



Geeks and Geezers: How Era, Values, and Defining Moments Shape Leaders - How Tough Times Shape Good Leaders

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Adversity brings out the best in real leaders, say **Warren G. Bennis**, an HBS professor, and **Robert J. Thomas**, associate partner and senior fellow at the Accenture Institute for Strategic Change in Cambridge, Massachusetts. In this e-mail interview and excerpt from their new book, *Geeks and Geezers: How Era, Values, and Defining Moments Shape Leaders*, they explain how that works.

by Warren G. Bennis and Robert J. Thomas



Leaders create meaning out of events and relationships that devastate nonleaders. Even when battered by experience, leaders do not see themselves as helpless or find themselves paralyzed. They look at the same events that unstring those less capable and fortunate and see something useful, and often a plan of action as well. A powerful example is that of Vernon E. Jordan, civil rights pioneer and presidential advisor. In his 2001 memoir *Vernon Can Read!*, Jordan describes the vicious baiting he received as a young man from his employer, Robert F. Maddox. [6](#) Jordan served the racist former mayor of Atlanta at dinner, in a white jacket, with a napkin over his arm. He also

functioned as Maddox's chauffeur. Whenever Maddox could, he would derisively announce, "Vernon can read!" as if the literacy of a young African American were a source of wonderment. So abused, a lesser man might have allowed Maddox to destroy him. But Jordan wrote his own interpretation of Maddox's sadistic heckling, a tale that empowered Jordan instead of embittering him. When he looked at Maddox through the rear-view mirror, Jordan did not see a powerful member of Georgia's ruling class. He saw a desperate anachronism who lashed out because he knew his time was up. As Jordan writes: "I do not mean just his physical time on earth—but I believed that the 'time' that helped shape him was on its way out. His half-mocking, half-serious comments about my education were the death rattle of his culture. When he saw that I was in the process of crafting a life for myself that would make me a man in some of the same ways he thought of being a man, he was deeply unnerved."[7](#) The home in which Jordan was a servant was the crucible in which, consciously or not, Jordan imbued Maddox's cruelty with redemptive meaning. And thus are leaders made.

Nelson Mandela used his powerful character and imagination to thwart his jailers' attempts to dehumanize him. "If I had not been in prison," he told Oprah Winfrey in an interview in 2001, "I would not have been able to achieve the most difficult task in life, and that is changing yourself." Notice how Mandela made lemonade from the most bitter of lemons. He saw himself not as a passive victim—someone who was imprisoned by others—but as an individual who had been "in prison." Instead of allowing his jailers to define him, Mandela fashioned a heroic identity for himself—one that inspired millions in Africa and elsewhere and was instrumental in ending apartheid and creating a new, multicultural South Africa. For Mandela, the crucible was both an external reality and something he created in the process of imbuing it with meaning.



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Much of the leadership literature focuses on the traits or habits of leaders. In fact, every individual has a unique set of obstacles as well as assets that he or she brings to the table. Whether the bar is poverty, insecurity based on some physical attribute (Mike Wallace's teenage acne), or ethnic or racial discrimination (architect Frank Gehry was so troubled by widespread anti-Semitism that he changed the family name from Goldberg shortly before his first child was born), everybody enters the lists with a burden, a perceived reason for not succeeding. Ford Motor Company executive (and geek) Elizabeth Kao expressed the concept well when she said: "Everybody has their own wall to climb." One of the key differences between leaders and nonleaders, we found, is the ability of

leaders to transmogrify even the negatives in their lives into something that serves them. For leaders, the uses of adversity are genuinely sweet.

What makes a leader

An important part of our leadership model is what lies on the other side of the crucible—the qualities that define lifetime leaders and learners... The one key asset all our leaders share, whether young or old, is their adaptive capacity. The ability to process new experiences, to find their meaning and to integrate them into one's life, is the signature skill of leaders and, indeed, of anyone who finds ways to live fully and well. Of all our subjects, none showed greater adaptive capacity than Sidney Rittenberg. Thrown into a Chinese jail, confined in a pitch-dark cell without any explanation, Rittenberg did not rail or panic. You wonder what you would do in such dreadful circumstances, if you would be able to come out whole. Within minutes, Rittenberg recalled matter-of-factly, a stanza of verse popped into his mind, four lines read to him as a little boy:

They drew a circle that shut me out, Heretic, rebel, a thing to flout. But love and I had the wit to win. We drew a circle that took them in. [8](#)

That bit of verse (adapted from "Outwitted" by Edwin Markham) was the key to Rittenberg's survival. "My God," he thought to himself, "there's my strategy. There's my program." Evidence of the power of Rittenberg's ability to adapt and survive is Rittenberg Associates, the consulting firm that he founded and continues to run, which helps American companies do business with the Chinese. As his example so vividly reminds us, bitterness is maladaptive.

Optimism is an element of what health psychologists term *hardiness*, a rubric for the cluster of qualities that equip people for serial success. Tenacity and self-confidence are others. But leaders share less obvious assets as well. As Saul Bellow says of the character very like himself in his novel *Ravelstein*, they are all "first-class noticers." Being a first-class noticer allows you to recognize talent, identify opportunities, and avoid pitfalls. Leaders who succeed again and again are geniuses at grasping context. This is one of those characteristics, like taste, that is difficult to break down into its component parts. But the ability to weigh a welter of factors, some as subtle as how very different groups of people will interpret a gesture, is one of the hallmarks of a true leader.

One of the best ways to define good leadership is to study bad leaders.

Although we explore this approach at length in chapter 5, a single instance is instructive here: Shakespeare's tragic Roman general Coriolanus. A great warrior, a man with a strong moral compass, Coriolanus has only one flaw—his utter inability to reach out to the people of Rome and engage them in his vision. Rereading the play in the context of leadership, we couldn't help thinking of Coriolanus's mother, Volumnia, as the ancient Roman equivalent of an executive coach saddled with a particularly thickheaded client. Talk to the people, she encourages her son again and again. But Coriolanus doesn't get it. He fails to grasp the expectations of the people or how they will respond to his aloofness. He is convinced that reaching out to the populace would be a form of pandering, that it would require him to sacrifice his integrity.

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— Warren G. Bennis and Robert J. Thomas

Finally, before we conclude this overview of our leadership model, we need to say something more about one of the most exciting ideas to emerge from our research. We discovered that every one of our geezers who continues to play a leadership role has one quality of overriding importance: neoteny. The dictionary defines *neoteny*, a zoological term, as "the retention of youthful qualities by adults." Neoteny is more than retaining a youthful appearance, although that

is often part of it. Neoteny is the retention of all those wonderful qualities that we associate with youth: curiosity, playfulness, eagerness, fearlessness, warmth, energy. Unlike those defeated by time and age, our geezers have remained much like our geeks—open, willing to take risks, hungry for knowledge and experience, courageous, eager to see what the new day brings. Time and loss steal the zest from the unlucky, and leave them looking longingly at the past. Neoteny is a metaphor for the quality—the gift—that keeps the fortunate of whatever age focused on all the marvelous undiscovered things to come. Frank Gehry designs buildings that make architects half his age gasp with envy. Neoteny is what makes him lace up his skates and whirl around the ice rink, while visionary buildings come to life and dance inside his head.

Walt Disney, of all people, did a good job of describing his own neoteny. "People who have worked with me say I am 'innocence in action,' " he wrote. "They say I have the innocence and unselfconsciousness of a child. Maybe I have. I still look at the world with uncontaminated wonder."⁹

The capacity for "uncontaminated wonder," ultimately, is what distinguishes the successful from the ordinary, the happily engaged players of whatever era from the chronically disappointed and malcontent. Therein lies a lesson for geeks, geezers, and the sea of people who fall in between.

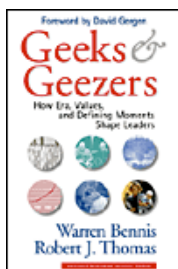
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Five Questions for Robert J. Thomas and Warren Bennis



The authors recently participated in an e-mail interview about their new book with HBS Working Knowledge senior editor Martha Lagace.

Lagace: You interviewed forty-three leaders aged twenty-one to ninety-three. The average age of the "geeks" group was twenty-eight, and the "geezers" group, seventy-seven. What were some of the main differences you discovered between the younger and the older group when they embarked on a career in business?

Thomas and Bennis: We found three big differences between geeks and geezers. But before we discuss them, it's important to highlight something embedded in your question: we were keenly interested in how era and epiphanic events influenced these leaders' worldviews at *similar* points in their lives, i.e., between the ages of 25 and 30. So, in a very real sense, we wanted to compare the effects of era on *two* groups of young people, one that was 25-30 years old in 1950 (roughly) and the other that was 25-30 years old in 2000. So, the differences:

First, geeks have bigger and more ambitious goals at age 25-30 than geezers did at a similar age...and they're impatient to achieve them. At age 30, most geezers were focused on making a living and finding a secure handhold on the American dream for themselves and their families. Geeks, on the other hand, talked about making history, literally changing the world. These ambitions were not limited to business; geeks aspire to rewrite the rules in education, medicine, and politics.

Second, geeks place far more emphasis on achieving balance in their work, family, and personal lives than did geezers at a comparable age. No issue or attitude divided geeks from geezers more dramatically than the importance of balance in their lives. Geeks don't think it will be easy to "have it all," but they aren't afraid to try. Women geeks were far more vocal than men about aspiring to a fuller life, but the desire for balance was a leitmotif in interviews

with men, as well. Geezers at a similar age were far more focused on starting a career and starting a family; balance was a topic for kitchens and bedrooms, not the workplace or the business press and certainly not in job interviews.

Finally, geeks were less likely than geezers to have heroes or obvious leadership role models. The "all-purpose heroes" of the 1940s and 1950s (e.g., F.D.R., Churchill, MacArthur) celebrated by *Time* magazine, provided geezers with strong images of what it meant to be a leader. Geeks felt flooded with celebrities but could name few public heroes; indeed, they tended to be skeptical of the concept of hero. Instead, the people geeks admire and to whom they look for behaviors to model are closer to home: parents, coaches, teachers, and mentors. The sense we got from geeks is that real heroes are the leaders who work with followers as intimate allies.

Q: What characteristics as business leaders do these two generations have in common?

A: Without exception, they thrive in unstructured settings. Business schools teach legions of graduates a basic leadership technique for such surroundings: the "OODA" loop—a continuous process of *observing*, *orienting*, *deciding*, and *acting*. But the leaders we interviewed exhibit a very different direction-setting approach when confronted by the messy or the unfamiliar—something we call "ALA" —for *act*, *learn*, and *adapt*. Our leaders experiment in order to advance knowledge. Ian Clarke, the twenty-four-year-old cofounder of the software firm Uprizer.com, describes it as constantly being on the lookout for "things you don't know you don't know."

The ability to thrive in messiness grows out of the leader's belief that she can learn from a variety of sources. Muriel Siebert, the first woman to own a seat on the New York Stock Exchange, pressures herself to see the world from many different perspectives: her own, those of her subordinates and peers, those of her customers, creditor, and regulators. Constantly putting herself in others' shoes creates a tension—an edginess—that drives her to look for previously unseen connections.

[More](#)

Q: In *Geeks and Geezers*, you discuss the importance of "era" in shaping the lives of the people you interviewed. One difference stands out: The older generation, for instance, claimed to have heroes—usually famous—who had inspired them in their youth. The younger generation, meanwhile, claimed to have personal heroes—a family member, for example. What similarities did you observe between the generations with respect to the era in which their coming-of-age has shaped them?

A: One powerful similarity stood above all others: adaptive capacity. We allude to it in response to your earlier question about characteristics the groups held in common. The ability to process new experiences, to find their meaning and to integrate them into one's life is the signature skill of leaders and indeed anyone who finds ways to live fully and well.

There were other factors as well such as developing a unique voice, an identity; a strong moral compass and belief system; and the capacity to engage others in shared meaning. But overall, we came away believing that if there was one quality that deserves to be swiped with a highlighter, it's this willingness to adapt creatively to new situations.

When we look at who becomes a leader, we see enormous variance in I.Q., birth order, family wealth, whether the family was intact, level of education, ethnicity, race, and gender, although these factors certainly cannot be dismissed entirely. But in studying both very young and older leaders, we found over and over again that much more important than a person's measured intelligence—to take just one example—was the ability to transcend the limits of adversity. And we believe that the ability to find ways to overcome those limitations is the real measure of a leader.

Adaptive capacity, which includes such critical skills as the ability to understand context and to recognize and seize opportunities, is the essential competence of leaders. And adaptive capacity, we discovered, is also the defining competence of everyone who retains his or her ability to live well despite life's inevitable changes and losses.

Q: You mention Shakespeare's *Coriolanus* as a cautionary tale in how not to lead. How so?

A: Coriolanus was Shakespeare's tragic Roman general. He felt that his "mom" wanted him to sacrifice his integrity on the altar of pandering to the public... What he didn't get was that the 5th-century B.C. Rome he had left to conquer the Tarquins had changed, changed into a modern, republican state where even the plebeian senators could vote. He failed to show up and viewed with disdain the idea that he had to court the public. Coriolanus is a brilliant example of failing in our number one quality for lifetime leadership, "Adaptive Capacity." And there are far too many examples of this identical failure taking place every day in corporate America.

Q: Given your own ages and experience, would you like to be starting your career again now, aged twenty-one? All things considered, do you feel that the younger generation will have it easier or harder than you did as they make their careers?

A: Let's set aside the question of whether we'd like to start over ... we've both had several careers in our lifetimes and we expect several more. As to your second question, it's not a matter of who has or had it easier, to be honest. The model of leadership that we propose is also a theory of adult learning and development. Finding ways to live well grows ever more important as our life expectancies increase. Although some boomers are notoriously reluctant to face it, the prospect of a longer life increases the potential for suffering as well as joy.

So, what does our model tell us about both leading and living well? Both require learning how to learn. All our geeks and geezers devised their own learning strategies, applying their creativity to finding new ones at each new stage in their lives. Dee Hock made sure he would never stop learning by refusing to be in any organization or institution that tried to blunt, control, or direct his curious mind. Sidney Harman and many of our other geezers are voracious readers and systematic collectors of interesting people, another sure way to learn.

For lifetime leaders, learning is as natural as breathing. They squeeze all they can out of every new acquaintance and encounter. They regard life's sterner, less pleasant side as a particularly instructive classroom. Another strategy our leaders use is to learn from other generations. Our geezers cultivate younger friends and unselfconsciously learn from their children and grandchildren. They also seek out wise older friends because they know that the crucibles of aging face all of us.

Our geezers understand, as we all should, that the successful old can lead the way as we deal with the inevitable challenge of finding an exciting, useful, healthful place in a culture that continues to despise and fear old age.

Q: Any other thoughts?

A: Yes. You wouldn't believe how much fun we had in this project. Every interview was an adventure, or better yet, a remarkable meal with smart, lively, and engaging partners. And the insights we pulled from one another as co-authors were extraordinary. The truth is that by the end, neither of us was sure who came up with this or that idea. And that was just fine. Great, in fact.

Footnotes

6. Vernon E. Jordan, Jr., and Annette Gordon-Reed, *Vernon Can Read! A Memoir* (New York: Public Affairs Press, 2001).

7. *Ibid.*, 9.

8. Edwin Markham, "Outwitted," in Cary Nelson, ed., *Anthology of Modern American Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

9. Dave Smith and Walt Disney, *The Quotable Walt Disney* (New York: Hyperion, 2001).