

## **Reading 1: The Transformational Experiences That Leave Ordinary People *Being* Leaders**

### **Reading 1.A: Selected Quotations from “Crucibles of Leadership” by Warren Bennis and Robert Thomas**

Compiled by and with comments by Erhard, Jensen and Granger

In the following excerpts from the Harvard Business Review article “Crucibles of Leadership” by Warren Bennis<sup>1</sup> and Robert Thomas<sup>2</sup>, you will see that what they term “crucibles” show up as a common path to true leadership, without exception for every one of the leaders they studied. This course is designed to produce that same transformed relation to life, others, and oneself required to be a leader that for all those studied by Bennis and Thomas resulted from crucible experiences.

As these authors point out, it is not the crucible itself that leaves one being a leader, rather it is the way in which a crucible is dealt with that results in the *transformative experience* that alters one’s relation to life, others, and oneself. In this course, through the use of opportunities for such *transformative experiences* (which while personally challenging do not involve the trauma or pain of a crucible), you will have the opportunity to discover for yourself what the great leaders studied by Bennis and Thomas discovered for themselves in the process of dealing with a crucible event.

As we said, we do not employ crucibles to provide the opportunity for the transformative experiences that left the people Bennis and Thomas examined as great leaders. However, we do want to be clear that a part of what is necessary to realize the promise of the course is your producing certain transformative experiences for yourself. And, while we will provide you with opportunities to do so, you must be willing to do so, in fact committed to doing so.

The following indented material is all direct quotes from “Crucibles of Leadership” by Warren G. Bennis and Robert J. Thomas, *Harvard Business Review*, September 2002 (from the HBR At Large Version). (emphasis added).

---

<sup>1</sup> Warren Bennis, pioneer in the field of leadership, was University Professor and Distinguished Professor of Business Administration and Founding Chairman of The Leadership Institute, University of Southern California.

<sup>2</sup> Robert Thomas, visiting professor of leadership and transformational change, is Executive Director of the Accenture Institute for High Performance and Chair of the advisory panel for the Perlmutter Institute for Global Leadership at Brandeis University.

In interviewing more than 40 top leaders in business and the public sector over the past three years, we were surprised to find that all of them – young and old – were able to point to intense, often traumatic, always unplanned experiences that had transformed them and had become the sources of their distinctive leadership abilities.

We came to call the experiences that shape leaders “crucibles” ... A crucible is, by definition, a transformative experience through which an individual comes to a new or an altered sense of identity.

For the leaders we interviewed, the crucible experience was a trial and a test, a point of deep self-reflection that forced them to question who they were [that is, the way they ‘wound-up-being’] and what mattered to them [that is, mattered as a ‘created committed to’ rather than as a ‘wound up committed to’]. It required them to examine their values, question their assumptions, ... And, invariably, they emerged from the crucible stronger and more sure of themselves and their purpose – changed in some fundamental way. (p. 3)

Everyone is tested by life, but only a few extract strength and wisdom from their most trying experiences. [It isn’t what happens to a person during a crucible event, rather it is the way in which that person deals with what happens that makes it transformative.] (p. 2)

Crucibles force leaders into deep self-reflection ... (p. 1)

As we see from the excerpts from the article “Crucibles of Leadership” by Bennis and Thomas, “crucibles” when dealt with authentically result in the *transformations that are the genesis (source) of being a leader*. In the course you will be provided with opportunities to authentically generate for yourself the transformations required to be a leader and to exercise leadership effectively as your natural self-expression (again, in the course without the pain of a crucible event).

As Bennis and Thomas point out, these transformations require you to identify and question what you have been taking for granted – that is, your values, what really matters to you, who you know yourself to be, and what you believe or assume to be true about yourself, others, and the world. In short, this is creating a transformation for yourself that takes you well beyond “the way you wound up being”, and leaves you in a new world.

Opening up for yourself a world in which being a leader and the effective exercise of leadership becomes your natural self-expression is in a sense what this course is all about.

In addition to opening up this world of being a leader, Bennis and Thomas also point out: “In the extreme, this capacity for reinvention comes to resemble eternal youth – a kind of vigor, openness, and an enduring capacity for wonder that is the antithesis of stereotyped old age.” (Bennis and Thomas, p. 6)