



# Book Still Surprised

## A Memoir of a Life in Leadership

Warren Bennis and Patricia Ward Biederman  
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## Recommendation

In this fascinating memoir, celebrated leadership guru Warren Bennis looks back on what he learned fighting in the US Army during World War II, studying at Antioch College and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), experiencing psychotherapy, and working as a leader in academia throughout his eventful life. Bennis discusses the traits he discovered among successful leaders, including empathy, respect for others, and the ability to listen and to adapt. He explores the transformational “crucibles” he went through to become a leader and a leadership expert. *BooksInShort* believes aspiring and current leaders in business, academia, the military and politics can learn from Bennis’s insights, experiences and observations about leadership.

## Take-Aways

- As a young man in the US Army, Warren Bennis learned the value of leadership.
- Bennis sees his weeks of intensive military training in weapons, tactics, physical fitness, communications and leadership as the best education he ever received.
- World War II was Bennis’s first “crucible,” a life-changing experience. He finds that many leaders experience “transformative” events that prepare them to lead.
- Conquering his postwar fears through psychotherapy proved to be another crucible.
- Bennis’s college and graduate school experiences prepared him to become a leader within academia.
- He sought opportunities throughout his career to apply what he learned about group dynamics, psychology and leadership.
- Hard work is more than just labor. Work engages the mind and helps solve problems.
- Bennis cites the ability to listen, to pay real attention, as a crucial leadership attribute.
- Leaders must deal with “time-sucking” crises that take away from long-range productivity.
- Bennis has lived “a life of continual discovery, continual renewal, continual surprise.”

## Summary

### Going to War

Warren Bennis (born in 1925) had graduated from Dorsey High School in Los Angeles and was approaching his 18th birthday when he enlisted in the US Army’s Specialized Training Program. After a year in the military, he applied for Officer Candidate School (OCS). The regime at Fort Benning – 17 weeks of training in weapons, tactics, physical fitness, communications and leadership – was the best education he ever received.

“Leadership is so often a function, not of one’s personality or psychological makeup, but of the role one finds oneself in.”

Even now, Bennis is not sure why he volunteered for OCS. Nothing in his life had hinted at his fascination with leadership. Just as an actor puts on a costume and assumes a character, Bennis became an officer when he donned his military uniform. In December 1944, fighting as a member of the Army’s 63rd Infantry Division, Bennis was one of the youngest US officers on the European battlefield. He learned a leadership lesson the first night he met the men he would command. The soldiers slept on the floor, but Bennis’s aide-de-camp found a bench whereon he could sleep. According to Bennis, “At that moment, I made my first important leadership decision. I chose to put my sleeping bag on the floor beside my men.” The decision paid off when one of the most experienced men in his unit became his battlefield mentor. Bennis fought in the final days of the Battle of the Bulge. Deeply affected by the war – the broken bodies, the stench of burning flesh and the bitter cold –

Bennis refers to it as his first “crucible,” a life-transforming experience.

## Antioch College

In 1947, thanks to the GI Bill, Bennis enrolled at Antioch College in Yellow Springs, Ohio. Out of his uniform, he felt “vulnerable,” very unsure of his identity and nearly anonymous, until the campus literary magazine published one of his wartime stories, making him a lifelong “storyteller and collector of stories.” The discovery that he could write his “way into the consciousness of others” transformed him. Spending his college years amid “the clash of opposing ideas” started “a life of continual discovery, continual renewal, continual surprise.”

“We are social animals, and our packs need leaders. Good or bad, they shape our destinies.”

In 1948, Doug McGregor, a professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), became president of Antioch College. Bennis got to know McGregor – his future friend and mentor – in weekly meetings of the college’s Administrative Council, sessions that revealed ambitions to Bennis that he didn’t know he had. He enjoyed making decisions on policy, curricula, student affairs and tenure. One teacher told Bennis to pursue economics at Harvard or MIT; despite Bennis’s weakness in math, a letter from McGregor got him into MIT. At Antioch, Bennis and art major Lucille Rose fell in love; they wed in a friend’s garden before graduation.

## “Rites of Passage”

Bennis’s first years at MIT were miserable. He and his young wife lived on a gritty Cambridge street across from a Lux soap factory, which fouled the air. They had only a stove for heat, and their marriage suffered as Bennis tried to keep up in tough economics courses. Despite the arduous classes, he enjoyed the intellectual atmosphere. In 1952, he spent his second year of graduate school at the London School of Economics. His marriage to Lucille quietly unraveled, and they divorced. A fellowship enabled him to work at London’s Tavistock Institute of Human Relations, which combined psychoanalytic theory with group dynamics to treat soldiers suffering from “shell shock,” now known to be post-traumatic stress disorder.

In eighth grade, “I devised a story that I could star in. I’ve been doing much the same thing ever since.”

In London, Bennis experienced terrible anxiety. Psychoanalysis and a prescription drug for insomnia enabled him to cope. Back at MIT, he became a “control patient” and began meeting with a psychiatrist five times a week. Conquering his fears in these sessions proved to be a rite of passage for him, the kind of transformative crucible he sees in the lives of many great leaders. In 1957, in another passage whose import took years to develop, he went to a Sunday afternoon party where he met Grace Gabe, a beautiful fourth-year medical student. He thought she was too sophisticated for him, but they fell in love and eventually married – but not for another 35 years.

## Group Dynamics

Doug McGregor started the Sloan School of Management at MIT and hired Bennis, who became involved in special “T-Groups,” problem-solving gatherings that analyze themselves as they evolve. Bennis first encountered T-groups at Antioch when McGregor introduced him to their founder, Kurt Lewin, of the National Training Laboratories (NTL). Bennis perceived the T-Groups as a “useful tool both for studying group dynamics and for helping bring about change.” Starting in 1955, Bennis spent summers at T-group workshops in Bethel, Maine – “a summer camp for some of the best social scientists in the world.” The sessions were another life-shaping experience because he learned to listen with attentive empathy, a skill he soon saw as crucial to leadership. In 1956, Bennis co-wrote two published papers on group behavior using his T-group observations. In 1959, he followed that work with a piece on leadership, his “first publication in a field – leadership studies – that had yet to be invented.” He became one of its seminal voices.

“It is no accident that the war produced so many authentic leaders in the second half of the 20th century. Nobody who has to make choices that result in the deaths of others takes leadership lightly.”

Bennis loved teaching at MIT but craved new experiences, so he accepted an invitation to teach at the Institute for Management Development (IMEDE), in Lausanne, Switzerland, for the 1961-62 academic year. At a party there, he met the prize-winning artist Clurie Williams. He soon realized how much he loved her. Bennis missed Williams so much when she returned to America for Christmas that he decided to propose. They married on March 30, 1962. Although IMEDE wanted Bennis to stay another year, McGregor coaxed Bennis back to MIT, assuring him that the institute would grant him tenure – which meant a lifelong job and financial security. He discovered that work didn’t necessarily equate to monotonous labor: “Work...could be the activity of an engaged mind or a group of minds collaborating to solve a worthy problem.”

“Adaptive capacity was the single most important attribute for success, whatever the field.”

On May 3, 1964, Warren and Clurie’s daughter, Kate, was born. All his professional ambitions seemed trivial compared to the love Bennis felt for Kate – and later for his sons, John and Will. That fall, Doug McGregor, a heavy smoker, died of a heart attack. As Bennis gave McGregor’s eulogy, he realized he would miss his mentor terribly. Bennis decided it was time to become a leader himself, perhaps as a university administrator. He was ready for a different life.

## Winging It in Buffalo

Bennis gave up his tenured faculty position at MIT to become provost of social sciences at the State University of New York at Buffalo. In a three-hour meeting, the college’s president Martin Meyerson sold Bennis on his vision of academic utopia; Meyerson hoped to establish seven themed residential colleges to transform SUNY Buffalo into the “Berkeley of the East.” Bennis wanted to see if he could “successfully lead the kind of organization [he] regularly analyzed.”

“Paying undivided, respectful attention inevitably makes you more empathic, one of the most important and most undervalued leadership skills.”

Bennis might have reconsidered the job if he’d predicted the trouble he would face. Student protests against the Vietnam War were sweeping campuses nationally.

SUNY Buffalo was no exception. Harried by a bad economy and endless student protests, Meyerson (who did not support Bennis in the long run) left in 1970, after promoting the med school's Peter Regan to acting president and making Bennis acting executive vice president. In March, students believed that 400 riot police officers would invade the campus. Bennis met with department chairs, deans and the student body president to assure them it would not happen. Afterward, he walked to Regan's house unannounced and found the acting president meeting with the police commissioner. Lying to Bennis, Regan had requested that one-third of the police force patrol the campus 24 hours a day. Infuriated, Bennis quit the next day. "I lost my innocence in Buffalo," he says. "For the first time I felt I had been betrayed, both by Peter Regan and by Martin Meyerson."

## University of Cincinnati

As often happens to leaders in difficult situations, crisis management dominated Bennis's time in his next role as president of the University of Cincinnati. In 1971, within his first 100 days in office, Bennis had to manage two complex situations: First, the education dean wanted to be a hands-on father, so he brought his infant son to the office twice a week. Outraged local citizens wanted to know why the university was spending their tax dollars on babysitting, creating "the kind of time-sucking problem all leaders face." Second, Sen. Edward Kennedy's office wanted to call congressional hearings regarding troubling experiments at the school's nuclear medicine department, which was giving terminal cancer patients full-body radiation and experimenting on impoverished African-Americans and developmentally disabled children – all without consent.

"We...all had undergone a crucible, a transformative experience that had prepared [us] to lead."

The school lacked formal ethics guidelines for experiments and performed no autopsies on patients who died under its care. This crisis lingered for almost a year. University administrators worked with the National Academy of Sciences, halted the research and set up an ethics board to govern research. Bennis met with Kennedy, whose empathy impressed him, and managed to persuade the Senator to shelve the planned hearings.

"Leadership is a performance art, and most of us become leaders only when we are cast in that role."

By 1975, the university needed additional funding to survive. It was Ohio's only remaining municipally owned university, and the city of Cincinnati provided 6% of its funding, which was not enough. The school had to join the state system to survive, but locals resisted that change because they saw joining the state system as a loss of meaningful status. Bennis recruited hefty allies to lead the two-year fight: the mayor, the governor and his appointees on the university's board. They finally won 70% of the vote to "go state" on June 8, 1976.

## Taking a Time Out

Soon after, while guest lecturing at Harvard, Bennis was stunned when a venerable dean asked, "Do you love being president of the University of Cincinnati?" Suddenly, he realized he didn't. Given a simultaneous loss of support on campus, he resigned and took a sabbatical. In London, he had a heart attack and recuperated with friends who lived in Windsor Castle. Clurie came to help him convalesce, but after months of tension (following 17 "almost always" happy years of marriage), they separated. His endless work had placed undue strain on their union. In 1979, he moved to Sausalito, California, lived on a houseboat and initially supported himself only with his Cincinnati severance package. The dean of the Marshall School of Business at the University of Southern California (USC) lured Bennis back to academia.

## "Coming Home"

The past 30 years of Bennis's life have been the most rewarding. He taught at USC (the first place in which he didn't "feel like a sojourner") and reconnected with Dr. Grace Gabe, whom he had left behind in Boston in 1957. Bennis had ended the relationship by telegram three days before their planned wedding. Since both were very ambitious, he feared the marriage would fail. Gabe became a psychiatrist, married a doctor who died tragically, and had two daughters. In 1990, Bennis was speaking at a leadership forum in Washington, DC, when he sent Gabe another telegram, asking if she'd meet him for dinner. She accepted several days later. After an initial awkward dinner, they began corresponding and became a bicoastal couple. After a few months, they knew they wanted to be together. Bennis offered to move to Washington, but Grace surprised him with her willingness to move to California. They married in 1992.

"It was time to fight the bull." (Warren Bennis)

Since 1995, Bennis and USC president Steve Sample have co-taught "The Art and Adventure of Leadership." Each semester, they select 42 students out of about 300 applicants. Guest speakers have included former British prime minister Margaret Thatcher and former US presidential candidate Mike Dukakis. At USC, Bennis accepts that he never knows what's going to happen next. "Every day I look around, and I'm still surprised." As a professor of management, Bennis found time to think, write and teach, and he studied what interested him: the nature of leadership, the importance of creative collaboration, how groups work and how to bring about change. Working with Burt Nanus, he co-wrote *Leaders: Strategies for Taking Charge*. In researching the book, Bennis interviewed almost 100 business leaders. Other bestsellers followed.

"We need and seek honest, competent leaders in every area of our lives – government, the workplace, social organizations, schools."

Now in retirement, he reports, "At some point, you are amazed to discover that you have...become a name. All you did was work hard, get lucky and stay alive."

## About the Authors

**Warren Bennis** teaches at the University of Southern California's Marshall School of Business. He has collaborated with journalist **Patricia Ward Biederman** on several leadership books.