

Managing People is Like Herding Cats by Warren Bennis

Book Review by Mike Taigman

Occasionally the title of a book whispers in my ear, “this was written just for you.” Before I even opened the cover, *Managing People is Like Herding Cats* it was clear to me that this book was written for those of us who run ambulance companies. If you think that this book doesn’t apply to your shop then one of three situations probably exists: 1) You don’t work in an ambulance company, you picked this magazine up in your dentist’s office because it looked more interesting than Bleeding Gums Quarterly. 2) You have never been around cats. 3) You regularly engage in what the psychologists refer to as, “magical thinking.” For the rest of us, this book is funny, brilliant, irreverent, and right on target.

The author, Warren Bennis, probably knows more about leadership than anyone on the planet. He has been studying, teaching, and writing about leaders since before World War II. His ability to challenge the status quo, force you to see old issues with new eyes, and help you enjoy the process is unparalleled.

In his chapter *The Leadership Crisis*, he says, “Our need for true leaders goes unspoken, but it manifests itself in pathetic ways as in our idolatry of show business stars, our admiration for corporate kings, and our instant elevation of McHeros such as Ollie North. We didn’t much like what he did, but we loved the way he did it.”

The recent popularity of instant leadership courses is another symptom of this fundamental need. The courses themselves demonstrate our confusion about what constitutes leadership. Some claim it derives automatically from power. Others say it’s mere mechanics a thorough comprehension of the nature of organizations. Some say that leaders are born, while others argue that they can be made, and according to the microwave theory, made instantly. Pop in Mr. or Ms. Average, and out pops another McLeader in sixty seconds.”

When he discusses traits of a leader he says, “By dedication, I mean a passionate belief in something. This sort of intense and abiding commitment is the basis for great works of art, inventions, scientific discoveries, explorations, and lives. It is what makes marriages, corporations, and governments work. Indeed, absolute fidelity to someone or something makes us more fully human.” He also believe that leaders must display openness, “I mean a willingness to try new things and hear new ideas, however bizarre, a tolerance for ambiguity and change, and rejection of any and all preconceived prejudices, biases, and stereotypes.”

Bennis is legendary for differentiating management from leadership. Here is his current list:

- The manager administers; the leaders innovates.
- The manager is a copy; the leader is an original.
- The manager maintains; the leader develops.
- The manager relies on control; the leader inspires trust.
- The manager has a short-range view; the leader has a long range perspective.
- The manager asks how and when; the leader asks what and why.
- The manager has his or her eye on the bottom line; the leader has his or her eye on the horizon.
- The manager accepts the status quo; the leader challenges it.
- The manager is the classic good soldier; the leader is his or her own person.

- The manager does things right; the leader does the right thing.

This short book is jam-packed with great concepts. The ten traits of effective leaders is worth the price of the book alone. If you've ever felt that running your organization was like "Herding cats" or "Keeping all the puppies in the box" or for you zen followers "putting a live snake down a straight tube" then this book is for you.