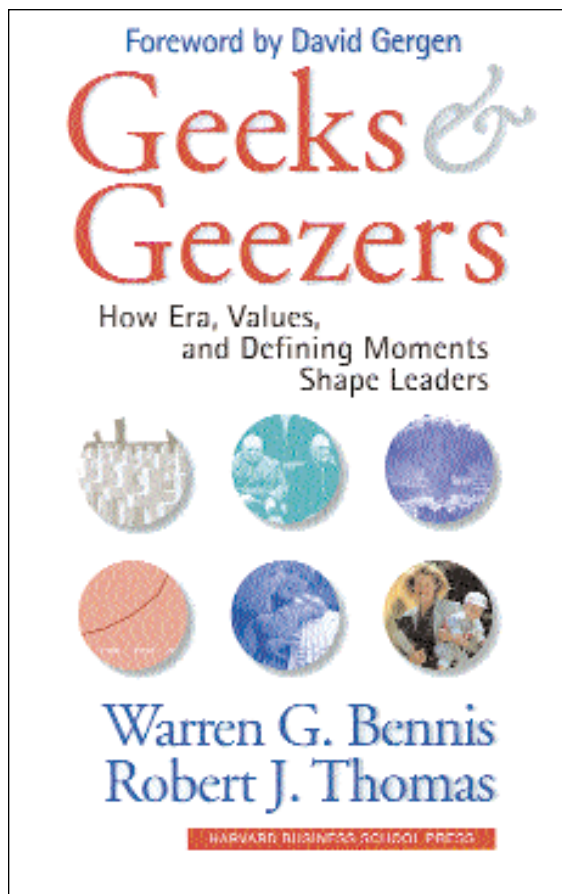


# BOOKS



## Geeks & Geezers

### How Era, Values, and Defining Moments Shape Leaders

By Warren G. Bennis and  
Robert J. Thomas

Reviewed by Patricia A. Galagan

Any book by Warren Bennis promises a good read. He publishes frequently, and you can look forward to his books on leadership and organizations as you might the next novel from John Updike. Bennis is one of the most graceful, literate, and insightful writers of his generation. And his generation is part of the subject of this new book, *Geeks & Geezers: How Era, Values, and Defining Moments Shape Leaders*. With co-author, Robert J. Thomas, a sociologist and former MIT professor now a partner with Accenture, Bennis has produced an insightful look at leadership from the poles of two generations.

Bennis wanted to explore what motivates and moves the young, and understand what he calls his “fellow geezers,” leaders 70 and older. The geeks in the book, 35 and younger, had all achieved something outstanding at an early age and could articulate their experiences. Many, from the dot.com world, had grown up “virtual, visual, and digital.”

From hours of interviews with 43 leaders, Bennis and Thomas extracted a theory of leadership: that our era—the time and place that shape us—plays a significant part in who we become. People shaped in the same era have a shared his-

# ON THE NIGHT STAND

By John Buschiazzo



I should begin by saying that I don't have any books on my nightstand. The reason is that my wife has custody of the nightstand (and the alarm clock, thank goodness).

But I do have a short stack of books lying around that I'm reading.

Currently I'm enthralled by Patrick Lencioni's *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team: A Leadership Fable*. I'm usually put off by books that assign numeric values to subjective concepts, but I find myself caring deeply about this fictitious team. Rather than offer a mundane list with a clinical examination of the impact on teams, Lencioni gets at the essence of why teams struggle. The vivid portrayal of a team and organization in crisis allows him to allude to a model for building a cohesive team.

What do Mikhail Gorbachev and Norman Lear have in common? Both are featured in *Working Together: Diversity as Opportunity*, edited by Angeles Arrien. Diversity is embraced as an advantage, not a challenge to overcome. When utilized fully, it can create vast possibilities in all facets of our lives.

I also find myself drawn to Johnston and Smith's *Life Is Not Work, Work Is Not Life: Simple Reminders for Finding Balance in a 24/7 World*. This collection of short essays helps me to stay grounded by reminding me that balance between work and life is an achievable reality.

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tory and culture that influence their thinking and behavior. Geeks and geezers differ, for example, on the value of experience. For a geezer, it's a point of pride; to a geek, experience is something that fetters the creative mind. But both groups have a common wish to transcend personal and institutional limits. The geeks and geezers in the book all had "a remarkable adaptive capacity" for analyzing their life experiences to find meaning and to integrate their experiences into their lives.

Bennis and Thomas also name the transformational experiences that enable leadership ability to emerge. The authors call those experiences *crucibles*. They can be terrible, such as a war, or benign, such as a mentor-protégée relationship. Leaders survive their crucibles and create positive meaning out of them. The authors say war is a common crucible for men. The book was published before it was time to ask whether the war with Iraq will be the crucible for a new generation of leaders.

Another idea to emerge from the authors' research is that geezers who continue to play a leadership role have the quality of *neoteny*, a zoological term meaning the retention of youthful qualities by adults. People who are neoteric retain their youthful curiosity, playfulness, eagerness, fearlessness, warmth, and energy. They have the ability to continue learning.

The book is full of engaging examples of leaders, including some you may not have encountered in a leadership book. One is Coriolanus, Shakespeare's

tragic Roman general who couldn't reach out to the people of Rome and engage them in his vision.

There are also revealing demographic tidbits. In a list of geezer's favorite fiction, works by Graham Greene, a chronicler of Catholic guilt, figures prominently; 87 percent of their mothers were homemakers exclusively; and their youth occurred in an era of limits. Geezers tend to be hard-working, and they work to make a living, not to find themselves.

Here's geezer Robert Crandall, the retired chairman of the board of American Airlines: "I was trying to achieve a particular goal. I didn't play golf. I didn't take much time off.... Now you read a lot about balance. That's all well and good. But people who worry about balance have no overriding passion to achieve leadership."

For an engaging look at diversity of thought and action represented by different generations of leaders, you won't do better than this book.

*Geeks & Geezers: How Era, Values, and Defining Moments Shape Leaders* by Warren G. Bennis and Robert J. Thomas. Boston: Harvard Business School Press. 224 pp. US\$26.95

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