



## Geeks and Geezers

Notes by Frumi Rachel Barr, MBA, PhD

**Author:** Warren G. Bennis and Robert J. Thomas

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**Foreword by:** David Gergen introduces and reinforces the concept of a crucible being central to the development of leaders. If a person can not only survive but create positive meaning out of such experiences, she or he can grow into a durable, effective leader.

**Author bio and credits:** Warren Bennis is Professor and Founding Chairman of The leadership Institute at USC, the author of 27 books on leadership and change, and a Pulitzer nominee.

Robert J. Thomas is an Associate partner and Senior Fellow with the Accenture Institute for Strategic Change and the award-winning author of *What Machines Can't Do*.

**Author's Big Thought:** This book is about leadership and learning and about the process by which some people succeed again and again. It grapples with such compelling questions as why some people are able to extract wisdom from experience, however harsh, and others are not.

Geeks and geezers goes beyond personal revelations to postulate a theory of leadership. The authors believe they have developed a theory that describes how leaders come to be. They have identified the process that allows an individual to undergo testing and to emerge, not just stronger, but equipped with tools needed to both lead and learn. It is a model, that explains how individuals make meaning out of often difficult events they call crucibles, and how that process of meaning-making both galvanizes individuals and gives them their distinctive voice.

### **A few supporting ideas:**

Geeks are 35 and under, the cohort born around 1970. They are the first generation to have grown up virtual, visual and digital. The geeks who were chosen to be interviewed are men and women who have led or built organizations. Geezers are all over 70 and over. Some are retired, but most continue to lead major corporations or other successful organizations.

### Era- Based Differences

Era was found to leave its imprint on an entire generation, who tend to share everything from worldviews to common taste in footwear. A handful of pronounced era-related differences were found between geeks and geezers.

#### Main Differences:

##### Careers:

Geezers saw a conventional career path, followed for a time if not forever

Geeks tended to see their careers as adventures, fashioned for themselves, usually in collaboration with their peers, that they were willing to abandon if the current one failed.

##### Balancing personal life and work:

Most Geezers were workaholics, leaving family issues to their wives. They were clearly torn between ambition and the desire for a fulfilling personal and even spiritual life.

Geeks are more confident of meeting their survival needs and are not content to work to the exclusion of everything else.

##### Attitude toward heroes:

Geezers cited world-renowned leaders as their heroes: like FDR and Churchill

Geeks were seen for the most part as not having heroes – mostly they cited their parents as their heroes.

#### Main Commonalities:

Both generations were able to thrive in complex, ambiguous situations

Geeks, who came of age in an era of relentlessly accelerating change continuously face new tests.

Many of the geezers interviewed, having enjoyed predictable and conventional success, later became risk takers.

Whatever his or her generation, each leader was the author and critic of his/her own life. Each person had crafted a resonant story out of the important events and relationships in his/her life. To a person, the leaders felt that the insights they had won justified whatever hardships they had endured. In every case, they learned and they grew.

The goal of the authors was to discover how leadership develops and how it is sustained: they felt that existing theories of leadership based on personality traits and situational explanations didn't account for all the data. They didn't explain the dynamic process they saw again and again, in which era, individual factors, and certain key competencies- adaptive capacity above all, but also the ability to engage others through shared meaning, voice and integrity – coalesced around a critical experience or event to transform the individual.

The authors propose a new theory of how leaders are made. This theory both describes and predicts who is likely to become and remain a leader, and describes the parallel process whereby individuals become lifetime learners. At the heart of the new theory is that each of the autobiographical stories had at its core, a crucible, the term used to include the wide range of transformational events that their leaders experienced. Every crucible is/was an incubator for new insights, ideas, and conceptions of one's self. Whatever the crucible experience was, going into battle, immersion in another culture, being mentored, overcoming fears – the individual created a narrative around it. A story emerged of

how he/she was challenged, met that challenge, and became a new and better self. Often the story was inspirational to engage followers. Virtually everyone was about the education of the narrator. Learning how to learn may be the single greatest gift that leaders took away from their crucibles. When their learning how to learn was combined with their creativity, these leaders were unstoppable.

Geeks and geezer leaders enrolled others in their enthusiasm. They had an aura and energy about them. Openness to experience, a mischievous smile and a contagious laugh as well as wit, resilience, curiosity, and tirelessness. They had an almost palpable hunger for experience and an incapacity for bored detachment. The authors referred to this quality as “neoteny”.

The model for leadership proposed is also a theory of adult learning and development. Both leading and living well require learning how to learn. Everything their leaders learn get added to their tool kits. They also learn from other generations. Building and maintaining networks across generations, organizations and cultures is a way to learn continuously and to leverage the insights of people who have a genuine interest in your growth and success.

**Reviewer's recommendation:** Warren Bennis has written some of the most significant books about leadership. This one is a wonderful addition since it compares and contrasts two such different age

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**About the reviewer: Frumi Rachel Barr, MBA, PhD**

Many CEO's find themselves asking “What now?” to sensitive situations that only an experienced former CEO can understand. Frumi is brought in to solve problems and often remains to work with you, as your confidante and secret weapon. She has an uncanny knack of getting to the heart of your corporate climate and maximizing your team’s performance, profitability and sustainability.

To schedule a free ***Break From the Pack to Success*** consultation email

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