

# LEADERSHIP Warr Bennis Excellence



THE MAGAZINE OF LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT, MANAGERIAL EFFECTIVENESS, AND ORGANIZATIONAL PRODUCTIVITY

June 2013

**Leader  
Power**

**Cultivate  
Trust**

**Learn from  
Experience**

**Develop a  
Learning Mindset**

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# LEADERSHIP Excellence

Warren Bennis



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*Catch of the Day*

*Birds of prey, like this osprey eagle, display precision and power as they catch fish. Likewise, leaders of people display dexterity as they accelerate performance.*

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# Learn from Experience

*Develop learning mindsets and practices.*



by Steve Terrell

**A** DAPTIVE CHALLENGES, complex problems, and volatile conditions place unprecedented demands on leaders. Hence, as David A. Kolb and Bauback Yeganeh note: *Expertise at learning has become the key capability necessary for survival, success and fulfillment.*

After faltering performance, IBM CEO Virginia Rometty put the company on notice, saying “We haven’t transformed rapidly enough. We have to step up on all levels.” IBM isn’t alone in the struggle to keep up with changing markets and conditions. All organizations are operating in volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity; as a result their leaders must quickly size up people and situations, make tough decisions, take appropriate action without complete information, and flexibly change on the fly in order to produce results in new, demanding, first-time situations.

Succeeding in such conditions requires leaders to *intentionally learn from their day-to-day experience*, apply what they learn to new challenging situations, and continue learning. Leaders who consistently practice the skills and tactics of learning from experience are much better equipped to deal with the complexities and challenges of modern business life.

*“The ability to continue learning is an essential skill of leadership. When leaders lose that ability, they inevitably falter,”* say Warren Bennis and Robert Thomas.

*Experience is a central component of leadership development; however, having an experience does not guarantee learning from it.* Many people don’t learn from experience, because they lack the knowledge and skills needed to do so. Providing challenging assignments to leaders doesn’t automatically result in leaders’ development. A study by Fiedler found that longer leader tenure and experience was negatively correlated with team performance. Learning from experience requires an approach to living that makes learning one’s primary focus. Experience is only the best

teacher, for those who actively utilize specific learning strategies and skills to derive the lessons of experience.

Most of us live on *automatic pilot*, making little or no effort to learn from our experiences. We develop patterns or habits of behavior that make it easier to go through life without having to think about things every time (this *automaticity* means you can perform a skill without having to consciously think about it). However, this also leads to our sleepwalking through valuable experiences that hold hidden learning, *if only* we noticed! When we assume that *learning happens automatically*, and give little thought or energy to learning or improving our learning capability, we miss out on opportunities to learn, grow, and develop as leaders.

*To get the most out of your daily*



*experiences, focus on two key ideas: Learning Mindset and Learning Practices. A Learning Mindset (attitude) leads to Learning Practices (actions).*

• **Learning Mindset.** Think of a *mindset* as a habitual or characteristic mental attitude that determines how you will interpret and respond to situations. In the context of learning from experience, *Learning Mindset* is an attitude that predisposes you to be open to new experiences, to believe you can and will learn, and to intentionally grow and develop from your experience. It includes the assumptions and beliefs that govern how you think about and approach experience and opportunities, and if you see them as opportunities to learn and develop, as well as your affective stance toward learning, your emotional state or feeling about learning, learning situations, and new experiences.

When I operate with a *Learning Mindset*, I view tasks and projects as opportunities to learn something new,

and focus on expanding my current knowledge and skills as I take creative action to produce the desired results. I see every experience as an *opportunity to learn, grow, and develop.*

Leaders who have a *Learning Mindset* see *opportunities to learn* in all aspects of their work life. Leaders whose attitude toward learning embodies: belief in their learning and growth potential; openness to experience; motivation, willingness, and desire to learn; curiosity about others and how they do what they do; an attitude of discovery and exploration; an intention and willingness to gain something positive from experience—experience more growth.

• **Learning Practices.** After receiving 360-degree feedback or attending a training program, leaders often ask: *What can I do to get better as a leader?* It’s one thing to know that you need to *think more strategically* or to *give performance feedback and coaching* to direct reports. It’s different to translate that into practical actions that you can take to bring about lasting change.

*Time on the job represents our best, most accessible opportunity to learn from our day-to-day experience.* We just need to know *how to use our experience to grow and develop.* **Learning Practices** are actions you can take to accelerate and enhance your learning from experience. Your actions determine whether you proactively pursue learning in your work life, or focus only on getting the job done. Leaders who use the **Learning Practices** learn more, faster while achieving better results.

Here are **10 key learning practices** to help you *learn from experience*: 1. Take responsibility for your learning and development; 2. Approach new assignments/opportunities with openness to experience and positive intention to learn; 3. Seek and use feedback; 4. Clearly understand your strengths and areas of development; 5. Ask great questions

**How can today’s leaders possibly cope with all the complexities and challenges facing them? Steve Terrell has the answer: By learning from their day-to-day experience, applying what they learn to challenging situations, and continuously learning and consistently practicing the skills and tactics of learning from their experience.**

Ken Shelton, editor/CEO,  
Leadership Excellence

and show curiosity; 6. Listen transformatively (intently, deeply, empathically); 7. Respond to experience with adaptability and flexibility; 8. Actively reflect and practice mindfulness; 9. Actively experiment with new approaches to learning; and 10. Closely observe and learn from others.

*Effective leaders transform experiences into growth.* The greater the challenge, the greater the opportunity to develop. As you have a *Learning Mindset* and put *Learning Practices* into action, you will learn more, faster; perform at a higher level; and create greater value for your company and for yourself. LE

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**ACTION:** *Actively learn from your experience.*

**L e a d e r s h i p   E x c e l l e n c e**

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