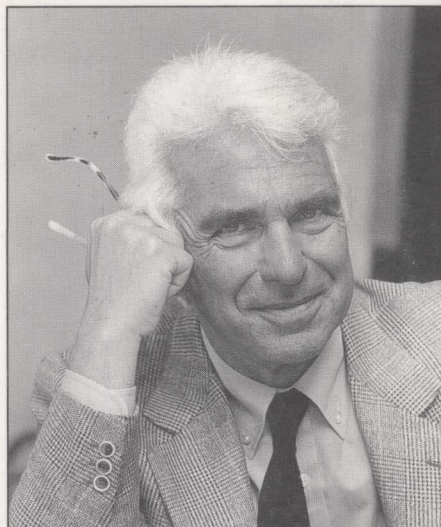


Warren
Bennis



Why
Leaders
Can't
Lead

The Unconscious
Conspiracy Continues



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WARREN BENNIS



Jossey-Bass Publishers
San Francisco

WHY LEADERS CAN'T LEAD

The Unconscious Conspiracy Continues

by Warren Bennis

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Bennis, Warren

Why leaders can't lead.

(The Jossey-Bass management series)

Includes index.

1. Leadership. 2. Social change. 3. Civilization, Modern—20th century. 4. United States—Civilization—20th century. 5. United States—Social conditions—1980- . I. Title. II. Series.

HM141.B434 1989 303.3'4 88-46091

ISBN 1-55542-152-0 (alk. paper)

ISBN 1-55542-282-9 (paperback)

Manufactured in the United States of America

JACKET DESIGN BY WILLI BAUM

COVER DESIGN BY FIFTH STREET DESIGN

FIRST EDITION

HB Printing 10 9 8 7 6 5

PB Printing 10 9 8 7 6 5

Code 8927

Code 9084 (paperback)



The Jossey-Bass Management Series

Consulting Editors
Organizations and Management

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Preface

Thirteen years ago, I wrote *The Unconscious Conspiracy: Why Leaders Can't Lead*. It stirred up a bit of a commotion at the time. I was pleased to learn last summer that university presidents had named it (along with another book of mine—*Leaders* [1985]) as one of their favorite books on leadership. I was pleased and disturbed, actually, since its continuing popularity suggests that while the players have changed, as the world has, their predicament has not—except perhaps for the worse. In America today, it is harder than ever to lead. One of my favorite social barometers, the bumper sticker, corroborates this. There has been a resurgence lately of such exhortations as “Don’t Vote—It will Only Encourage Them.” For at least the second time, “Impeach Someone” is popular. Though we need leaders as much as ever, we have never held them in lower regard. Circumstances conspire against them. And so—without meaning to—do the American people.

Writers and teachers like to think that once they have identified a problem and offered some solutions, the problem is on its way to being solved. Having named the leadership problem in 1976, and having pointed out the direction in which I thought solutions might lurk, I moved on to fresh pastures. One such verdant field was an extensive study of

leaders and the characteristics of leadership, which (with my coauthor Burt Nanus) I described in *Leaders*.

My next project was to have been a book titled *Managing the Dream*, in which I planned to focus on the application of leadership, spotlighting a variety of leaders and their organizations. As often happens, however, I had to go back before I could go forward. I needed to look again at the context of leadership—at our organizations and at society itself—because leaders do not emerge from or function in a vacuum, and there has never been a more challenging context than the one in which we live today.

My intent at that juncture was simply to update *The Unconscious Conspiracy* to reflect the changed circumstances. Almost immediately, however, I saw that much more was needed. In tone and temper, the 1980s were totally different from the 1970s. Indeed, the 1980s were less an extension of the 1970s than they were the *result* of both the 1960s and the 1970s. In the 1960s, we wanted to make the world better. In the 1970s, we wanted only to make ourselves better. Now, at the start of the 1990s, we seem to be uncertain about whether we can make anything better.

The business world is turbulent, its waters roiled by continuing scandals and violent stock market shifts. The political world is in upheaval, fueled by a growing fear that our leaders and institutions are failing to cope and, in fact, are frozen by the complexity of the problems we face. The very fabric of our society is being unraveled by unchecked crime and drug traffic, increasing poverty and illiteracy, and unprecedented cynicism toward possible solutions. Who's in charge here? The answer seems to be, no one.

An unconscious conspiracy in contemporary society prevents leaders—no matter what their original vision—from taking charge and making changes. Within any organization, an entrenched bureaucracy with a commitment to the status quo undermines the unwary leader. To make matters worse, certain social forces—the increasing tension between individual rights and the common good, for example—discourage the emergence of leaders. The narcissistic children of the Me Decade seem unwilling to embrace any vision but their own—a narrow one

that excludes the possibility of sacrificing a little bit today to gain something better tomorrow. A corollary of this unwillingness to sacrifice is an unwillingness to cooperate with neighbors. Americans are now going through a self-imposed isolation phase: Each individual feels helpless to affect anything beyond the immediate environment and so retreats into an ever-contracting private world—a phenomenon that manifests itself among the affluent as “cocooning” and among the poor as drug addiction. Activism is on the decline, including the simplest form of activism—voting. People float, but they don’t dream. And people without a dream are less easily inspired by a leader’s vision.

So the bad news is, the arena in which leadership is exercised has deteriorated. The good news is, we have, I believe, a better grasp of the problems and a better sense of the solutions than we did a dozen years ago. In fact, the last third of this new book is devoted to solutions—or parts of a solution. These suggestions for change—and that is really what they are—have been wrung both from my observations of other leaders and from my own years of painful experience.

Why Leaders Can’t Lead is an analysis of the problems facing anyone who tries to take charge of an organization—of whatever kind—and effect change. The book offers those engaged in the day-to-day tasks of leadership specific suggestions—not only on how to counter the turmoil and inertia that threaten the best-laid plans, but also on how to keep *routine*, which absorbs time and energy like a sponge, from sapping their ability to make a real impact.

The book is not overly optimistic. But I do think change is possible—even change for the better. Change begins slowly, however, as, one by one, individuals make the conscious choice to live up to their potential.

So *Why Leaders Can’t Lead* is intended for everyone in a position of leadership, or aspiring to such a position; for all those concerned with who is elected, promoted, or appointed to leadership in any kind of organization. It is meant for anyone who holds a government office; anyone in public service. It is addressed also to professors of business, political science, and public administration; all department heads, deans, administrators, presidents, and

chancellors of universities. It is intended for anyone interested in the future of this society. It will help the reader understand the problems facing leaders in this increasingly complex world of ours. At the same time, it will give leaders some practical ideas on how to deal with the troublesome issues that we all face.

Some material is reprinted here from my earlier book on the subject with very few modifications. The story of Charles Johnson, told in the first chapter, is still a moving example of how pressures from competing constituencies—pressures that are pervasive in our society—can destroy a leader. In the second chapter I retell the tale of the experience at the University of Cincinnati that led me to believe that existing academic theories of leadership were useless; but here the story serves to introduce my subsequent research and the four competencies that I believe are crucial for genuine leadership.

Most of the material in Part Two, “A Society Without Dreams,” and Part Three, “Parts of the Problem,” is new, the results of my reexamination of the context of leadership. Part Four, “Parts of the Solution,” is a combination of old and new thoughts. “Quitting on Principle” has been updated, for example, although the issue itself is no different: The analysis is still the best I have to offer of this continuing problem, and I believe the insights are still valid. On the other hand, “Leading to Make a Difference,” an essay on choosing self-fulfillment despite the efforts of parents, schools, and organizations to conspire against us, is entirely new, as are some of the other chapters.

This, then, is not *The Unconscious Conspiracy Revised* or even *The Unconscious Conspiracy—The Sequel*, or *Part Two*. This is largely a new book. While my description of our current circumstances may seem grim, I hope it will make the reader aware of the possibilities for change. In fact, I hope it will spur the reader on to take responsibility for change. Abraham Maslow said, “Each time one takes responsibility, this is an actualization of the self.” It is also the first step in taking charge, in becoming a leader.

The best hope I have for this book is that twelve years from now I will look back on it and muse, “Where have all the leaders come from?”

Acknowledgments

My thanks go first of all to William Hicks at Jossey-Bass, for his editorial help and constant knack of making it all seem easy. As for the writing and the ideas behind it, I want to thank Peggy Clifford not only for the prodding and hard work that went into the difficult job of revision but also for her originality of thought. Finally, and most important, a long, deep bow to Judith Garwood, whose "fine Italian hand" is seen throughout and who brought whatever grace and elegance this book contains to every page her gifted hands touched.

Santa Monica, California
April 1990

Warren Bennis

To Douglas McGregor,
whose contribution to the field
and to me, personally,
remains peerless



The Author

Warren Bennis is Distinguished Professor of Business Administration at the University of Southern California. He received his A.B. degree (1951) from Antioch College in economics and psychology, an Honor Certificate (1952) from the London School of Economics, and his Ph.D. degree (1955) from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (M.I.T.) in economics and social science. Bennis served several years on the faculty of the M.I.T. Sloan School of Management and succeeded Douglas McGregor as chairman of the Organization Studies Department in the Sloan School. He has also served as a faculty member at both Harvard University and Boston University; as provost and executive vice-president of the State University of New York, Buffalo; and as president of the University of Cincinnati (from 1971 to 1977).

Bennis has authored fifteen books and over five hundred articles. His latest book, *Leaders: The Strategies for Taking Charge* (1985, with B. Nanus), was cited as the best business book of the year by Harvard L'Expansion. Twice he has won the coveted McKinsey Foundation Annual Prize for the best book on management: in 1967 for *The Professional Manager* and again in 1968 for *The Temporary Society*. His writings have ap-

peared in the *New York Times*, *Esquire*, the *Atlantic Monthly*, the *Saturday Review*, *Psychology Today*, the *Los Angeles Times*, and the *Harvard Business Review*. He is on the board of editors for the *Journal of Creative Behavior*, the *International Journal of Small Group Research*, the *Journal of Occupational Behaviour, Consultation*, the *Journal of Higher Education*, the *Journal of Managerial Psychology*, the *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, and the *Journal for Higher Education Management*. He is also a consulting editor for the Jossey-Bass Management Series and chairman of the board of editors for the University of Southern California's magazine for executives, *New Management*.

Bennis has been U.S. Professor of Corporations and Society at the Centre d'Etudes Industrielles in Geneva; scholar-in-residence for several years at the Aspen Institute of Humanistic Studies; professor at the Management Development Institute (IMEDE), Lausanne, Switzerland; visiting professor and project director of the Indian Institute of Management in Calcutta, India; Raoul de Vitry D'Avaucourt Professor at INSEAD in Fontainebleau, France; and Distinguished Scholar-in-Residence (1984) at Southern Methodist University.

Bennis has recently been a consultant to Rockwell International, Southern California Gas Company, Equitable Life Assurance, Chase Manhattan Bank, and American Medical International (AMI), where he was instrumental in the establishment of their Corporate College for senior management. He has also acted as a consultant to McKinsey and Company, TRW, Polaroid, and Ford Motor Company and served in an advisory capacity to four U.S. presidents.

Currently, Bennis serves on the boards of directors for First Executive Corporation, the Foothill Group, the California School of Professional Psychology, Transformational Technologies, Inc., the Public Justice Foundation, and the American Leadership Forum, as well as on the advisory boards of the Centre for Managing the Self (Geneva), the American Sports Institute, and Index Systems, Inc. He has also served on the National Advisory Board of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce and the board of the American Management Association.

Warren Bennis has received several honorary degrees. He was awarded the 1987 Dow Jones Award by the American Assembly of Collegiate Schools of Business, for “outstanding contributions and distinguished service to the field of collegiate education for business management.” In December 1986, he won the Speaker of the Year Award presented by the American Society for Training and Development, Los Angeles, for “the unusual scope and magnitude of his contribution to the field of HRD, both theory and practice.” He has also been the recipient of the Employment Management Association’s Pericles Award (1987); University Associates’ First Annual Distinguished Contribution Award (1986); the Perry L. Rorher Consulting Practice Award (1983), presented by the American Psychology Association for “demonstrating outstanding ability in applying psychological knowledge and skills to assist organizations to respond more effectively to the challenges of society”; and the Distinguished Service Award (1973), the highest honor accorded by the American Board of Professional Psychologists.

Bennis’s pioneering work in the dynamics of organizations has been widely acclaimed. The results of his extensive studies of public and private executives and gifted entrepreneurs who make things happen in America are published in his book *Leaders: The Strategies for Taking Charge* (1985, with B. Nanus).



Why Leaders Can't Lead



Contents

Preface	xi
The Author	xvii
Part One: The Unconscious Conspiracy and How to Confound It	1
1. One Job, One Year, One Life	3
2. Learning Some Basic Truisms About Leadership	14
3. The New Metaphysics of Our Age	25
Part Two: A Society Without Dreams	31
4. The Long Slide from True Leadership	33
5. Back to the Future	42
6. The Age of Unreality	50
7. Where Have All the Leaders Gone?	59

Part Three: Parts of the Problem	67
8. Bosses as Heroes and Celebrities	69
9. When There Are Too Many Chiefs	76
10. Bottom-Line Obsessions	81
11. Untapped Human Capital	86
12. The Perils of Accord	90
13. The Pornography of Leadership	94
14. When Winning Is Losing	98
15. The Name of the Game Is Greed	102
Part Four: Parts of the Solution	105
16. Leading to Make a Difference	107
17. A Bright Future for Complexity	112
18. Letting Virtues Shine Through	116
19. Quitting on Principle	121
20. Canceling the Doppelgänger Effect	137
21. Leader Power That No One Has	142
22. Avoiding Disaster During Periods of Change	147
23. Dealing with the Way Things Are	152
Postscript	160
Index	161



PART ONE

THE UNCONSCIOUS CONSPIRACY AND HOW TO CONFOUND IT