Book Review

Geeks & Geezers: How Era, Values, and Defining Moments Shape Leaders
by Warren G. Bennis and Robert J. Thomas

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Geeks & Geezers: How Era, Values, and Defining Moments Shape Leaders - the title makes you chuckle; the stories behind the subtitle fascinate you. Bennis and Thomas have developed a new theory of what makes a leader, and this book supports it through personal interviews with forty three people: the geeks (not all of whom work in technology) are under the age of thirty-five, and the geezers, all over age seventy. The authors also cite further evidence for their theory in the public lives and careers of numerous others.

Past studies of leadership often emphasized the importance of age and maturity; Bennis and Thomas initially believed that one's era was a primary influence on leadership. The book begins, in fact, by demonstrating that era determines everything from the heroes people admire, to the books they read, to the worries that occupied them at age twenty-five. But through their interviews with geeks and geezers, the authors discovered that the phenomena of an era play only one part in developing leadership qualities. These phenomena feed into a personal "crucible," a critical experience (or set of experiences) that future leaders draw upon to organize meaning and develop core leadership competencies.

Lest you think that the geezers, with the life-changing experiences they garnered from World War II through the period of the Civil Rights Movement, have an unfair advantage, this book provides evidence that a leader's crucible need not be a dangerous or world-changing event. Very private experiences, from climbing a mountain, to going back to school, to being mentored by a grandfather, can have an impact as significant as that of fighting a battle, being imprisoned in China for sixteen years, or suffering the death of a child. What is important is not the crucible itself, but how the event changes the life of the person experiencing it, be it a geek or a geezer.
Core Leadership Competencies

Additional elements that interact with critical experiences and life lessons to form one's personal crucible are what Bennis and Thomas call core leadership competencies. Of the four competencies they define, they give primacy to **adaptive capacity** -- an ability to "transcend adversity, with all its attendant stresses, and to emerge stronger than before." The other three core competencies are: an ability to share your vision with others; a distinctive and compelling sense of conviction, or voice; and a sense of integrity, including a strong set of values (not necessarily religious). Although other skills are often invaluable -- where would Steve Jobs be without technological brilliance -- these four competencies were present in all the geeks and geezers the authors interviewed.

It is unfortunate that after this book was published, Jack Welch -- whom the authors frequently cite for his stellar adaptive capacity, vision, conviction, and integrity -- was brought so low. His public problems lend a discordant note to the book's otherwise very convincing arguments. Perhaps Welch's "fall from grace" reinforces something the authors note clearly in the discussion: While the geezers admired world leaders from Roosevelt, to Gandhi, to Martin Luther King, Jr., geeks had trouble identifying personal heroes. When pushed, they most frequently named parents or teachers. In this age of information, problems that might have remained hidden from public view in the past are now visible to all, and the case of Jack Welch reminds us that even the most compelling leaders are not perfect.

Are You a Leader?

So why read *Geeks and Geezers*? And who should read it? I am the parent of a geek and the child of a geezer. For me, this book provided insight into both generations. I found myself absorbing the descriptions of the two eras and then providing the transition between them, based on my own experience. What did I read, who were my heroes, and what were my concerns at age twenty-five? Inevitably, I began assessing my own life and character within the framework of the authors' model. Am I a leader? If so, then what was my crucible? How do I measure up in terms of adaptive capacity, vision, conviction, and integrity?

As you can see, I got a lot from reading this well-written, thought-provoking volume. It provides plenty of anecdotes and stories to leaven the more theoretical and philosophical details of the model. This isn't a technical book. It won't improve your ability to develop requirements or manage the software process. What it does do is allow you to step back from the details of your daily work and look at yourself -- at how you are developing as a leader. It helps you see what you need to go beyond today as well as how to avoid the pitfalls and traps that face potential leaders. Although it isn't a self-help book, it does provide life-lessons that, if you absorb them, may change the way you handle yourself in future leadership situations.

-Erica Kolatch
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