

# LEADERSHIP *Warren Bennis* Excellence



THE MAGAZINE OF LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT, MANAGERIAL EFFECTIVENESS, AND ORGANIZATIONAL PRODUCTIVITY

DECEMBER 2009

**Lead Yourself**

**Leadership Insights**

**Revolutionary Thinking**

**New Breed of Leader**

**Sheila Murray Bethel**  
Leadership Consultant



*"Leadership Excellence is an exceptional way to learn and then apply the best and latest ideas in the field of leadership."*

—WARREN BENNIS, AUTHOR AND USC PROFESSOR OF MANAGEMENT

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## Fox Guarding the Henhouse

Alas, in the legend and lore of so-called leadership we commonly hear of foxes (folks in positions of responsibility) allegedly guarding the henhouses they intend to bilk, raid, pillage and plunder. Hence, we again plea for authentic leaders.

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## Authentic Leadership

*It's the new leadership challenge.*



by Tony Tiernan

**C**RISES GIVE LEADERS A mandate to drop the distractions and irrelevancies, and re-focus on the core task: to make meaning. That is a great gift.

**Meaning is value.** Often we define *value* only in financial terms or, even more narrowly, in terms of the return we deliver to shareholders. That narrow definition drives two key distortions in our behavior as leaders. First, it can cause us to violate the value-creating identity of our organizations as we scramble to maximize short-term returns, or modify business strategy with each swing of the stock market.

Second, it can lead us to think in terms of “human capital” instead of human beings. We can deploy the former, but we have to lead the latter.

Organizations are crucibles in which we forge and find meaning. People experience meaning—and are moved to action—as social beings, not as cogs in a *system of inputs and outputs*.

Given meaning, people can—and often do—work magic. So if we want our people to be extraordinary, to transform our organizations, to redouble their efforts and increase their commitment in tough times, we need to give them meaning.

You do that by uncovering and operationalizing your unique value-creating identity. And it requires a new kind of leader—the authentic leader.

**What is authentic leadership?** AL is about your ability to build and effectively communicate *organizational identity*—a shared understanding of who you are, the difference you’re trying to make, and the unique value you create. If you lose your sense of self, you lose the power to create meaning—the force that attracts and binds the right people (and right customers) to you.

**What is identity?** Identity is the sum of *what the organization does* (problems it solves and needs it addresses) and the *way it operates* (meaning and purpose that drive the business, the difference it seeks to make, its relationships with customers and employees, and the

value it delivers). By uncovering that unique value-creating identity, helping your people to find themselves in it, and showing them (by storytelling and example) how to use it to make decisions and guide behavior, you help them connect their individual stories with the organizational narrative. *You make meaning.* And that makes authentic the story that you tell to the world.

**Why does identity matter?** A strong sense of identity and purpose enables focus. For many leaders, particularly those in professional services companies where the “product” is the people—and the brand is communicated through their interactions in the marketplace—identity serves as the guiding compass that keeps the company on track, its talent on board, and its clients bound to the organization.

Companies that struggle most during a recession are those with blurred identities—or unclear expertise. If you use the recession to demonstrate what your company stands for, you’ll find that, when recovery comes, you’ve built a magnet that attracts the *right* clients and *right* employees. *Identity*—built, communicated, and sustained through

AL—is key to creating long-term results.

When evaluating the authenticity of *your leadership*, ask four questions:

**Do you really know your business?** Beyond knowing the goods or services, you must know the *difference* you want to make, the *meaning* you stand for, the *values and beliefs* that guide

you, and *stories* you want told about you.

**Is your identity entrenched in your core business processes?** Knowing your identity is not enough. You must operationalize your identity to guide how you develop customers, talent and ideas.

**Does your culture support your identity?** Identity goes beyond providing a strategic focus—it is what keeps your policies and ways of treating people unwavering, even in tough times.

**Do you clearly communicate your identity?** You must effectively deliver meaning to the marketplace, or the meaning is lost. Your identity should be evident in behavior, and translated into compelling *benefits-based messages*.

Leadership is about creating meaning—a strong identity that keeps an organization focused, its expertise current, and its offering relevant. **LE**

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**ACTION:** Create meaning and identity.

