

Book Review: The Leadership Challenge by James M. Kouzes and Barry Z. Posner

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Abstract

This review examines James Kouzes and Barry Posner's *The Leadership Challenge*. Kouzes and Posner explore practices leaders worldwide use to make a difference in their organizations. In its entirety, the book is about *The Five Practices of Exemplary Leadership*, namely: model the way, inspire a shared vision, challenge the process, enable others to act, and encourage the heart. Further, the authors outline the behaviors that leaders employ so that extraordinary things can occur through *The Ten Commitments of Leadership*. The review evaluates the authors' approach in providing a manual to leaders and contributing to *Leadership and Management*.

Keywords: leadership, challenge, book, review, principles, practices, commitment, Kouzes, Posner, management, manual, organization

Book Review: The Leadership Challenge by James M. Kouzes and Barry Z. Posner

James Kouzes and Barry Posner's book, *The Leadership Challenge*, serves as a manual for aspiring leaders - students and professionals alike, and even leaders already holding positions within their respective organizations - for advice and counsel on making extraordinary things happen. Kouzes and Posner examine practices leaders worldwide use to transform values into actions, visions into realities, obstacles into innovations, separateness into solidarity, and risks into rewards (p. 2). Throughout the book, the authors want to provide leaders with real-life examples and concrete steps (Take Action sections) that they can use to create a climate in which people take on challenging opportunities and succeed. In its entirety, the book discusses *The Five Practices of Exemplary Leadership*: Model the Way, Inspire a Shared Vision, Challenge the Process, Enable Others to Act, and Encourage the Heart (p. 15). Further, the authors outline the behaviors that leaders employ so that extraordinary things can occur through *The Ten Commitments of Leadership*.

Research and evidence-based, Kouzes and Posner's *The Leadership Challenge* is an essential contribution to the field of Leadership and Management because it can help managers, emerging and seasoned leaders, and individual contributors develop their ability to lead others towards success and beyond. Throughout the book, ordinary people are taught how to become extraordinary leaders. Leaders from different cultures and countries and small and large companies offered insight into what they did when they were "at their best as leaders" (p. 2).

There are seven parts to *The Leadership Challenge*. Part 1 of the book introduces Kouzes and Posner's Five Practices of Exemplary Leadership. The authors claim that "leaders get people moving" and admit that time, problems, technologies, and people change over time, but leadership endures (p. 1). Additionally, Kouzes and Posner point out that leadership is a relationship between those who aspire to lead and those who choose to follow (p. 30). In their view, a relationship characterized by mutual respect and confidence will overcome the greatest adversities and leave a lasting legacy (p.30). In addition, Kouzes and Posner have outlined the desired leader attributes that people most look for in leaders. Based on their research, most constituents believe that leaders must be honest, competent, and inspiring (p. 35). These desirable traits led to the *Kouzes-Posner First Law of Leadership* which states that "If you don't believe in the messenger, you won't believe the message" (p. 38). Interestingly, three of these attributes closely match the criteria used by experts to assess "credibility," namely: trustworthiness (honesty), expertise (competence), and dynamism (inspiring). Leadership, according to Kouzes and Posner, is built on credibility. The authors prescribe the most significant way to establish credibility encapsulated in the *Kouzes-Posner Second Law of Leadership*: "You build a credible foundation of leadership when you DWYSYWD – Do What You Say You Will Do" (p. 40).

Part 1 successfully provides readers with a glimpse of what comes in the chapters that follow. Brief descriptions of the five practices and ten commitments are provided. Table 1.1 aptly summarizes these Practices and Commitments (p. 29). Kouzes and Posner use real-life examples of leaders from different companies and organizations, but it is noteworthy that most of the examples come from the business sector. However, it should be noted that any leader from any field or discipline will be able to apply the *Five Practices*, the *Ten Commitments*, and the examples. Using real-life experiences of leaders is a powerful tool the authors use to convey their ideas to their readers.

Kouzes and Posner delve into the first of the *Five Practices*, "Model the Way," in Part 2. As a leader, the first step should be discovering personal values and beliefs, finding their voice, and coming up with principles that guide decisions and actions. Furthermore, Kouzes and Posner believe that leaders must practice what they preach. The authors present these ideas as Commitments under the first Practice: *clarifying values by affirming shared values*; and *setting the example by aligning actions with shared values* (p. 42). Sharing values promotes loyalty, teamwork, and a strong sense of purpose. "Setting the example" means that leaders need to live the shared values and teach each other to model the values (p. 75). The authors provide several examples of leaders

from different continents.

In Part 2, Kouzes and Posner provide readers with blueprints on how to "Model the Way" effectively. Part 2 includes two chapters with sections called 'Take Action' that provide relatively easy instructions on clarifying one's values and setting examples. In stating, "Titles are granted, but it is your behavior that earns respect," (p.16), the authors are trying to convey the importance of modeling behaviors they expect of others to achieve commitment and achieve high standards. As with Part 1, the authors successfully weave through the text examples of day-to-day leadership experiences of practitioners, both positive and negative, to drive home their points. Despite Kouzes and Posner's efforts to incorporate stories from all over the world, they mainly spoke about experiences from the business world. The authors mention in their introductory message that they found success stories in various industries, including profit-based organizations and nonprofits, agriculture and mining, manufacturing and utilities, banking and healthcare, government and education, the arts, and community service, among others (p. 14). In future editions of *The Leadership Challenge*, the authors may include examples from the education sector, for instance, so that students reading the book as part of a leadership course have a better understanding of the concepts because the examples are more easily recognizable. When presented with familiar situations, students can make more robust and better connections between concepts, practices, and models.

Part 3 of *The Leadership Challenge* deals with the second of the Five Practices - "Inspire a Shared Vision." Among the Commitments of Exemplary Leadership within this Practice, Kouzes and Posner identify two: envision the future by imagining exciting and ennobling possibilities, and enlist others in a common vision by appealing to shared aspirations. Almost every leader of an organization has dreams and visions of what it might become. To imagine what might be possible, they start with the end in mind. According to the authors, the dream or vision becomes the force behind the future. When an organization has a common purpose, it inspires people to realize its vision (p. 104). As soon as the vision is established, the leaders must enlist others by creating a common ground on which everyone can agree (appealing to common ideals) and then animating the vision. The authors suggest that to achieve extraordinary things in organizations, leaders must engage both hearts and minds of their constituents (p. 129). The vision can be animated by using symbolic language, creating images of the future, practicing positive communication, expressing emotions, and speaking sincerely. The goal is for leaders to generate enthusiasm and excitement for the common vision (p. 152), which is instrumental in realizing the vision.

As one of Kouzes and Posner's recommendations for animating the mission, leaders should use symbolic language through logos, slogans, metaphors, pictures, and other images. Interestingly, in the book entitled, *Reframing Organizations: Artistry, Choice and Leadership*, Lee Bolman and Terrence Deal (2008) attributed the use of symbols as one of the four frames or lenses that managers and leaders can use to better understand the broad concepts of management and leadership. The authors of *Reframing Organizations: Artistry, Choice, and Leadership* devoted several chapters to Symbolic Frame and extensively discussed how they can help leaders inspire, ignite passion, and spark interest in those around them. In contrast, *The Leadership Challenge* offers only a few pages on symbolic language. Consequently, it is highly recommended that additional inputs be added to *The Leadership Challenge* in upcoming editions and cross-reference Bolman and Deal's book since the two offer striking similarities in terms of propositions, examples, and concepts.

Part 4 of *The Leadership Challenge* is attributed to the third *Practice of Exemplary Leadership*, which Kouzes and Posner label as "Challenge the Process." Leaders must look to the challenge they face as a crucible for greatness and must venture out and not sit idly by waiting for fate to smile on them (p. 19). In pursuing new products, services, or processes, leaders must *search for opportunities by seizing the initiative and looking outward for innovative ways to improve*. More often than not, seeking out challenges requires things to be different than they currently are. The authors assert that leaders cannot respond to challenges with the same old solutions but instead must alter the status quo (p. 159).

Moreover, according to the authors, leaders should challenge for the sake of meaning, that is, challenge with

a purpose (p. 169). Leaders must also *experiment and take risks by constantly generating small wins and learning experiences*. Taking risks can mean committing mistakes and failures along the way, but the authors encourage leaders to proceed anyway and learn from those mistakes. Successful leaders ask, "Where are we experimenting and how are we changing?" (p. 209). Exemplary leaders view change as a challenge that can be overcome, no matter how overwhelming, frightening, or immobilizing it may be.

Many people are hesitant to take risks because mistakes and failures are inevitable, as Kouzes and Posner explain. They suggest that leaders break big problems down into manageable steps (p. 195), enabling risk-averse people to finally try something new, even if it is only one small thing. If unsuccessful, the outcome will still be bearable, even if undesirable. Smaller tasks out of an enormous undertaking can be advantageous to the risk-taker. If the effort is successful, the team involved in the undertaking can experience a small victory. The authors suggest that these small wins produce big results because it is hard to argue with success (p. 197). It is commendable that the authors give their readers practical and doable tips that encourage them to try them out.

Part 5 of *The Leadership Challenge* focuses on the fourth Practice of Exemplary Leadership - "Enable Others to Act." The two Commitments that Kouzes and Posner relate to this Practice are: fostering collaboration by building trust and facilitating relationships (p. 218) and strengthening others by increasing self-determination and developing competence (p. 243). The authors suggest that leaders build trust by investing in trust, being the first to trust, showing genuine concern for others, and sharing knowledge and information. Facilitating relationships means developing a collaborative vision and defining roles, promoting reciprocity norms, structuring projects in a collaborative manner, and promoting face-to-face interaction. Leaders must enhance their self-determination, develop competence, and gain confidence to strengthen others. Kouzes and Posner ask leaders to accept and act on the paradox of power: you become more powerful when you give your power away (p. 244). The authors want others to lead by empowering those around them.

Many of the *Practices* and *Commitments* are easy to understand, but others are more complex, and Kouzes and Posner's examples help the reader better understand. Kouzes and Posner attempt to explain the *Commitment* "Strengthen Others" in Part 5. Their explanation discusses the importance of a leader's influence in creating an environment that allows group members to be fully engaged and make a decision based on their judgment. When individuals have a sense of self-determination, they feel more accountable. When reading the chapter about "Strengthening Others," the reader might not initially think of self-determination as an essential component. Given the excellent explanation of the authors, however, the readers would be convinced that self-determination is indeed instrumental in strengthening others. Kouzes and Posner posit that "feeling powerful comes from a deep sense of being in control of your own life (p. 246)."

The fifth *Practice of Exemplary Leadership* is thoroughly discussed in Part 6 of *The Leadership Challenge*. It is called "Encourage the Heart" by Kouzes and Posner. Leaders can achieve this by *recognizing contributions through showing appreciation for individual excellence and celebrating values and victories through the creation of a spirit of community*. Recognizing contributions entails expecting the best from others and personalizing recognition (p. 275) while celebrating values and victories means creating a spirit of community and being personally involved. In response to the questions "What sustains a leader?" and "From what source comes the leader's courage?" the authors wrote, "The answer is love. Leaders are in love - in love with the people who do the work, with what their organizations produce, and with their customers (p. 274)."

The Leadership Challenge is powerful in that Kouzes and Posner offer practical tips to struggling leaders about the different *Commitments* and *Practices*, rather than just showcasing examples of leaders who have done something well, as exemplified in Part 6. They discuss how to further "Encourage the Heart" of group members, including taking time to thank teammates, personalizing recognition (a thoughtful gift or token of appreciation), and integrating celebration into daily work life. In terms of real-life examples, the authors' recounting the experiences of the leaders of one of the largest educational organizations in the world, DeVry, is admirable. Not to mention that Kouzes and Posner dedicated a total of three pages to the whole story.

Part 7 of *The Leadership Challenge* encourages everyone to be a role model for leadership. The authors emphasize that leadership is everyone's responsibility. Taking on the leadership challenge requires practice, reflection, humility, and a commitment to making a difference. Kouzes and Posner conclude that leadership is not an affair of the head - it is an affair of the heart.

Kouzes and Posner's concluding chapter (Part 7) appropriately sums up the true essence of leadership: that leadership is, in fact, an affair of the heart. They draw this conclusion from countless real-life examples of people in leadership positions worldwide. It is noteworthy that the authors also presented data they collected with their analyses. As a result, their claims are credible, believable, and scientific.

According to Kouzes and Posner in the introduction of *The Leadership Challenge*, leadership opportunities are everywhere. They believe that anyone looking to learn more about leadership can use *The Leadership Challenge*. Despite this, most of the examples of leadership cited by the authors are business-related or organizational. Therefore, anyone reading this book might conclude that its intended audience is business leaders and managers. This book can be used as a manual for students taking leadership courses who may not necessarily be on the corporate track if they translate and use similar examples in their field of study.

Overall, *The Leadership Challenge* is an excellent resource for aspiring, struggling, and successful leaders. With countless real-life examples and exceptional practical advice, it offers a wealth of valuable tips. Albeit lengthy, the book provides in-depth information about the *Five Practices* and *Ten Commitments of Exemplary Leadership*. Kouzes and Posner begin their book by saying that it's not meant to be read cover-to-cover but that readers can jump around to the sections and chapters most relevant to them. Ultimately, this book can be considered one of the best guides to leadership success. The principles elucidated by the authors can serve as a robust foundation for individuals hoping to influence others and help them innovate and succeed during this time of global competition and economic uncertainty.

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