

# LEADERSHIP Excellence

Warren Bennis



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

January 2013



Steven Snyder  
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

**Attract  
Top Talent**

**Leadership  
Sustainability**

**Leadership  
Struggle**

**Engage in Three Practices**

[www.LeadersExcel.com](http://www.LeadersExcel.com)

# Leadership Struggle

*It's an art to be mastered.*



by Steven Snyder

LEADERSHIP IS OFTEN A *struggle*, as it implies navigating and leading people through adversity. Cultural images abound of happy, confident leaders expertly steering their followers through dark times into the warm sunlight of victory. External adversity, however, often generates *internal struggles* in leaders, a hazard of leadership our culture rarely acknowledges.

Rare are leaders who talk openly and honestly about their struggles for fear of being perceived as weak, ineffective, and incompetent. Most leaders buy into the notion that *being a good leader* means having all the answers and never stumbling when it counts.

The best leaders learn to sidestep these unrealistic expectations by accepting themselves for who they are today while striving to be better tomorrow. They accept that *struggle is a natural part of leadership*; in fact, it often paves the way for the greatest growth. Instead of denying the struggle or feeling diminished by it, they come to embrace it as *an art to be mastered* and develop skills that help them thrive amid challenge and adversity.

Inevitably, every leader stumbles. But great leaders use *failure* as a *wakeup call*. Instead of blaming others, they turn their attention inward for reflection and introspection. They study how their behaviors contribute to substandard outcomes and resolve to learn and grow from the experience.

## One Powerful Story

In my research on *leadership struggle*, Joe Dowling, artistic director of the Guthrie Theater, shared with me his *powerful story of struggle and redemption*. His story is a classic case of how new pathways for growth and development can emerge when a leader deals openly and honestly with his struggle.

At the age of 28, Dowling became the youngest artistic director in the history of the Abbey Theatre, the National Theatre of Ireland. Almost immediately, he found himself clash-

ing with the board of directors. Dowling's fiery passion for executing his creative vision was at odds with the board's hands-on management style. After several years, a reluctant and divided board granted Dowling the authority he desired. A few years later, however, when the board issued a moratorium on guest artists in the wake of financial difficulties, tensions erupted once again. Dowling demanded that the restriction be rescinded. When the board refused, Dowling's relationship with some of the directors became so acrimonious and stressful that he felt he had no choice but to abruptly and publicly resign, which placed his entire career in jeopardy.

After spending a decade in commercial theater, Dowling returned to the nonprofit world by accepting the position at the Guthrie, a regional theater renowned for its artistic and cultural aspirations. However, his relationship with the board soon became contentious, echoing the pattern of conflict at the Abbey. Fortunately, an interaction with Guthrie board chair Margaret Wurtele triggered an epiphany. During a heated exchange, recalls Dowling, "Margaret looked at me and said, 'You do know, of course, that everybody on the board wants you to succeed.'" Dowling was stunned. In a flash, he realized that his confrontational style might have obscured a blind spot—something he was not aware of or did not recognize as a problem—that had made his years at the Abbey unduly combative and was already threatening his relationships at the Guthrie.

Today, Dowling acknowledges how he could have avoided some of the headaches and heartache that were the hallmark of his tenure at the Abbey. In retrospect, he sees that Abbey board members were not enemies but rather imperfect people like himself who were seeking to express their closely held values in difficult circumstances.

"If I had sat down individually with each board member and explained my position more cogently and clearly—if I had developed a majority by persuasion and conversation as opposed to confrontation—I probably could have gotten through that period," he said.

Dowling's recognition of his blind spot transformed his leadership. With more self-awareness and humility, he became a collaborative leader, more respectful of the visions of others. Viewing *struggle* as a doorway to personal growth enabled him to tap more fully into his leadership potential.

## Three Core Practices

You don't need Joe Dowling's artistic sensibilities to master *the art of struggle*. You can learn to channel your energies through *three core practices*:

**1. Become grounded by regaining your balance.** Struggle involves some change, resulting in natural tensions that can throw a leader off balance. If you feel anxious or scattered, engage in reflective activities to calm and center your mind and body and give you an accurate reading of your circumstances. Seek advice and support from trusted colleagues. Remind yourself that *struggle is a natural part of leadership* and you can learn much from it.

**2. Explore new leadership pathways.** You may need to reimagine your situation or reinvent yourself by cultivating skills that will help you adapt to the struggle. Consider conducting a self-assessment to uncover and remedy



***I confess: I'm an aficionado of art—primarily the performing arts, one being leadership. So when I saw that Steven Snyder had authored a book, "Leadership and the Art of Struggle", my interest was piqued. In my 30 years as editor of "Leadership Excellence" magazine, I've witnessed that "struggles" or "crucibles" both refine and define great leaders. Beyond simply telling stories of leadership ordeals, Steven distills these stories into practical action points that we all can use to become better leaders—and thus transforms the book into a work of art.***

Ken Shelton, editor/CEO,  
Leadership Excellence

blind spots. Embracing your struggle can elicit fresh insights about yourself, your values and your life's purpose.

**3. Deepen and enrich your adaptive energy (cultivated in steps 1 and 2).** As you emerge from your struggle, you will be better equipped to walk into the promising future that awaits you. You will foster constructive new habits that support and enrich this new way of being, be more likely to notice and celebrate precious moments with family and friends, and be more attuned to the *people* and *things* that matter most.

Summon the courage to confront your story, reconstruct your leadership narrative, and forge ahead. Out of your discomfort will flow a new ease, a self-assuredness that is both calming and energizing, and the rewarding blend of command and confidence that only mastery can bestow. **LE**

Steven Snyder is founder of Snyder Leadership Group and author of *Leadership and the Art of Struggle: How Great Leaders Grow Through Challenge and Adversity* (Berrett-Koehler). Visit [www.snyderleadership.com](http://www.snyderleadership.com).

**ACTION: Try these three practices.**

**L e a d e r s h i p   E x c e l l e n c e**

Reprinted with permission of *Leadership Excellence*: 1-877-250-1983