched with rapt attention as Warren interviewed me about leadership.

Each of us who knew Warren—students, leaders, and faculty alike—gained enormously from his wisdom and insights. Unlike some scholars who hoard their ideas, Warren genuinely wanted all of us to take his ideas, expand on them, and live them. He was indeed, as I said at his memorial service, a generous friend.

Warren's influence on business leaders had been widespread and profound for decades. So many executives who never had the privilege of knowing him were inspired by his writings and adopted his approach to leadership. Countless chief executive officers have told me personally what a profound influence he had on their leadership. For that, he is properly remembered as "the father of leadership."

Steve, for his part, was a master practitioner of the leadership trade. He was revered in higher-education circles for pushing the State University of New York at Buffalo into the limelight, and then for guiding USC into the academic

big leagues. He, too, carried his gifts into the classroom and shared them generously. The students who participated in this remarkable course were not only given a great gift but also given a lifetime opportunity to share that gift with others.

Long before I met Warren, I read his classic *On Becoming a Leader* just as I was joining Medtronic. Finally, I had found a philosophy of leadership I could resonate with. As Warren wrote: “The most dangerous leadership myth is that leaders are born. That’s nonsense; in fact, the opposite is true. Leaders are made rather than born.” Throughout my years at Medtronic and at Harvard, I have carried that belief into my work and my teaching.

I met Warren in the late 1990s, and he was a loyal friend and mentor to the very end—always available with encouragement and a helping hand. As executive editor for my four books in the Warren Bennis Books Series, Warren generously shared his time and his insights. When I was writing *True North*, coauthor Peter Sims and I spent an entire week with Warren in Santa Monica going over all the key ideas for the book. He had an enormous impact on the lives of so many people in just the same way—always with kindness, insight, and warm generosity.

Throughout his career, Warren was motivated by a deeply human, democratic view of how organizations should function. In his final years, he grappled with both the promise and the pitfalls of democracy when democratic springs were struggling to blossom around the world. Thankfully, in this book he is able to leave us with some profound insights into what

makes a functional, healthy democracy worth fighting for in our organizations and our societies.

Although Warren passed away last summer, his legacy remains as strong as ever: With this new book, he and Steve have made the art and adventure of leadership accessible to new generations. Only 600 students over 15 years were fortunate enough to engage with them each week, as they discussed the biggest issues and thorniest questions of our time involving leadership, ethics, success, and legacies. Now through this remarkable book all of us have the opportunity to gain from their combined wisdom. It is indeed an enduring gift to the rest of us—and a tribute to their generosity.

—Bill George



PREFACE



For much of the past quarter century, I enjoyed the extraordinary privilege of leading a large organization through a time of major change with the world's greatest leadership expert at my side—advising me, questioning me, encouraging me, and challenging me.

The friendship between Warren and me began and blossomed in Los Angeles. But Warren in some sense had always been a creature of Cambridge, Massachusetts—one who felt invigorated when breathing in its rarefied intellectual air. He relished the academic pageantry and power of that educational mecca.

Yet his curiosity would draw him to places far different from Cambridge—spiritually, geographically, or both. The rust, frost, and rugged self-reliance of Buffalo would lure him, then would Cincinnati's peculiar blend of communal spirit and proud independence. There, he began to live out his leadership theories in cauldron-like conditions and make the essential refinements to those theories that would make him unique in our time.

Warren was finally lured to Los Angeles and his academic home for his final 35 years of life, the University of Southern California. Both the city and the school were still fresh faced and a bit brash when he arrived, disinclined to bow to older traditions and enthusiastic about inventing their own new ones. Both the city and the university were stubbornly reluctant to leave the trailblazing to others.

When USC's ninth president, James Zumberge, announced his impending retirement in 1989, its board of trustees tapped Warren to chair the committee to find Dr. Zumberge's successor.

The significance was that the world's greatest authority on leadership was now being called by his university to lead the search for USC's next leader.

The challenge would be daunting for any new president naive enough to accept the job. Even a brief glimpse of Los Angeles's history reveals that this city of dreamers hailing from around the world has little tolerance for association with failure or even mediocrity. USC people, colloquially known as Trojans and the Trojan Family, reflected that uncompromising ambition in an even more heightened fashion.

Early in the search process, Warren contacted me and said he believed he needed to explore whether I was the person that USC needed. It was not evident at the time that my family and USC would be a fit. I had worked my whole life at state-run universities, and USC was proudly private and autonomous in its self-governance. And Los Angeles had

little in common with my roots in the Midwest and the Northeast.

But Warren's presence made the situation compelling. He had always instinctively gone to where he felt the action was happening. And now he said that he felt something important was happening in Los Angeles, and that his university could help shape that.

His optimism was infectious, as all who knew him can attest. My wife, Kathryn, and I accepted the challenge and moved west in 1991, and I undertook a nearly two-decade presidency at a time of rapid growth for USC. Warren was along every step of the way, making success possible.

Warren and I regularly lunched, dined, and sat across conference tables. We discussed current events, the state of higher education, and the future, all to which he which he brought his rare, polymathic insights. Unsurprisingly, we spoke often of leadership—how to understand it, how to bottle it, how to unleash it into society, as well as how to minimize or prevent its more pernicious aspects.

Within a few years, our discussions morphed into a class that we would coteach. Though technically listed in the formal course catalog as MDA 365, it was known to everyone else as *The Art and Adventure of Leadership*. This was a seminar for only a few junior- and senior-level undergraduates. Though the average USC undergraduate was extraordinary by this phase in USC's rapid growth, only the finest of them could succeed in demonstrating enough academic strength,

leadership knack, and experience to earn one of 40 to 45 seats each spring semester.

Warren was an acclaimed author and public intellectual, and I was an electrical engineer by trade and an administrator by profession; but he and I would both look back on our 16 years of coteaching that course as a true highlight of our careers. Our students were bright eyed, eager, and passionate. They challenged us, they challenged each other, and they challenged our impressive list of top leaders from around the world who visited as guest speakers.

The experience was intensely human and intensely productive. And many alumni of the class told us something that surprised us. One of the most educational aspects of the class, they said, was a certain dynamic tension resulting from the confrontation of Warren's ideas and my own.

Although we had been allies and Warren had personally recruited me to USC, our styles, our philosophies, and even our values indeed could seem—at least on the surface—markedly different. This led to disagreement and debate, which the students observed and joined. The discussions covered issues such as:

- Whether the leader should focus more on what's changing in our world or what's timeless within it (here, I tilted toward the latter and Warren to the former),
- The extent to which the organizational pyramid needed to be flattened (Warren always believed in the benefit of

the flattest and most democratic organization possible, whereas I was more measured on this point), and

- Whether a leader should be judged more by noble character or by bottom-line outcomes (I was more inclined to the latter position).

And, of course, we explored various aspects of failure, as it involved figures from history and our own colleagues (including many a chief executive officer, politician, or university president who fell along the way). We pondered momentary and final failure—failure as judged by others and failure as judged by the leader’s own conscience. And we thought about how failure could be a stepping-stone to something better, perhaps even to a victory that would have been impossible without the failure along the way. This book is a result of those honest discussions.

In 2010, I retired from the USC presidency and became president emeritus. In my new role, I still found that one of the most rewarding parts of my life was the interaction with Warren.

After I read his memoir, *Still Surprised: A Memoir of a Life in Leadership*, I told Warren that he may not have been fully aware of the sort of document he’d gifted us with.

“This isn’t a book about leadership,” I told him one day at lunch.

He seemed taken aback. “Oh . . . then what *is* it?” he asked.

“It’s a love story,” I said. “It’s about a man who deeply loves humanity. A man who’s spent his entire life seeking to understand humanity. And to help build up people who are worthy of serving humanity.”

Warren seemed touched. He was too modest to speak in such terms about himself or his work. But I could tell he knew, deep within, that he wasn’t simply an expert on management, on power, or on leadership in even the broadest context.

He was a human being who knew and who loved humanity. And his legacy is an enduring one that shows future generations the way to find, recover, and celebrate this common humanity continuously.

It has been the privilege of a lifetime for Kathryn and me to have shared so many years of journeying together with Warren and his wonderful wife, Grace. And I hope this final collaboration between us gives adequate service to the man’s genius.

Steven B. Sample
Los Angeles, 2014



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