

## Warren Bennis

Warren Bennis, born in New York City in 1925, was educated at Antioch College and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. From 1971 to 1977 he served as the president of the University of Cincinnati. The author of several important books on management, he now teaches at the School of Business in the University of Southern California.

### Time to Hang Up the Old Sports Clichés

Americans are, on the whole, simple and direct people. We do not incline toward nuances or subtleties, in either our lives or our work. We opt inevitably for the concrete over the abstract. We are also extremely competitive, relishing opponents' losses as we boast of our own victories. For these reasons, sports are not only our favorite form of entertainment but the principal model and metaphor for our own lives.

At home and at work, we talk often of winning and losing, scoring touchdowns, carrying the ball, close calls, going down to the wire, batting a thousand, hitting paydirt and going into extra innings, and while we may like movie, TV and music stars, we admire sports stars. Every father wants his sons to shine on the playing fields, which is why Little League games frequently have all the carefree air of the London blitz.

Preachers and politicians, among others, see this national obsession as healthy, portray us as good people interested in good, clean fun. Universities, including mine, celebrate and reward their athletes as heroes. When the Super Bowl rolls around, the country focuses on The Game.

I am admittedly as obsessed as anyone. I seem to remember forever great plays, great players and even the scores of great games, though I sometimes cannot recall whom I sat next to at dinner three nights ago. But I am also convinced that it is time to find a new model.

Life is not a baseball game. It's never called on account of darkness, much less canceled because of inclement weather. And while major sports are big business now, business is not a sport, and never was. Indeed, thinking of business as a kind of game or sport was always simplistic. Now it's downright dangerous.

Games are of limited duration, take place on or in fixed and finite sites and are governed by openly promulgated rules that are enforced on the spot by neutral professionals. Moreover, they are performed by relatively evenly matched teams that are counseled and led through every move by seasoned hands. Scores are kept, and at the end of the game, a winner is declared.

Business is usually a little different. In fact, if there is anyone out there who can say that his business is of limited duration, takes place on a fixed site, is governed by openly promulgated rules that are enforced on the spot by neutral professionals, competes only on relatively even terms and performs in a way that can be measured in runs or points, then he is either extraordinarily lucky or seriously deluded.

The risks in thinking of business in sports terms are numerous. First, to measure a business on the basis of wins and losses is to misunderstand both the purposes of a specific business and the nature of business itself. No business—whether it sells insurance or manufactures cars—can or should be designed to win. Rather, it should be designed to grow, both quantitatively and qualitatively. In this sense, it vies more with itself than with its competition. This is not to say there are never winners or losers—in head-to-head contests, as when two ad agencies are competing for the same account, someone will win and someone will lose. It is to say, to paraphrase Vince Lombardi's legendary dictum, winning isn't everything, it's one of many things a business must accomplish.

Thus, a company designed merely to win will probably lose in the long run. For example, the John Doe Insurance Company could win the auto market overnight by offering comprehensive coverage for \$100 a year. However, the company would fail when the claims began coming in.

Second, it is perilous to think of limits, rules and absolutes in business. Athletes compete for a given number of hours in a given number of games over a given period of weeks or months. Businesses are in the arena for decades, sometimes centuries. Though the action may rise and subside, it never stops. It does not offer any timeouts, much less neatly defined beginnings and endings.

American business has traditionally been schizophrenic about rules. When it is flourishing, it wants no rules or regulations. When it is failing, it wants a plethora of rules. For example, Detroit saw Washington as its nemesis until foreign cars flooded the market.

Then, Chrysler went to the Feds for a loan, and now Detroit begs Washington to regulate imports while lobbying against Federal safety and quality controls.

Athletes perform in a static environment—the size of the field, the length of the contest, even the wardrobes of the players remain the same, day after month after year. Businesses function in a volatile universe, which changes from moment to moment, and hardly ever repeats. It is affected by droughts half a world away, a new gizmo down the street, consumer attitudes and needs, a million things. Given this mercurial context, any business that is not at least as dynamic and flexible as the world in which it functions will soon be out of step or out of business.

Clearly, then, there are far more differences between sports and business than similarities. But the danger is that many people will continue to imagine that success in business is like success in sports—flat-out, total victory; a world championship. But the best-run and most successful companies in America do not think in terms of victories and defeats, coming from behind, last-minute saves or shining moments, and they do not count on regulations or referees. Instead, they think in terms of staying power, dedication to quality, and an endless effort to do better than they have done. They see change as the only constant, and they try to adapt to the world rather than expect the world to adapt to them. Indeed, it is a business's ability to adapt to an everchanging world that is the basis for both its success and progress.

I should emphasize that I am not criticizing the management of professional sports teams, which are themselves businesses. Some teams are poorly run, but others, like the Boston Celtics or Los Angeles Lakers, operate on the same principles that other successful businesses do. They change, they plan for the long-term, and they strive ceaselessly for quality. What I object to is comparing the playing field to the marketplace.

The truth is that there is no workable or appropriate metaphor for business except business itself, and that should be sufficient. Like a well-played game, a well-run business is something to see, but, unlike a well-played game, it is not a diversion. Rather, it is life itself—complex, difficult, susceptible to both success and failure, sometimes unruly, always challenging, and often joyful.

So let's leave the home runs to the Phillies' Mike Schmidt and the touchdowns to the Bears' Walter Payton, and get down to business.

## Topics for Discussion and Writing

1. In paragraph 5 Bennis suggests that "it's downright dangerous" to see business in terms of metaphors drawn from the world of sports. On the other hand, presumably those who use metaphors believe that the metaphors help them see things freshly and clearly. If you have read Robert Keidel's essay (page 414), do you think that Keidel's use of metaphor clarifies your understanding of business or, on the contrary, does it lead to dangerous misapprehensions? Be as specific as possible.
2. In paragraph 8, when Bennis says that a business "should be designed to grow," he is using a metaphor, for he is comparing a business to a living organism. And in paragraph 11, when he says that American business is "schizophrenic," he uses a metaphor from psychiatry. Reread his essay closely and jot down a list of the metaphors he uses. Do you think his metaphors are useful, or are they (to quote paragraph 5) "dangerous"?
3. Evaluate Bennis's final paragraph as a final paragraph. What makes it effective or ineffective? Now look at Bennis's opening paragraph. Does his description of Americans largely exclude some groups? Are there readers his opening paragraph might unintentionally "exclude" or turn away?

## Milton Friedman

*Milton Friedman, born in Brooklyn in 1912, is a graduate of Rutgers University, the University of Chicago, and Columbia University. A leading conservative economist, Friedman has had considerable influence on economic thought in America through his popular writings (he wrote a regular column in Newsweek), his numerous scholarly writings, and his presence on national committees.*

## The Social Responsibility of Business Is to Increase Its Profits

When I hear businessmen speak eloquently about the "social responsibilities of business in a free-enterprise system," I am reminded of the wonderful line about the Frenchman who discovered at the age of 70 that he had been speaking prose all his life.