Team Building for 21st-Century Leaders

I. Redefining Leadership

Warren Bennis is an author and professor from the University of Southern California in Los Angeles. I try to read anything Warren Bennis writes because he has fresh insight into the issues of leadership and management. His latest book, coauthored with David Heenan, is entitled *Co-Leaders: The Power of Great Partnerships* and has a long, insightful opening statement. I include it as we begin, because it summarizes a critical change in how leaders are perceived today.

> This book reflects our conviction that you must look beyond the Bill Gates of the world to understand what will make organizations succeed in the new millennium. In this first comprehensive study of co-leaders and their often-quiet power, we challenge the time-honored notion that all great institutions are the length and shadow of a great man or woman. It is a fallacy that dies hard. But if you believe as we do that the genius of our age is truly collaborative, you must abandon the notion that the credit for any significant achievement is solely attributable to the person at the top. We have long worshipped the imperial leader at the cost of ignoring the countless other contributors to any worthwhile enterprise. In our hearts we know that the world is more complex than ever and that we need teams of talent, leaders and co-leaders working together to get important things done. The old corporate monotheism is finally giving way to a more realistic view that acknowledges leaders not as organizational gods but as the first among many contributors. In this new view of the organization, co-leaders finally come into their own and begin to receive the credit they so richly deserve.

All too often one leader receives most if not all the credit for great achievements or turnarounds in business, sports or government. Books are written about them and their leadership style, but the credit going to one person isn't always accurate. Behind every leader there is usually a good team of people. There is seldom one person who can be everything to the organization they serve, even if they are the leader. Visionary founders or leaders may think they made the difference, but often they were the first among equals who got things moving in the right direction. From that point, others did the work.

It's time that we redefine or adjust our understanding of what leadership is. The leader shouldn't be expected to know or do it all. At the same time, the leader should not take credit for dramatic success or bear all the blame for dramatic failure. Both are

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symptoms of the old mentality of a leader's role, and both must increasingly be replaced by an understanding of the importance of the leader and their role on any team.

Jim Collins, coauthor of the business bestseller *Built to Last*, has been talking recently about what he calls Level-Five Leadership. For Collins, Level Five Leaders are at the top of their trade as far as leadership development is concerned. But Collins characterizes Level Five Leaders as humble men and women who understand their true contributions to the team. What most intrigued me was what Collins had to write about "the principle of the window and the mirror."

First, let's look at "the principle of the window." What he means by that is that Level Five Leaders seem to be looking "out the window" when things go well. What are they looking for? They are looking for other people with whom they can share the credit for the success. Level five leaders know that they had a role in the success, but they weren't the only ones. They want to spread the credit around the team.

But what does he mean by the principle of the mirror? Collins states that Level Five Leaders first look in the mirror at *themselves* when things don't go so well. They don't hold others responsible, or point fingers of blame. This doesn't mean that others aren't responsible in part, but level five leaders set an example of introspection in times of trouble. They look at themselves and what they could have done more effectively. From there, they will be less defensive and accusatory as they meet with others in their leadership team to assess what went wrong.

How can this obsession with leader at the top be corrected? There are three things that I see leaders can do to build a team concept in the work they do.

1. Redefine Expectations from Leaders

"Leadership is one of the most talked about and least understood ideas in contemporary discussions. At its best, leadership is a subtle process. As the ancient Taoist proclaimed, 'When the leader leads well, the people will say, 'We did it ourselves.''' Leadership needs to be offered and, if effective, it is voluntarily accepted.— Robert Greenleaf, *The Power of Servant Leadership*

By studying and rethinking leadership, we can adjust our tendency to overestimate the leader and underestimate the team. Peter Drucker, the father of modern

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management, wrote in *The Post-Capitalist Society*, "What should we hold you [the worker] accountable for? What information do you owe the rest of us? Which worker has to be a participant in decisions as to what equipment is needed, how the work should be scheduled, indeed, what the basic policy of the entire company should be."

That represents a radical rethinking of the leader's role. Instead of telling workers *what* to do and *how* to work, leaders solicit participation, input and feedback. Leaders don't assume that they know it all. In fact, leaders *know* they don't know it all. They realize that even the person who sweeps the floor may see something from their perspective that could help the organization or at least contribute to a more efficient operation. Warren Bennis said that the leader is "first among many contributors." Leaders use their power and position to first build the team, and then to bring out the best in every person.

In my own leadership, this has caused me to make two radical departures from traditional leadership practices. First, I don't conduct staff evaluations. What I try to do is work with my team to help employees evaluate themselves. This means that each person must have input into what they are accountable for—their job objectives and expectations. I try not to base compensation on longevity of service to the organization, but on value added to the organization through accomplishing predetermined objectives.

Second, I try to loosen up on communication. I don't think salaries or other "sensitive" information should only be available to upper level leadership. I think everyone has a right to know how salary levels are determined and what they can do to increase their earnings. I think that helps team members understand what the company values are by showing where the company is willing to put compensation dollars.

Third, my staff meetings are always "open." They aren't just times of me talking "down" to the workers. Rather, staff meetings are times when everyone and anyone can raise questions, issues or concerns that are relevant to their area of work or to someone else. I try to talk very little at staff meetings; I listen and try to help the team accomplish what needs to be done.

All that required re-thinking my role as a leader. I determined that I was there as an important part of the team; I was to "run interference" for others to help them contribute what only they could contribute.

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2. Contribute Your Strengths

I try to re-read Peter Drucker's *Effective Executive* every year. In one chapter, he urges his readers to contribute their strengths in order to be an effective executive. That is easier said than done, especially for those who operate from a mindset that the leader can and should be able to do and know it all. And there are some who believe that leaders should act like they know it all even if they don't. To do otherwise, this mindset says, would be to weaken the role of the leader. Of course, nothing could be further from the truth.

A team is assembled because members of that team have different skills, years of experience, and perspectives. The leader is a member of the team as "the first among many contributors." The leader, once he or she has set the direction and helped determine the goals, must then step back and become part of the team. As a team member, leaders then contribute their strengths to see that the vision is accomplished. In effect, the leader becomes a servant to the vision just like all the other team members.

To contribute your strengths means that you know what your strengths are. That also assumes that you know your weaknesses as well. This is *critical* self-knowledge that can release the leader from trying to be or do all things. No one is that gifted or smart. Leaders can only contribute to the team what they know and do well.

3. Build a Team

It isn't enough to have a team; a team must be *built*. There is more to building a team than choosing members, like children do when they are on a playground. One critical skill that leaders must have involves *building* an effective team. That implies a plan, then laying a foundation and then the structure itself.

Let's start with a basic definition of a team: a team is a group of people assembled for the long or short-term to accomplish some task or purpose. The size of the team is determined not by office politics, but by the task to be accomplished. The team stays together until the project or task is complete; then a new team may be built for a different task. It may even be possible for people to choose the team on which they want to serve. Now that's a different way of looking at team building!

A team isn't the solution to every problem or situation. Right now teams are a bit of a management fad. Team building is not a panacea. In some cases, a strong leader,

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especially in times of crisis, is a preferable leadership style. But leaders must know when to assume authority and then when to begin spreading the authority among team members as the crisis is resolved or the business situation becomes more favorable.

Even if leaders must assume control of a crisis without a team, they can still sit down with as many employees as possible and explain to them what they are doing and why. People can then ask questions and get as many answers as the leader is able and permitted to give.

Whenever I have a leadership role, I prefer to talk to as many people as possible, even if the basic decisions have been determined. I want to hear what their concerns are and what they think will work and why. I begin laying the foundation for the team, before it is a team, by letting participants know that I value their input. They can tell me things trusting that I won't berate, laugh at, or dismiss them, even if I disagree.

This allows me to get to know the people that could possibly make up any future teams. People are all different. Some move quickly, and some move slowly. Some won't ask you questions, and won't be honest with you even if you grab them by the ankles and shake them up and down. But I want and need to know that. I want to lay the foundation and then finish the structure that can release the potential of a well-built team.

Let's stop and try something. Considering your present operation, what steps can you take now to build a more effective team? Take one minute and think about some area that has been a problem or is a tremendous opportunity for your business. Write down the names of some people who come to mind and how you will begin to build? Will you meet with them one-on-one? Take several groups out to lunch? Think about how you would structure the team. What would your team objectives be? What problem or opportunity are you trying to address?

Perhaps you consider yourself a team-builder. Then ask others if they agree. Interview five or six key employees and ask them if they agree with you. If they don't, don't get angry!

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Now don't go back to the office and launch a new program called "Operation Team." If you've seldom utilized teams and you have sixty employees, don't break them down into ten teams of six people each. Do a prototype of one team and work at building it. Learn what works and what doesn't. Start slowly and don't raise expectations beyond what you can deliver.

When you "blow the trumpet" as a leader and then retreat on the issue for which you sounded the alarm, you'll find that you lose credibility and respect as a leader. The next time you'll have to blow the trumpet even louder. People will then say, "Here we go again. What is it this year?" You don't want that if you're serious about being an effective leader. A structure will take some time to build and so does a team. As you rethink your leadership style, make teams a part of that style and learn how to build them without using authoritarian techniques.

II. <u>Key Skills in Team Building</u>

When you go back to start or improve your teams, there are four key issues I would like you to remember and apply. These four issues are skills that can be developed and improved over time. But don't wait until you're an "expert;" start applying and perfecting these skills now.

The first issue is **service**. Throughout this book, I will refer to Robert Greenleaf, who wrote *The Power of Servant* Leadership and coined the phrase "Servant Leadership." Greenleaf wrote, "How can an institution become more serving I see no other way than that the people who inhabit it serve better and work together toward synergy—the whole becoming greater than the sum of its parts."

When people think of service, they often think of menial tasks being done in a humble manner. That's not what I think of when I think of servant leadership. I think of leaders serving their teams, doing whatever it takes to see the members succeed and the mission accomplished. That may take more skill than any other task on a highly technical team project! Let me give you an example.

Twelve years ago when I was the administrator for a large church, I decided to walk around our office as an "outsider," trying to see things as someone off the street may see them. We had a large staff. Everyone had an office and access to a secretary,

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which they often shared with one or two other leaders. As I walked around, I was confronted by a secretary sitting in front of three closed office doors. I went around the next corner and I saw another secretary in front of two closed doors. I made one more turn and I saw an empty secretarial desk and two more closed doors. And I finished my journey by coming back around to the front of the building to confront the fourth area where there was, you guessed it, a secretary in front of two closed doors..

And I said to myself, "What's wrong with his picture?"

We certainly were in no position to call ourselves the *Church of the Open Door*, because there weren't any. But we were proud that we were a friendly, accessible church. But all our leaders were sequestered behind closed doors and staff and members needed to make an appointment to see them. I thought pastors and leaders were supposed to work with people? What were we doing behind closed doors?

I could not change the management style of those leaders, for most of them had more seniority and authority than I. They would not have been receptive to what I saw or my recommendations for change. So I developed a *personal* management and leadership philosophy that my door would stay open, unless I was involved in an emergency situation. So from that day on, I organized my day to allow for the interruptions that I knew would come.

My motivation was service. If a fellow employee or "customer" needed a piece of my time or a piece of information that I had for them to do their work or get on with their lives, then the best way I could serve them was to give them that piece of information or a piece of my time.

And I still keep my door open. Most time management books I've read tell me not to do this, but I feel I *must* do it. I want to serve the customers and people with whom I am working, so I try to make my office the center of all offices. An assistant or secretary *never* keeps people out of my office. I *want* people to come in so I can help them.

One more thing: if I am meeting with someone and my phone rings, I don't answer it. The person I am meeting with was there first. I let the phone ring and go to voicemail. I do not interrupt my time with the person in my office and by answering another call say, "The telephone is more important than you."

Both decisions are borne out of a desire to serve. I trust that over the last dozen years, many people have enjoyed working with me, and that I've been able to build effective teams because I understood some of the little things of service.

The second issue was mentioned already and that is **communication**. In recent survey outlining reasons considered to be very important in deciding to take a job with an employer, 65% of those responding said "open communication" was the main factor in choosing a new job position. The second factor was the effect the position would have on family and personal life. It is a new day with both men *and* women working outside the home. Consequently people are more concerned abut the discretionary time they do have and how they can invest it in families.

The third factor in deciding to take a job was the nature of the work itself. (The source of the survey was the Families and Work Institute in New York and was conducted in1993.) After the top three factors, management quality, supervisor, and the opportunity to gain new skills were mentioned next in that order. By the way, the factor of salary was listed as number 16 on the list of reasons for taking a new position.

"Open communication" was the number one reason. That tells me that people want to be listened to and they want to have a voice in matters that affect them. That means that leaders will have to improve their listening skills. If someone is talking to you and your eyes are roaming to other work, or you're picking up the phone or clicking on the computer keyboard when someone is talking, they know you aren't listening to them. You're saying, "What you're saying isn't that important to me."   How does that make you feel when it happens to you? Why would it be any different when the roles are reversed?

One person's mission is another person's minutia. To make a deposit, what is important to another person must be as important to you as the other person is to you. --Stephen Covey

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But that example is trivial and personal. More importantly, if you make major decisions that affect people's work and don't first consult with them, then you aren't a good communicator. If people hear about major changes from other people and not from

you, you're not a good communicator. If you withhold information because you don't trust your team, then you're not a good communicator.

Robert Greenleaf in *The Power of Servant Leadership* wrote "Listening, coupled with regular periods of reflection, are essential for the growth of the servant leader. This involves learning to listen not only to people, but the sounds of your own life. Is your body trying to tell you to slow down? Do you have an inner sense to pursue a certain direction even though there are other paths that make more sense? Listening starts by listening to your own conversations and then paying attention to the things happening around you."

Greenleaf goes on to say that the most successful servant leaders are those who have become skilled, empathetic listeners. My own religious guide, The Bible, instructs me to be quick to hear, slow to speak, and slow to anger. More often than not, I am the exact opposite: slow to hear, quick to speak, and quick to anger. Strong leaders have much to say and usually have a temper to go with it. But both those traits hamper open communication.

When you're dealing with a person who is coming from a paradigm of Win/Lose, the relationship is still the key. The place to focus is on your Circle of Influence. You make deposits into the Emotional Bank Account through genuine courtesy, respect and appreciation for that person and for the other point of view. You stay longer in the communication process. You listen more, you listen in greater depth. You express yourself with greater courage. You aren't reactive. You go deeper inside yourself for strength of character to be proactive. You keep hammering it out until the other person begins to realize that you genuinely want the resolution to be a real win for both of you. That very process is a tremendous deposit in the Emotional Bank Account. – Stephen Covey

I want you to spend three minutes right now thinking about your communication style as it relates to team building. How are your phone manners when someone is in your office? Do you make eye contact with people who are talking to you? Do you take notes--mental and physical--on what they say? How can you

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improve? Write down a plan for how to improve. Get others involved in the process of helping you.

The third skill that will help you build an effective team is recognizing individual needs. Effective team builders practice the basic truth that not everyone is the same. When looking for ways to energize your employees or to build a more effective team, make sure that your plans address one or more of eight basic human desires. According to Bob Nelson in *1001 Ways to Energize Employees*, these eight desires are activity, ownership, power, affiliation, competence, achievement, recognition, and meaning. Everyone is different and thus will be different in which desires they hold dear.

Recognizing that everyone is different, with different motivations and values, I want to learn as much about team members as possible. That is why I am such a proponent of the DISC profile, which I discuss in my book *So Many Leaders, So Little Leadership*.

This profile is a tool to understand employees and team members and to discover in part why people do the things they do. The profile isn't a test; it's a way you can start to understand how a person thinks and how they work. Just making an effort to understand where someone else is coming from will help you start to build a better team.

Is the profile perfect? No. Is it one of the simpler tools that I have found? Yes. And beyond finding a tool that we can use to understand other people, it has helped me understand myself. After I took the DISC profile in 1993 and had the results explained to me, I walked out of a meeting, I picked up a phone and resigned from a church where I was the pastor. For the first time in my life, I realized that I wasn't created to pastor a church. It wasn't a matter of intellect or desire. Getting tasks done motivates me, and being a pastor didn't allow me to see enough of my finished work to keep me happy.

I have since tried to use the DISC to help others understand who they are and who they're not. I also saw my tendency to build teams with people who were like me. That was and is a mistake. We all need a diverse team with people who can provide different perspectives and ideas, if the team is going to be effective. The DISC can help us do that.

You can access my website, www.purposequest.com, and find the DISC category under the **Leadership** heading to do more study on the DISC profile resource. You can actually take a sample profile there and generate a basic interpretative report from your answers.

III. Key Benefits from Team-Building

To keep team building from being a fad that is here today and gone tomorrow, it is essential that we understand some of the benefits to your business of a team approach to leadership and management. As I understand them, there are four major benefits.

1. Innovation

"One of the stepping stones to a world-class operation is to tap into the creative and intellectual power of each and every employee" -- Harold A. Poling, former chairman and CEO of Ford Motor Company

Authoritarian leaders usually believe that their brains are better at understanding their particular business than all other heads combined! Yet I have been surprised on more than one occasion when someone, who I thought was simple because they were quiet, came up with a great idea that added value to the business operation. That's the reason I want everyone talking at a staff meeting. I am not smart enough to know it all, and I want to create a flow of communication that doesn't only cover details, but also leaves the door open for a good idea to be presented.

Creativity and innovation are not the sole possession of upper-level management. People at every level see things from their own unique point of view. Only a fool would not take advantage of the life experience that could enable someone to make a significant contribution to the business. Many people will not share their ideas or give needed feedback because they are afraid of looking foolish, don't believe anyone will hear what they are saying, or don't recognize their good idea for what it is.

For innovation to occur, the team must be diverse. It must include, whenever possible, different ages and cultural groups. Of course, whenever possible, there should

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be men and women on the team. And it may not hurt to ask people who would like to be included on the team for a certain project. People know what they can contribute and if they proved their value to you in the past, should be given a chance to do something they would like to do.

2. Excellence

"Manufacturing excellence results from dedication to daily progress. Making something a little bit better every day." – Robert Hall professor, Indiana University

A commitment to excellence is dedication to daily progress, to making something a little better every day. Excellence cannot be mandated through slick slogans or campaigns that focus on external things. Excellence is a heart matter and people will only use their heart when they are sure it won't be trampled or ridiculed.

I used to equate excellence with perfection, but I no longer make that mistake. Now I pursue progress because I have come to see that excellence is a process not a program. If the newsletter we produce is a little bit better than the last newsletter, I am happy. It may still not be what we want it to be, but it's getting better. That's excellence.

Teams are better suited to pursue and achieve excellence because a group of people are committed and motivated from within to go beyond the norm. A leader can't order people to produce excellence; it must come from within every person. They must not only believe in the leadership, but also in the vision the leaders have put forward.

My favorite story about excellence is about Nordstrom's, a famous American department store. When you walk into a Nordstrom's, you are greeted by someone playing a grand piano. They are excellent in much of what they do.

On one occasion, I bought four dress shirts at a San Francisco Nordstrom's. As I went shopping throughout that mall, I soon realized that I had put the shirt bag down somewhere and had forgotten to pick it up. I immediately began to retrace my steps that led me back to the sales table where I purchased the shirts.

I asked the sales person whether or not anyone had turned in my lost shirts. When I explained what had happened, the sales person said, "Why don't you pick out four more shirts?"

I responded that I couldn't afford to buy four more. At that point, two other sales representatives appeared and helped me find the exact four shirts that I lost. They put

them in a bag and handed them to me and said, "No charge! Happy New Year from Nordstroms!"

Now that is excellence. They didn't have to check with their supervisor. As a sales team, they were dedicated to my satisfaction, a dedication that caused them to do something that went beyond the norm.

Guess where I have purchased every shirt for the last 15 years? And there's not a Nordstrom's within five hours of driving time from my home. I have to work hard to find a Nordstrom's, but when I do, I buy a shirt there.

How does it make you feel when you encounter something like that? How would you like to be a part of a team that's innovatively thinking of how they can make one another and their customers feel good about life? It's good business to pursue excellence. True excellence can only come from a motivated team that is determined to make every day's work a little better than the day before.

3. **Retention**

"34 % of all respondents in a national survey cited 'limited recognition' as the most common reason for leaving an employer." -- Robert Half International study.

Retention is a third benefit of team building. You keep your workers longer because they enjoy what they are doing and the people for whom they are working. An important part of worker retention is appropriate recognition for work done. Teams tend to give this recognition to people more than authoritarian leadership structures. One of ways to retain people is to recognize them.

A study of employees from 65 workplaces gave the following results:

- 58% said they have never received a personal thank you for work done;
- 76 % said they have never received a written thank you;
- 78% said they felt they have not been promoted even though their performance warranted a promotion;
- 81% said they have never gotten public praise;
- 92% said they have ***never*** encountered a morale-building meeting.

There is a business best-seller by Bob Nelson entitled, *1001 Ways to Reward Employees,* and his follow-up book, *1001 Ways to Energize Employees*. Buy these books, study them and then apply what you've learned in your own business setting. Then be creative and come up with some new ways to recognize your team members. Don't forget to ask *them* what they would enjoy receiving as recognition. After all, often you're not smart enough to know what they desire unless they tell you!

We are often afraid to give praise for fear that someone will ask for more money or some other benefit. If you are serious about team building, I say lavish people with praise! When someone does something right and I catch them doing it right, I want to bring out the trumpet. I want everyone to know.

I want my team meetings to build morale, not tear it down. The first thing I do with a team after we complete a project or event is to make a list of everything we did correctly. Along with that, we gave out applause and praise. Only then would we address what we could do better next time.

4. **Fun**

"Allow employees to deviate from policy, when warranted by the circumstances. Make every effort to accommodate flexible and nontraditional work schedules. Encourage employees to have fun at work and play." – Bob Nelson

That's right. When you do things with a team, you can have fun in business. What a novel idea! When I worked for a music company planning conferences and training events, we made sure we had fun. If possible, we would try and go to a venue a day early or stay a day late and do something enjoyable together.

I remember once the team was in Taiwan and we sent all our laundry out to be done. We sent it out separately but it came back all in one big bag. I told the team to meet me in my room in ten minutes. When we assembled, I dumped out all the laundry and we sorted it out all together, including the underwear. We still laugh about that incident when we get together.

What's more, I ended up with five articles of clothing that no one would claim. I carried it all with me throughout Asia for two weeks. When things got tense or people were tired, I would bring out those five pieces and look for the owners once again. We had fun. Teams can and should have fun.

Well, there you have it. I believe that those who can build effective teams will lead the way in the 21st century. It isn't easy to build a team and in the short-run it may appear to be more trouble than it's worth. But in the long-run, people will be happier and your business will benefit from all that the team members have to offer. May the joys and benefits of working on a team be yours in the days and years to come.