

## THE BIG IDEAS

### Leadership Basics

V + P + I + T + C + D.

### Self-Invention

Is the key to leadership.

### Blessed Impulse

You trust it?

### What Will You Express?

Expressing vs. proving yourself.

### Trust

The four ingredients.

### World-Class Leaders

Will you be one? (We need you!)

# On Becoming a Leader

BY WARREN BENNIS · BASIC BOOKS © 2009 · 304 PAGES

*“On Becoming a Leader is based on the assumption that leaders are people who are able to express themselves fully. By this I mean that they know who they are, what their strengths and weaknesses are, and how to fully deploy their strengths and compensate for their weaknesses. They also know what they want, why they want it, and how to communicate what they want to others, in order to gain their cooperation and support. Finally, they know how to achieve their goals. The key to full self-expression is understanding one’s self and the world, and the key to understanding is learning—from one’s own life and experience.*

*Becoming a leader isn’t easy, just as becoming a doctor or a poet isn’t easy, and those who claim otherwise are fooling themselves. But learning to lead is a lot easier than most of us think it is, because each of us contains the capacity for leadership. ...*

*At bottom, becoming a leader is synonymous with becoming yourself. It’s precisely that simple, and it’s also that difficult. So let’s get started.”*

~ Warren Bennis from *On Becoming a Leader*

Warren Bennis is one of the world’s leading authorities on leadership.

This is, as Peter Drucker puts it, his “most important book.”

I initially read this book nearly 20 years ago when I first became a leader. As a 25-year-old founder/CEO who raised \$5 million as part of the dot com boom of the late 90’s, I led a startup that went from 2 to 45 employees in less than 9 months (and then, after hiring the CEO of adidas to replace me as the young CEO, when the market crashed in 2000, we went from 45+ to 15 employees as we worked with an investment bank to sell the business to one of our two competitors who had raised 10x the money we had). My learning curve was nice and steep. (Laughing.)

I recall enjoying this book back in the day and I enjoyed reading it again in preparation for Leadership 101. (Get a copy of the book [here](#).)

It’s packed with Big Ideas. I’m excited to share some of my favorites so let’s jump straight in!

## LEADERSHIP: LET’S START WITH THE BASICS (V + P + I + T + C + D)

“Leaders come in every size, shape, and disposition—short, tall, neat, sloppy, young, old, male, and female. Nevertheless, they all seem to share some, if not all, of the following ingredients:

- The first basic ingredient of leadership is a *guiding vision*. The leader has a clear idea of what he or she wants to do—professionally and personally—and the strength to persist in the face of setbacks, even failures. Unless you know where you’re going, and why, you cannot possibly get there. ...

*“It is not in the still calm of life or the repose of a pacific station that great characters are formed. The habits of a vigorous mind are formed in contending with difficulty. Great necessities call out great virtues.”*

~ Abigail Adams

*"Ernest Hemingway said that the world breaks all of us, and we grow stronger in the broken places. That's certainly true of leaders. Their capability to rebound permits them to achieve, to realize their vision."*

~ Warren Bennis

- The second basic ingredient of leadership is *passion*—the underlying passion for the promises of life, combined with a very particular passion for a vocation, a profession, a course of action. The leader loves what he or she does and loves doing it. ...
- The next basic ingredient of leadership is *integrity*. I think there are three essential parts of integrity: self-knowledge, candor, and maturity. ...
- Integrity is the basis of *trust*, which is not as much an ingredient of leadership as it is a product. It is the one quality that cannot be acquired, but must be earned. ...
- Two more ingredients of leadership are *curiosity* and *daring*. Leaders wonder about everything, want to learn as much as they can, are willing to take risks, experiment, try new things. They do not worry about failure, but embrace errors, knowing they will learn from them. Learning from adversity is another theme that comes up again and again in this book, often with different spins."

That's from Chapter #2: Understanding the Basics. Let's re-cap the basic ingredients:

**A Guiding Vision.** Leaders have a clear sense of what they want to create and WHY. They focus on CREATING not complaining. So... What do \*you\* want? Why?

This is what I want: \_\_\_\_\_.

This is why: \_\_\_\_\_.

**Passion.** Leaders have an underlying passion for "the promises of life." That enthusiasm for and celebration of life and their chosen vocation is a key aspect of their ability to lead.

How is your passion for the promises of life? Do you LOVE what you do? (If not, check out Purpose 101 and get on track with getting incredibly good at doing what you most love to do in service to the world!)

**Integrity.** As we discussed in *Thoughts of a Philosophical Fighter Pilot*, integrity means to be INTEGRATED (not dis-integrated)—a complete whole. Here's how James Stockdale puts it: "Integrity is a powerful word that derives from a specific concept. It describes a person who is integrated, blended into a whole, as opposed to a person of many parts, many faces, many disconnects. The word relates to the ancients' distinction between living and living well. Contrary to popular thought, a person of integrity is typically easygoing with a sense of humor. He knows himself, reflects a definite and thoughtful set of preferences and aspirations, and is thus reliable. Knowing he is whole, he is not preoccupied with riding the crest of continual anxiety but is free to ride the crest of delight with life!"

Note: Integrity leads us right back to passion—a delight with life!/passion for the promises of life! (Being out of integrity/dis-integration does not.)

**Trust.** Trust, as Bennis shares, is the only ingredient that is not *acquired* but EARNED. Without trust a leader cannot function. We earn this trust via our integrity to our vision and consistent respect for truth and the individuals with whom we're serving. (More on that in a moment.)

**Curiosity + Daring.** Leaders are learners. They are intensely curious and see life as a laboratory in which they can experiment and optimize. They embrace risks—knowing they either win or they learn. How's your passion for learning and your appetite for risk?

P.S. Later in the book, Bennis outlines the qualities the next gen leaders will have: "Broad education, boundless curiosity, boundless enthusiasm, contagious optimism, belief in people and teamwork, willingness to take risks, devotion to long-term growth rather than short-term profit, commitment to excellence, adaptive capacity, empathy, authenticity, integrity and vision."

<— Let's cultivate those qualities.

*"Ideologically charged approaches rarely solve complex problems. Great leaders do not try to impose an ideological template, right- or left-leaning, on problems. First-rate leaders know that every problem is thorny in its own way and inclusively and collaboratively find solutions that reflect the unique realities at hand."*

~ Warren Bennis

*"To become a leader, then,  
you must become yourself,  
become the maker of your  
own life."*

~ Warren Bennis

## SELF-INVENTION = KEY TO LEADERSHIP

"I cannot stress too much the need for self-invention. To be authentic is literally to be your own author (the words derive from the same Greek root), to discover your own native energies and desires, and then to find your own way of acting on them. When you've done that, you are not existing simply in order to live up to an image posited by the culture or by some other authority or by a family tradition. When you write your own life, then no matter what happens, you have played the game that was natural for you to play. ... it is your task to break out of such limits and live up to your potential, to keep the covenant with your youthful dreams."

Did you know the word "authentic" literally means to be the author of our own lives?

To be effective leaders, we must do the work to create a guiding vision of what we truly want to create with this one precious life of ours. We must passionately fall in love with the promises of life and our chosen path to making our vision a reality while living in integrity with our deepest values, and earning trust along the way as we push our edges, take some risks, and learn just how to go about making it all come together.

That is the essence of leadership. And, it starts with self-invention—being willing to sit down and write the story of our lives the way we think is best.

(How're you doing with that?)

Reminds me of Abraham Maslow. In *Toward a Psychology of Being*, he tells us: *"The group of thinkers who have been working with self-actualization, with self, with authentic humanness, etc., have pretty firmly established their case that man has a tendency to realize himself. By implication he is exhorted to be true to his own nature, to trust himself, to be authentic, spontaneous, honestly expressive, to look for the sources of his action in his own deep inner nature."*

Todd Henry echoes this in *Louder than Words* in which he helps us discover our "authentic voice." He says: *"Here's a question worth pondering: While your work speaks about you, does it really speak \*for\* you? Does it represent you well? Does it reflect the authentic you?"*

Plus: *"Your authentic voice is a gift. How will you offer it to others today through your work? Answering that question is your life's mission."*

Matthew Kelly has some similar wisdom in his great book *Perfectly Yourself* where he tells us: *"Listen as I whisper three of the most powerful words in history into your ear. The great artists and scientists know the power of these words. Allow these three words to permeate every corner of your being and every aspect of your life, and you will live a life of such authenticity that has rarely been witnessed. Simplify. Simplify. Simplify. Which parts of your life are confusing, congested, or cluttered? Simplicity is the way to clarity."*

(btw: Matthew tells us: *"We complicate our lives because we don't know what we want."*)

Remember Ingredient #1 for leadership? A Guiding Vision. We must know what we want.

So: WHAT DO YOU (REALLY!!!) WANT?! And, how can you simplify your life so you can focus on what truly matters to you? (Now a good time to take a +1% baby step?)

## LEADERS TRUST THEIR "BLESSED IMPULSE" (DO YOU?)

"A part of whole-brain thinking includes learning to trust what Emerson called the 'blessed impulse,' the hunch, the vision that shows you in a flash the absolutely right thing to do. Everyone has these visions; leaders learn to trust them."

I want to remind you here of something Norman Lear said regarding the profound influence that Emerson's *Self-Reliance* had on his growth as a leader: 'Emerson talks about listening to that

*"Short-term thinking is the  
societal disease of our time."*

~ Norman Lear

*"As John Gardner once said, talent is one thing, while its triumphant expression is another. Only when we are fully deployed are we capable of that triumphant expression. Full deployment, engagement, hone and sharpen all of one's gifts, and ensure that one will be an original, not a copy."*

~ Warren Bennis

inner voice and going with it, all voices to the contrary. I don't now when I started to understand that there was something divine about that inner voice—I certainly didn't in high school, college, or even in young manhood—but somewhere along the line, I appreciated that, too. How is it possible that as a writer I can go to bed a thousand times with a second act problem and wake up with the answer? Some inner voice. To go with that—which I confess I don't do all the time—is the purest, truest thing we have. And when we forgo our own thoughts and opinions, they end up coming back to us from the mouths of others. They come back with an alien majesty. . . . So the lesson is, you believe it. *When I've been most effective, I've followed that inner voice.'*

Following the 'blessed impulse' is, I think, basic to leadership. This is how guiding visions are made real."

That's from a chapter called "Operating on Instinct" in which we learn to deepen trust in ourselves. There are few greater resources to help us do that than [Ralph Waldo Emerson](#)'s essay-manifesto [Self-Reliance](#). (If you haven't read that yet, please do. You'll love it.)

Favorite gems for your inspiration:

*"Trust thyself: every heart vibrates to that iron string."*

*"If I have lost confidence in myself, I have the universe against me."*

*"What I must do is all that concerns me, not what the people think. This rule, equally arduous in actual and in intellectual life, may serve for the whole distinction between greatness and meanness."*

We must trust ourselves. We must have the strength to rely on what we believe to be true. And... Emerson tells us we MUST (!!!) *also* know that having this trust in ourselves is \*NOT\* easy. Having the self-reliance to trust ourselves, to not conform, is a courageous, heroic act.

He warns us: *"For non-conformity the world whips you with its displeasure."*

Plus: *"And truly it demands something godlike in him who cast off the common motives of humanity and ventured to trust himself for a taskmaster."*

And, all that leads us to one of the best passages ever: *"A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds, adored by little statesmen and philosophers and divines. With consistency a great soul has simply nothing to do. He may as well concern himself with his shadow on the wall. Speak what you think now in hard words, and to-morrow speak what to-morrow thinks in hard words again, though it contradict every thing you said today.—'Ah, so you shall be sure to be misunderstood.'—Is it so bad, then, to be misunderstood? Pythagoras was misunderstood, and Socrates, and Jesus, and Luther, and Copernicus, and Galileo, and Newton, and every pure and wise spirit that ever took flesh. To be great is to be misunderstood."*

Leaders trust their blessed impulse. Do you?

(And, most importantly: What is it whispering (shouting?) in your ear right.this.moment?)

P.S. I'm reminded of the time a billionaire who invested in my prior business recited that long Emerson quote from memory as we discussed making a shift in our biz. Apparently, he thought it was wise advice. I am also reminded of a mentor (former CEO of adidas) telling me the two rules of business: 1. Business is simple—keep it that way. 2. Trust yourself—always.

## EXPRESSING YOURSELF VS. PROVING YOURSELF

*"Some people are born knowing what they want to do, and even how to do it. The rest of us aren't so lucky. We have to spend some time figuring out what to do with our lives. Vague goals, such as 'I just want to be happy' or 'I want to live well' or 'I want to make the world a better place' or even 'I want to be very, very rich,' are nearly useless. ...*

*"Knowing yourself, then, means separating who you are and who you want to be from what the world thinks you are and wants you to be."*

~ Warren Bennis

What do you want? The majority of us go through life, often very successfully, without ever asking, much less answering, this most basic question.

The most basic answer, of course, is that you want to express yourself fully, for that is the most basic human drive. As one friend put it, 'We all want to learn how to use our own voices,' and it has led some of us to the peak and some of us to the depths.

How can you best express you?"

That's from a chapter called "Deploying Yourself: Strike Hard, Try Everything."

Yes. We're repeating ourselves with our emphasis on KNOWING WHAT YOU WANT. Fact is, you can't "deploy yourself" and "strike hard" unless you know yourself and have a clear target at which you are aimed.

So, again, what do you want? :)

*Note:* One of the key distinctions Bennis makes throughout the book is that we want to be driven to EXPRESS ourselves, not to PROVE ourselves. There's a big difference between those.

When our deepest commitment is to \*express\* ourselves, we can trust those blessed impulses and ignore the inevitable backlash that will arise from our nonconformity. If our primary drive is to \*prove\* ourselves, we're in for a very tough haul—because we'll need to constantly conform to "prove" we're awesome and impress others; and, in the process, sell our souls.

Know yourself. Deploy yourself. Strike hard. Try everything. Lead.

## TRUST: 4 INGREDIENTS TO GENERATING + SUSTAINING

"The underlying issue in leading from voice is trust—in fact, I believe that trust is the underlying issue in not only getting people on your side, but having them stay there. There are four ingredients leaders have that generate and sustain trust:

1. *Constancy.* Whatever surprises leaders themselves may face, they don't create any for the group. Leaders are all of a piece; they stay the course.
2. *Congruity.* Leaders walk their talk. In true leaders, there is no gap between the theories they espouse and the life they practice.
3. *Reliability.* Leaders are there when it counts; they are ready to support their co-workers in the moments that matter.
4. *Integrity.* Leaders honor their commitments and promises.

When those four factors are in place, people will be on your side. Again, these are the kinds of things that can't be taught. They can only be learned."

Trust. Recall that it can't be acquired. It must be earned.

These are the four ingredients: CONSTANCY + CONGRUITY + RELIABILITY + INTEGRITY.

How're you doing with each?

## WORLD-CLASS LEADERS: WILL YOU BE ONE OF THEM?

"Becoming a leader is not an orderly path. It is a fitful, often painful process that involves wrong turns and dead ends before great strides are made. Usually some transformative event or experience is central to finding one's voice, learning how to engage others through shared meaning, and acquiring the other skills of leadership. FDR's lifetime struggle with polio was most certainly his crucible of leadership. Instead of simply enduring hard times, we have to seize every opportunity for transformation they afford. In recent weeks, as the stock market rocked and rolled, I thought of what Abigail Adams had written to John Quincy Adams in the

*"The first responsibility of a leader is to define reality. The last is to say thank you. In between, the leader is a servant."*

~ Max De Pree

*"These are the hard times in which a genius should wish to live. . . . Great necessities call forth great leaders."*

~ Abigail Adams

turbulent days of 1780: 'These are the hard times in which a genius should wish to live. . . . Great necessities call forth great leaders.'

It is significant, I think, that Adams chose the plural, *leaders*. . . . It is easy to forget that we need more than one gifted leader at a time. At the founding of the United States, when our population was less than 4 million, we had six towering leaders: Washington, Jefferson, Hamilton, Madison, Franklin, and Adams. Now that we number more than 304 million people, we are surely capable of yielding at least 600 world-class leaders in this country alone.

Will you be one of them?"

Those are the very last words of the book.

Imagine that: During our revolution, the United States produced six of history's greatest leaders at a time in which our total population was less than 4 million people. Now, with more than 300 million citizens, we are certainly capable of producing at least 600 truly extraordinary leaders.

The important question: Will YOU be one of them?

As you contemplate that, let's take a moment to reflect on this gem from Abigail Adams (and, note: Bennis cited her wisdom THREE times throughout the book—signaling just how important it is to his overall philosophy of leadership): *"These are the hard times in which a genius should wish to live. . . . Great necessities call forth great leaders."*

Hard times in which a genius (<— \*pointing at YOU\*!) should \*wish\* to live. Great necessities call forth great leaders.

Let us be called forth as we each become the leaders we are capable of becoming!

B

**Brian Johnson,**  
*Heroic Philosopher CEO*

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## About the Author of This Note

BRIAN JOHNSON



Brian Johnson is the Founder + CEO of Heroic. He's spent half of the last 25 years as a Founder/CEO and the other half as a Philosopher. Brian loves integrating ancient wisdom and modern science to help YOU become the best, most heroic version of yourself so we can create a world in which 51% of humanity is flourishing by 2051. Learn more at [heroic.us](http://heroic.us).