The Most Common Failures in Leadership

Introduction

In 2008, Warren Bennis spoke before the Consortium for Global Leadership (CGL) at the Harvard Center for Public Leadership. Mr. Bennis is the author of several books including Leaders, On Becoming a Leader, Judgment, and others. He is a distinguished professor of business administration at the University of Southern California and is a consultant for Fortune 500 companies.

During his presentation, Mr. Bennis describes the often-discussed and ever-popular qualities that characterize good leadership. He claims that most of the academic analysis currently available to students is focused almost entirely on leaders with excellent track records, an unfortunate misstep on the part of academics. While Mr. Bennis concedes that you can in fact learn quite a lot from these types of examples, he believes that students need to be made aware of some of the failures and common mistakes that permeate throughout much of today’s leadership hierarchy.

Mr. Bennis believes that there is a great deal to be learned by examining case-studies of leaders who have taken part in criminal activities or who have failed in some other ethical or judgment-based capacity.

Three Fatal Areas

There are three primary areas in which leaders may experience failure. In each of these contexts there exist a variety of knowns and unknowns that are useful to consider. These areas of interest are outlined as follows:

Knowing Others

In his lecture, Mr. Bennis refers to knowing others as the “Caesar Problem.” He contends that leaders tend to exhibit a certain degree of arrogance after years of success and power, an attribute that often leads to a communications disconnect with their subordinates and coworkers. Failure to connect with others has led to the downfall of many great leaders. Margaret Thatcher, who led the UK for just over a decade, enjoyed a multitude of successes and was widely loved by her citizens. Unfortunately, the last year of her service was wrought with economic problems and political infighting, which quickly brought about her demise. Many have attributed these failures to her Iron Lady mentality that left little to no room for compromise, even amongst members of her own conservative party. Another example of the “Caesar Problem” can be found in the case of Eckhard Pfeiffer who was Compaq’s CEO during the 1990’s. After years of touted success, Mr. Pfeiffer began to intentionally avoid people who he thought had bad
news for him. His failure to listen to the warnings of others brought about a series of bad decisions, which led to significant financial losses throughout nearly every sector of the company. As a result of his failures, he was quickly ousted by the Board of Directors at Compaq, a bit of an ironic fate for someone who had started his tenure as CEO in the midst of a similar coup.

Mr. Bennis contextualizes the “Caesar Problem” in terms of William Shakespeare. When writing his plays, Shakespeare would often use clever allegories in order to criticize a variety of social and political issues that were prevalent throughout much of England during his time. In Shakespeare’s Julius Caesar, the characters who plotted against the famous Roman leader had been doing so for quite some time. With all of his spies in the Senate how did he not see the signs? Both Mr. Bennis and William Shakespeare make it exceedingly clear that Julius Caesar’s hubris had clouded his judgment, causing him to adopt a false sense of security. He was convinced that the love of the people was enough to keep him in power, ignoring the warning signs and the substantiated threats that came from his enemies in Rome’s Senate. After his many military successes—an attribute that was highly regarded during that time—he clearly did not want to accept that he had failed to gain the love and respect of every Roman citizen, including that of his fellow political leaders. His failure to heed the advice and warnings of his subordinates brought about Caesar’s untimely demise.

Not listening is very commonplace, and this can be a leader’s fatal flaw. Today’s leaders should focus on the events around them, paying critical attention to both their subordinates and coequals.

**Contextual Intelligence**

*Contextual intelligence* refers to one’s capacity to accurately identify all of the essential factors in an event or situation; this includes evaluating factors accurately, developing an appropriate strategy for future action, and responding as appropriate. The proliferation of advanced technology, changing global economies, and improved accountability to corporate stakeholders has drastically increased the variables that play into each and every one of these situations. As such, leaders need to explore the vast areas to which they are unfamiliar. The failure of a leader to effectively identify and analyze these factors can result in poor or inappropriate decisions. To illustrate this point, Mr. Bennis, once again defers to Shakespeare. In *Henry IV*, Falstaff tells Prince Hal, “If you want to lead people, you’ve got to enter their world.” In many cases, these worlds may be unfamiliar.

In the late 1960's, Mr. Bennis was dispatched to Ohio where he was tasked with converting the University of Cincinnati into a state school. After his arrival, he was advised by Fred Lazarus, Jr., the founder of Federated Department stores, that Cincinnati was a very conservative city and that if he wanted to succeed in his endeavors there he would need to take things very slowly and keep a low profile. There
is a quote allegedly attributed to Mark Twain about Cincinnati: “When the end of the world comes, I want to be in Cincinnati, because it’s always twenty years behind the times.”

Initially, Mr. Bennis chose to ignore this sage piece of advice. He moved very quickly in his efforts to reconstruct UC’s structural system, so much so that he gained quite a bit of press coverage. After a few misguided attempts at appeasing the people of Cincinnati, Bennis found it exceptionally difficult to get anything done. Consequently, it took him three long years to accomplish his task, which after a short time came to be warmly accepted throughout the city. Had he chosen to heed Mr. Lazarus’s advice his odyssey may have looked much different.

This idea of moving slowly in order to gain awareness of a situation might seem to contradict the commonly accepted notion that the first 100 days of a new leader’s tenure set the groundwork for their future success. In fact, Mr. Bennis states that some early changes might be necessary and may prove to be what people really want and need. However, he still recommends that leaders not move too recklessly just for the sake of change. They should instead use their best judgment and take the time to fully assess a situation before making drastic changes.

The Self

*The self* drives our ambitions and aspirations. Understanding *the self*, or having self-awareness, requires introspection, open and honest communication with others, and a willingness to respond to negative feedback. Unfortunately, many leaders find self-awareness very difficult to attain, resulting in actions and behaviors that can lead to failure. It is not uncommon to confuse experience with self-awareness; leaders should be careful to understand how their actions affect others and fit into the organization as a whole.

Mr. Bennis likes to discuss his own drive, ambition, and aspirations. One of his greatest visions was to become a university president. So, to see if this vision had validity, he left his post as Chairman of the Organizational Studies Department at MIT and took the position of Provost at the State University of New York at Buffalo. Shortly thereafter he was given the opportunity to reshape the University of Cincinnati where he was eventually appointed to its presidency. When asked if he loved working as president of a university, he often pauses for a moment before responding. He does so in order to reflect on his own achievements and to assess if things could have been done differently. He hopes to use that same strategy early on in all of his future academic and professional endeavors, as he believes that knowledge of *the self* can truly allow us all to achieve great success.
Summary

- Author, university professor, and leadership consultant, Warren Bennis, believes that all leaders experience failures, from which we can all learn something.

- Three areas in which leaders fail include knowing others, contextual intelligence, and the self.

- Knowing others means paying attention to, and actively listening to those around you, especially when they have information that is unpleasant or negative.

- Contextual intelligence is all about being aware of your surroundings and taking the time to learn about and understand environments that may be unfamiliar.

- To avoid the self being a point of failure, you should be fully aware of what drives you, have a sense of what you really enjoy, and have passion in all that you do.

Reference