

# LEADERSHIP Excellence

Warren Bennis



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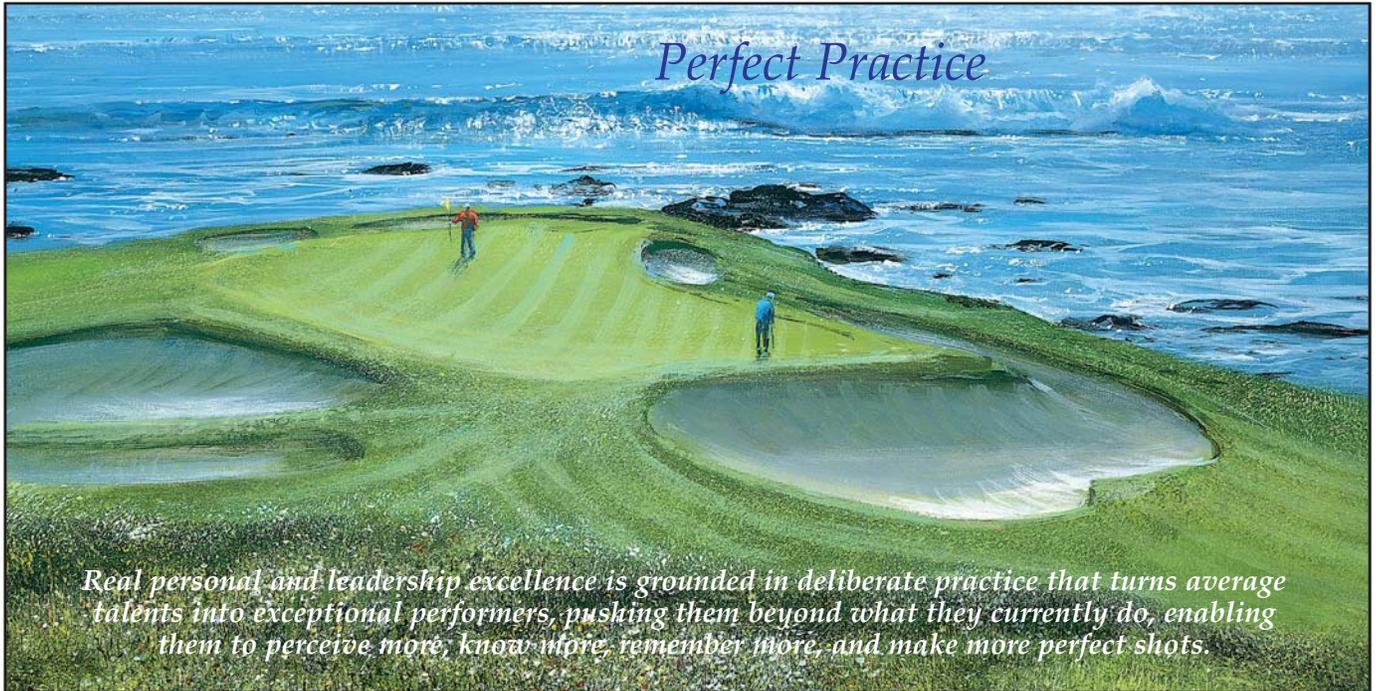
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*Real personal and leadership excellence is grounded in deliberate practice that turns average talents into exceptional performers, pushing them beyond what they currently do, enabling them to perceive more, know more, remember more, and make more perfect shots.*

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# Leaders as Coaches

Go back to leadership basics.



by Bob Schwieterman

**I**MARVEL AT HOW QUICKLY “new concepts” can take industries and professional disciplines by storm. In many cases, the new concepts are the same old concepts but with new packaging and terminology for something we should have been doing all along.

The art of coaching is one such concept. Teaching leaders and managers how to coach is now considered the missing link to improving performance. And while I’m a strong supporter of coaching, it is not new and not a silver bullet.

Recipients also think that coaching is worthwhile: 90 percent of those who receive coaching report it to be *some-what* or *very valuable*. The coaching paradigm is moving from an as-needed basis to regular meetings, and becoming an integral part of leadership development programs rather than a short-term tool to solve conflict.

We now need to get leaders to focus on the basics that seem to get overlooked with glitzy approaches and techniques. When facilitating coaching skills workshops, I tell participants that effective coaches are focused on having an ongoing dialogue with staff, creating intimate one-on-one relationships that demonstrate understanding of needs and wants, issues and concerns, and providing support to achieving goals.

Simple, right? But what skills make leaders good coaches of staff? Our work with thousands of managers has identified the ability to work productively with others—what we call Versatility—as the key element of work performance including coaching.

## Four Fundamental Skills

In my experience with clients, I see four fundamental skills that effective leaders use when coaching staff:

1. **Advocacy** is sharing your thoughts, experiences, facts, and feelings that support your viewpoint.

2. **Inquiry** involves asking effective and genuine questions to discover and develop an understanding of a staff

member’s point of view.

3. **Listening** is showing authentic understanding following your Inquiry.

4. **Feedback** is providing clear and direct messages about the impact of your staff member’s behavior.

In coaching workshops, we learn about and practice these skills one by one using unique exercises. Most participants say that they’ve been taught these skills before, but they have great difficulty putting them consistently into practice. I ask them, “What is preventing you from demonstrating these basic skills in every conversation you have with staff members?” Their answer: “a lack of time and patience.”

**I often hear one simple example.** A manager will often take a phone call or glance at email while having a conversation with a staff member, which tells the staff member that the issue he or she is discussing at that moment is at best equally important to the email the manager is reviewing. Managers justify this by saying they are pressed for time and need to multi-task. But according to MIT researchers, multi-tasking is a myth. In reality, you are just focusing your attention on one

thing and switching it to another quickly, and at the same time, you are sending a clear message to the other person that you are not authentically listening.

**I believe there is a simple rule for coaching:** if you are not ready to devote your attention to your staff member, it is better to say that and postpone the con-

versation until you can. If the issue is urgent and needs immediate discussion, postponement might not be an option. But usually, the staff member will appreciate your honesty and that you want to be focused during the conversation when it finally takes place.

## Hone the Basic Skills

Using the coaching skills associated with Versatility impacts the outcomes leaders seek to achieve through coaching. In our research, managerial performance indicators such as *ability to effectively coach others, communicating with others, and establishing effective relationships* are highly correlated with Versatility. When things aren’t working, go back to coaching basics—*advocacy, inquiry, listening and feedback.* **LE**

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**ACTION: Improve your coaching skills.**