



## How Leaders Collaborate

USC Professor Warren Bennis in conversation with Lear Center Director Martin Kaplan, about great groups, interdisciplinary & creativity



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### WARREN BENNIS ON HOW LEADERS COLLABORATE

A pioneer in the study of collaboration across disciplines, organizations and sectors, Warren Bennis has first-hand knowledge of legendary teams and what makes them tick. Here, he shares some of what he's learned about successful groups in a conversation with Martin Kaplan, Director of the USC Annenberg School's Norman Lear Center. The event was part of the Creativity & Collaboration in the Academy Initiative.

A video of the program can be watched in its entirety online at:  
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## PARTICIPANTS

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**WARREN BENNIS, PHD** is university professor and founding chairman of the Leadership Institute at the University of Southern California. He is also chairman of the Center for Public Leadership at Harvard's Kennedy School and Distinguished Research Fellow at the Harvard Business School. He has written more than twenty-five books on leadership, change, and creative collaboration including *Leaders*, which was recently designated by the Financial Times as one of the top 50 business books of all time. His most recent book is *Geeks & Geezers*.



**MARTIN KAPLAN, PhD** is the Lear Center founding director Martin Kaplan, a former associate dean of the USC Annenberg School, holds the Norman Lear Chair in Entertainment, Media and Society. A summa cum laude graduate of Harvard in molecular biology, a Marshall Scholar in English at Cambridge University, and a Stanford PhD in modern thought and literature, he was Vice President Walter Mondale's chief speechwriter and deputy presidential campaign manager. He has been a Disney Studios vice president of motion picture production, a film and television writer and producer, a radio host, print columnist and blogger.

## HOW LEADERS COLLABORATE



**Martin Kaplan:** Good afternoon. Thanks for coming. We're going to have a great time because we have a great person to have that time with.

The conversation today is part of a larger project. You can see the advertising for it up there. It's called Creativity and Collaboration in the Academy, and it's under the leadership of the Vice President of Research for USC. The challenge is how does USC maintain and increase its edge in research, especially in a time when collaboration and interdisciplinarity seem to be essential to everything? How do we encourage that? What are the barriers between us and that?

So we've been doing workshops and conferences and talks, and today it's a special pleasure for me to have this really delicious opportunity to talk about it with somebody whose name is associated with the idea of collaboration and leadership. He is a USC University Professor. He is a Distinguished Professor of Management and Organization. The list of articles and books he's written is a mile long. He is a beloved teacher. I know a bunch of your students are here today. And he essentially created the field of leadership studies.

In Japan, they have a category called Living National Treasure, and that is the title I would like to afford him. I'm also happy to say that we've been friends for more than 30 years. Please welcome Warren Bennis.

[Applause]

As you all were sitting down, there was some music, if you noticed. It's not often that we have music at the beginning of events. This is

a song that Warren asked that we play, and so I'd like to start by asking you what is it?

**Warren Bennis:** Well, many of you may know the work of Stephen Sondheim. I'm a groupie. If there's anyone I would do anything to meet, it's Sondheim. I once wrote him a crush letter. He never responded. He's brilliant in his lyrics and in his music. The song, called "It Takes Two," was from the musical *Into The Woods*.

[Singing] "It takes two, it takes two," da da da dah. I won't try it. Marty said, "Please, Warren, do not try to sing it."

[Laughter]

I will just give you the words because it's so fundamental to the idea of collaboration and partnership of any kind. "It takes trust. It takes just a bit more, and we're done. We want four, we had none. We've got three. We need one, it takes two." That's the last verse.

Now my son is working in Prague with a firm whose logo is, "Working alone sucks, so let's talk."

One more thing. Looking around, I see so many of my students and old friends. Coming up on the elevator with me was one of my first students. I looked at him today and said, "Oh, my god, you're a grown-up now." He's an executive at Medtronic. Anyway, thank you. That really moves me. Thank you for coming, all of you.

**Marty Kaplan:** Everyone is happy to be here, to celebrate you and to continue to learn from you.

I'm going to be quoting today from some of Warren's work. If you don't know *The Essential Bennis*, it's a great anthology, and it also includes at least one chapter from a book which was published as *Organizing Genius, the Secrets of Creative Collaboration*, although the original title was *Great Groups*.

And so I'm going to be quoting from this stuff as a way of raising some mileposts in your looking at these issues.

I'll start with your essay called "The End of Leadership."

You wrote, "Today's post-bureaucratic organizations are evolving into federations, networks, clusters, cross-functional teams, temporary systems, ad hoc task forces, lattices, modules, matrices, almost anything but pyramids with their obsolete top-down leadership."

So how come?

**Warren Bennis:** I'm glad you started with that because it reveals my optimism, in general. Alas, bureaucracies still exist. I think, though, that there's been a very gradual movement toward more connectivity, and the conventional wisdom among the brightest, most exemplary leaders I know is to try to get that connectivity.

So there's a tendency at least to talk the language of this, but often, it's still the same old, Weberian bureaucracy. You know, I wrote an article at least 60 years ago called "The End of Bureaucracy." Well, it is not. I think it's moving towards that, though.

So, here, at USC, for example, when I first looked at that title, Creativity and Collaboration in the Academy, I thought, that's an interesting oxymoron because I do not think we have the kind of collegiality which is the foundation of collaboration.

Yes, we talk about collegiality, but then I think about my office now; it's in a row of offices and they didn't really consider the ecology of relationships in the design. It would be so easy, structurally, to design a better, more open layout, but instead you have closed doors and empty offices much of the time.

We have a long way to go. We're in no position to boast about our own collaborative endeavors.

“*American society is based on the idea of the individual, based on the principle of the individual's right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.*”

Warren Bennis

**Marty Kaplan:** At another point in that essay, you say, "Most non-trivial problems require collective solutions."

**Warren Bennis:** Yes. I believe that more now than when I wrote it.

**Marty Kaplan:** If most non-trivial problems require collective solutions, there are barriers to achieving that that you touch on, and I wanted to mention some of them.

You say, "We resist the idea of collective creativity. We cling to the myth of the Lone Ranger, the romantic idea that great things are usually accomplished by a larger-than-life leader working alone."

**Warren Bennis:** I'm glad you brought that up. I suspect when you think of Cubism, you think of Picasso. We leave out Georges Braque who worked with Picasso for seven years to create Cubism. When we think of the Sistine Chapel, we think of whom? Michelangelo. We don't think of the 13 assistants and 200 people who also worked on it. There's something heroic about the solitary figure.

And American society is based on the idea of the individual, based on the principle of the individual's right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

When I was a kid and went to the movies, I loved John Wayne. Think about him. There's something about him that still is appealing: "Saddle up!"

And consider that one of the top best-selling magazines in this country is *People*. Imagine a magazine called *System* or *Group* as a best-selling magazine. *Group*. Not sexy. The reality is not sexy. Yet the reality is working with others. The reality is knowing you cannot do this without someone else helping you. I cannot teach the course I'm teaching with Dr. Steve Sample without him, and I know he knows he can't do it without me.



I mean even Sondheim, brilliant as he is, needs a librettist to structure and help him shape a musical.

**Marty Kaplan:** When you write about the reasons that we cling to the Lone Ranger mythology, you say this. “Despite the rhetoric of collaboration, we continue to live in a by-line culture, where recognition and status are conferred on individuals, not teams of people, who make change possible.

**Warren Bennis:** Okay. Is there anyone in the crowd – raise your hand, please – who sits on a tenure committee?

**Marty Kaplan:** Who will admit it?

**Warren Bennis:** What do we do when we evaluate candidates for tenure? Who is the first to author? That counts. But if you’re a second and third author, it’s another category. It doesn’t count as much.

And look at whom we remember as writing op-ed columns and news stories with several authors? It’s always the lead person we’re familiar with. Why is it we don’t pay attention to the duo?

USC has now embarked on interdisciplinarity – I pushed it for years when I was a university administrator – and we’re doing our best.



If you look at our incoming faculty, more and more, they’re widening the hyphen. I’ve got a colleague who’s a computational-biologist. More and more, we’re hyphenated. That’s what I meant by widening the hyphen.

Marty should be called professor of cellular biology and comp lit, no kidding. Your Harvard BA was in – ?

**Marty Kaplan:** Molecular biology.

**Warren Bennis:** And Stanford Ph.D. in?

**Marty Kaplan:** Modern Thought and Literature.

**Warren Bennis:** Modern Thought and Literature. Great. More people embody this ideal now. Dr. Nikias and Provost Garrett are pushing in this direction, talking about hiring transformational faculty, though I’m a little ambivalent about that.

**Marty Kaplan:** As a term or a goal?

**Warren Bennis:** Well, I wonder if it makes people who are already here wonder if they’re transformational.

**Marty Kaplan:** They’re pre-transformational.

**Warren Bennis:** Am I transformational or not? I don’t know. I agree with what they’re after, honestly. However, I don’t think we should just go after the superstars. I think the people we recruit should not only be very, very good but they must also enjoy working with others.

I don’t want them to hire a bunch of Nobel geniuses. Here’s why: At Berkeley, they have a parking lot for Nobel Laureates. Did you know that?

**Marty Kaplan:** No, I didn’t know that. They don’t get a restroom, do they?

**Warren Bennis:** I don’t know. But the parking lot is more important in a university than a restroom.

So a friend of mine was visiting and reviewing college campuses with their child. And they got to Berkeley and met very impressive individuals, but you know what? The parking lot for Nobel Laureates was empty. What does that say? They’re not teaching. They’re not there.

We want people who are not just terrific but really want to work

**“** *I think the people we recruit should not only be very, very good but they must also enjoy working with others.* **”**

Warren Bennis

with others. That's transformational, not just being brilliant, but also being collaborative.

Here's a story: Robert Zemeckis, the Academy Award-winning director, visits here almost every year. And this time, a student asked him, "What is your favorite movie?" Well, his answer was marvelous. He said, *Forrest Gump*. And the student said, "Well, why *Forrest Gump*, aside from its sales and all that?" And Zemeckis said, "Because we were all making the same movie." And he listed the caterers, the lighting people, the dolly grips, and 20 different people involved in making the movie. "We were all making the same movie." But is there an Academy Award for best ensemble?

I mean, if you've seen *Moneyball*, as I hope you all will, there were some great ensemble scenes between Jonah Hill and Brad Pitt.

I'd never heard of Jonah Hill, but their duets together, their ensemble work, when Brad Pitt was explaining to Jonah how you fire people, back and forth, it reminds me we don't have an Academy Award for ensemble acting, only supporting and leading.

That's an example of the enshrinement still. And I think what's wrong about it is that Jonah Hill made Brad Pitt as good as he could be, and Brad Pitt made Jonah Hill as good as he could be.

**Marty Kaplan:** There are some paradoxes in creative collaboration. I want to mention a few that you mentioned, to talk about them. One of them, you said, "Every great group has a strong leader." How can that be? How can a non-hierarchical organization have a head?

**Warren Bennis:** I thought a lot about that with respect to Steve Jobs. Here's a guy who has not created on the face of it the culture of listening, the culture of germinating, and yet, in a way, he's the good example. He embodies the paradox. How come?

In so many ways, Jobs is contrary to all the exemplary leaders I've

written about who were collaborative most of the time. But maybe the answer is in two of Jobs' phrases: "We're doing something not just great but insanely great" and "Think different." And there's a joke that goes, "How many Apple workers does it take to change a bulb?"

"One. The other five are designing a new and more beautiful light bulb." So he fostered an inventive culture, I guess.

**Marty Kaplan:** On that vein, you wrote, "Being an amiable person or even a pleasant one isn't a prerequisite for membership in a great group. Ordinary affability may be no virtue." Richard Feynman was infamous for telling his colleagues that one or another of their ideas was stupid, and from the Steve Jobs obituaries, in terms of what he told his people, stupid would be kind.

**Warren Bennis:** Yeah. You can't see it in the back row, but I'm shrugging my shoulders with the paradox.

**Marty Kaplan:** Another paradox. You described group leaders as "pragmatic dreamers of greatness." "Pragmatic dreamers."

**Warren Bennis:** True. I think the dream is important. Pragmatic means, I'm going to set a deadline. The dream has to have a product. Get something out the door. Henry Ford said that.

**Marty Kaplan:** Another paradox in a similar area. You said that people in great groups are often young people with delusional confidence.

**Warren Bennis:** Yes. I like the word "young," too, because it leads to diversity.

**Marty Kaplan:** You said that people in great groups are "irrationally optimistic."

**Warren Bennis:** How could you not be? Just put yourself in



the mind of Jobs back in '71. You think you're going to make something amazing, something that's better and quicker.

**Marty Kaplan:** You mentioned a little while ago the university, and so I want to turn to that just for a bit. Thinking of the university as a kind of creative ecosystem, and you write about leaders of great groups, "They tend to be deep generalists, not narrow specialists. They're not so immersed in one discipline that they don't see solutions in another. They are problem solvers before they're computer scientists or animators."

**Warren Bennis:** I would underline that even more now.

**Marty Kaplan:** You talk about the importance of finding talent, that a leader finds talent for a great group, but then you said, "Sometimes talented people find you. They smell out places that are full of promise and energy, the places where the future is being made. The gifted often catch the Zeitgeist and ride it to a common shore. Certain schools and academic departments are lodestones for talent."

How do they get to be that?

**Warren Bennis:** Well, when Alan Kay, of Xerox Parc – one of the co-creators of the original GUI, and the first laptop computer – started out, he went to Utah at first, where there was a computer group in Salt Lake City. And then he drifted to MIT – I was there then – because others were going to MIT who were interested in computers. You could see people coming to MIT from AT&T because that was where the best, early work in computers was going on. And later those people began drifting to places like Caltech, toward Stanford. They're drawn by an idea and, "Oh, there's a guy I can work with who sees the future as I see it or maybe he'll help me see it."

And what Mayor Bloomberg was getting at, with his recent push of \$100 million and 10 acres of Roosevelt Island to create a Silicon

Valley in New York City, is that people don't go to NYU to get engineers and technically-trained people...yet. He wants it to be like that.

**Marty Kaplan:** Do you smell that Zeitgeist here somewhere at USC?

**Warren Bennis:** I'll just talk from my department at Marshall School. It's called Management and Organizational Department. I see one or two, maybe three people who are young and who I think have that possibility of being the draw because they're into new and exciting stuff.

**Marty Kaplan:** Homegrown, not stars recruited?

**Warren Bennis:** Homegrown, right. Those are the ones we have to nourish, too.

**Marty Kaplan:** Warren told me before we came up here that he made a little summary of some of the takeaways of Great Groups, and I thought it would be terrific if we could hear that list. Is it seven?

**Warren Bennis:** Okay. It's now – it's six – seven, yeah. Okay, let me do it quickly.

One, I mentioned Bob Zemeckis earlier. "We're all making the same movie." Shared vision is the takeaway. It sounds so naïve, but it's true. We were there, we were all making the same movie. This is loaded with meaning.

Two, skin in the game. I tried to look up the origin of that phrase this morning, Marty, and there's no one clear origin. Warren Buffet has used it, but its origin is not clear. I mean it's a gambling term, I guess. But "skin in the game" means anteing up beforehand, investing in it. What's your investment? What are you risking for this project?

Three, knowing you can't do it alone. I mentioned earlier the course Dr. Sample and I co-teach and we know we need each other to do that. That course has really been fun for 14 years. And there's one student, Chris, who took it 12 years ago?

**Audience Member:** Eleven.

**Warren Bennis:** Eleven. Okay, so you couldn't do without the other. Watson and Crick were both writing at the periphery of their own disciplines. They couldn't have done it without each other.

Four is product. I mentioned earlier you have to have a product and get it out the door.

Five, abandon your own ego to the talents of others. I read recently – it's in the book – the Hollywood syndrome is not abandoning your ego to the talents of others.

**Marty Kaplan:** Not abandoning your ego?

**Warren Bennis:** Yes, in Hollywood, the idea is, "I know what's best for everybody." "I'm the brightest guy in the room." "Don't question me."

That's not what brings out the best in teams. You have to abandon your ego to the talents of others. I know more terrifically bright CEOs who have failed because of this one thing. Larry Summers is a fairly good example of someone who can't abandon his own ego. Marty, you know too well what I'm talking about. You know Larry. He's as bright as they come, but he has that, "I'm the brightest guy in the room" attitude. The trouble is he is incredibly bright, but he's got to learn.

Six is trust.

Seven is diversity.

**Marty Kaplan:** I'm going to wrap up with a comment that you made when you were writing the introduction to *The Essential Bennis*, looking through all of these pieces.

You said something I was very struck by. You said, "I am increasingly aware how crucial rhetoric and other performing arts are in making a compelling leader, good or bad."

**Warren Bennis:** In fact, there is a piece in that book that I call leadership as a performing art, but I still haven't nuanced it or discovered the full subtlety of what that means. Does it mean you're just acting?

What I do know is, that leaders must be aware of the impact they expect to make. Queen Elizabeth I, when she addressed the Armada, she knew what she was doing. She put on the most fascinating, shiny royal garment to dazzle them when she spoke to the Armada. She was aware of performance.

So was Alexander the Great. So was Caesar, who changed his toga before he went on, according to Plutarch's history. He said Caesar was very aware of the dress he was wearing. Why? Because part of performance is putting on. As Olivier said, "You don't have to be a great actor. If you want to do *Cyrano*, you just get a fake nose. Without the fake nose, without the costume, I cannot do it."

**Marty Kaplan:** Do you think Steve Jobs knew he was playing Steve Jobs?

**Warren Bennis:** I don't know. I haven't read Isaacson's new biography yet.

**Marty Kaplan:** Earlier you noted that there are no Academy Awards for ensemble performances. We were just talking about Warren Bennis as a performer, and I hope you will take it the right way that I believe you deserve from this room your own Academy



“*That's not what brings out the best in teams. You have to abandon your ego to the talents of others.*”

Warren Bennis

Award for your presentation today.

**Warren Bennis:** Thank you.

**Marty Kaplan:** Please join me in thanking Warren.



[Applause]