The Leadership Challenge

Third Edition

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Reviewed by Lydia Morris Brown

Introduction

The first edition of Leadership Challenge (1987) became one of the best-selling leadership books of all time and a modern classic on the subject. Now that the recent dot-com bust seems to have withered the entrepreneurial spirit of the late 1980s, and the innovative spirit of the mid-1990s (when the second edition was published), people are wondering if what was true about leadership then still applies today. As part of their extensive research for this third edition, Kouzes and Posner asked leaders: “What’s new, and what’s different?” They found that, though the context has changed, the content of leadership remains the same; thus, they offer The Leadership Challenge as a comprehensive, significantly revised and updated field guide—“a personal coach in a book.” Within this new context, they reaffirm what leaders do; reiterate the fundamental principles that support these leadership practices; provide examples of real people, demonstrating each practice; and offer specific recommendations on what anyone—executives, managers, employees, students, volunteers, parents, etc., can do to assimilate these practices and continually develop their capabilities as leaders.
PART I: THE FIVE PRACTICES OF EXEMPLARY LEADERSHIP®

Through their studies of “personal-best” leadership experiences, Kouzes and Posner have discovered that people who guide others follow common patterns of action. These patterns of action are not about personality, but about standard practices that the authors have forged into a dynamic model, the Five Practices of Exemplary Leadership: (1) Model the Way, (2) Inspire a Shared Vision, (3) Challenge the Process, (4) Enable Others to Act, and (5) Encourage the Heart.

According to the authors, exemplary leaders understand that their behavior, not their titles, wins them respect and gains the commitment of their followers; thus, they effectively model the behavior they expect from others: They are clear about their own guiding principles, they find their own voice, and then they open up their hearts and clearly and distinctly give voice to their values. This is not, however, about eloquent speeches, but about daily actions. Leaders must walk their talk so that people can determine how serious they are about what they say they believe.

Kouzes and Posner have also found that Modeling the Way is characterized by the simple things—relentless effort, competence, and attention to detail. Because people follow the individual, rather than the individual’s operational and strategic plans, leaders must earn the right and the respect to lead via direct individual involvement and action. They must spend time with people, work side by side with colleagues, tell stories that make values come alive, be highly visible during times of uncertainty, and ask the kinds of questions that induce people to think about values and priorities.

The authors note that every organization or movement begins with a dream or vision that invents the future. Exemplary leaders envision what can be. In their desire to change the way things are, and to create something that no one else has ever created before, they gaze into the future and see the results, even before a project has begun. Their absolute belief in what they envision pulls them forward. And, they are confident in their ability to make extraordinary things happen. Kouzes and Posner warn, however, that visions seen only by leaders are insufficient to create an organized movement or produce significant change. In order to lead, one must have followers, and people will not follow until they accept a vision as their own and commit to it. Moreover, this commitment cannot be commanded, only inspired.

In order to inspire others, leaders must have intimate knowledge of people’s dreams, aspirations, vision, and values, so that dialogue can occur (leadership is not a monologue). In order to breathe life into the hopes and dreams of their followers, leaders must understand their needs and have their interests at heart. And, if they are to forge unity of purpose, they must show how the dream is for the common good.

Kouzes and Posner’s research has shown that those who lead others always seek to challenge the status quo. Leaders are willing pioneers, ready to step out into the unknown to look for opportunities to innovate, grow, and improve.
However, their primary contribution is not as the originators or creators of new products, services, and processes, but is in the recognition of good ideas, the support of those ideas, and the willingness to challenge the system in order to facilitate the implementation. They understand that innovation comes more from listening than from telling, so they listen to customers, clients, vendors, and the people doing the work. Thus, one might say that leaders are early adopters of innovation.

Knowing that innovation and change demand experimentation, risk, and that some failure is inevitable, exemplary leaders use an incremental approach that garners small wins. These small victories build people’s confidence and strengthen their commitment to the long term. The authors emphasize that the key component here is learning. Although risk and failure are inherent and necessary components of experimentation, it is not possible to fail continually and still succeed as a leader. “As weather shapes mountains, problems shape leaders. … Leaders are learners. They learn from their failures as well as their successes.”

Realizing that a single person cannot turn grand dreams into significant realities, exemplary leaders foster collaboration and build trust so as to enable others to act. They understand that leadership is a team effort that goes beyond a few direct reports or close confidants to include everyone who has a stake in the vision. They understand that command-and-control techniques no longer apply; thus, they work to enable their followers to feel a sense of personal power and ownership so that they will be strong, capable, and committed enough to deliver on the promises they make. This kind of enabling is essential, for if people feel weak, dependent, or alienated, they do not perform at their best nor do they stay the course. Kouzes and Posner note that when leadership is a relationship founded on trust and confidence, people take risks, make changes, and accomplish more than they thought possible. In this way, leaders turn their followers into leaders themselves.

Finally, through genuine acts of caring, leaders encourage the heart of their followers so they can carry on through the inevitable periods of exhaustion, frustration, and disenchantment. This encouragement can come from either dramatic gestures or from such simple actions as showing genuine appreciation for people’s contributions and creating a culture of celebration. Recognition and celebration are not, however, about fun and games (though there is a lot of fun when the hearts of followers are encouraged). Neither are they about pretentious ceremonies that merely create some phony sense of “togetherness.” Encouragement is a serious business in which leaders visibly and behaviorally link rewards with performance so that people can see the benefit of exhibiting the behavior that aligns itself with cherished values. Leaders also understand that authentic celebrations/rituals that come from the heart build a strong sense of community and collective identity that can carry a group through extremely challenging times.

“You can’t follow someone who isn’t credible, who doesn’t truly believe in what they’re doing—and how they’re doing it.”

--Gayle Hamilton, Pacific Gas and Electric

According to the authors’ findings, this set of skills and practices is available to everyone, at every level of society and the organization, not just to the charismatic few. And, in fact, it is because so many everyday leaders exist, in everyday circumstances, that extraordinary things are accomplished on a regular basis. The evidence also shows that leadership is a relationship; in every situation and every action, success is a function of how well people work and play together. Nonetheless, the five practices only constitute part of the picture. Kouzes and Posner view leadership as a reciprocal process between those who aspire to lead and those who choose to follow. Thus, they state that strategies, tactics, and skills are useless if one does not understand the dynamics of this relationship.

Research shows that the characteristics that people most look for and admire in a leader have remained constant over the years. They are honesty, the ability to look ahead, competence, and the ability to inspire, with honesty emerging as the single most important ingredient in the leader-constituent relationship. Communications experts refer to these key characteristics as “source credibility.” People must be able to believe in their leaders and trust that they will do what they say they will do, that they are enthusiastic about the direction in which they are taking the group, and that they have the knowledge and skill to lead. Thus, credibility is the foundation of leadership.

Because credibility makes such a difference, leaders must take it personally. Not only do employee loyalty,
commitment, energy, and productivity depend on it, credibility also influences customer and investor attitudes. “The center of gravity for business loyalty [whether that business is a bricks-and-mortar firm or a dot-com] is the personal integrity of the senior leadership team and its ability to put its principles into practice.”

The question is: What does credibility look like behaviorally—how can people recognize it when they see it? Kouzes and Posner have found that people are judged to be credible when their deeds conform to their words; thus, they advise: DWYSYWD—Do What You Say You Will Do. And, they note that this commonsense prescription relates directly to the practice of Modeling the Way. To be credible, leaders must be clear about their beliefs (the “say” part), and they must act on them (i.e., they must do).

Essentially, then, The Five Practices of Exemplary Leaders and the characteristics of admired leaders are complementary. Exemplary leaders get results and they respond to the expectations of their followers. This stresses the point that leadership is a relationship of service to people and purpose.

PART II: THE TEN COMMITMENTS—BUILDING YOUR COMPETENCE TO LEAD

Kouzes and Posner note that a leader’s value is not only determined by a set of guiding beliefs, but also by his or her ability to act on these beliefs. Thus, embedded in each of the Five Practices are behaviors, what the authors call The Ten Commitments of Leadership, along with actions steps that leaders can use to move themselves and others to accomplish extraordinary things.

Commitment One: Find Your Voice by Clarifying Your Personal Values. In order to Model the Way for others, leaders must demonstrate intense commitment to their beliefs with each action they undertake. Clarifying one’s values and expressing oneself in unique ways is the first step. Leaders who always remain at the cutting edge are the ones who ask themselves what value they bring to their followers. Thus, the authors suggest the following steps for effectively finding and articulating voice: Become more self-aware—get and accept honest feedback. Take some quiet time for personal reflection so as to “hear” your voice speaking about what truly matters. Write a tribute to yourself to clarify how you would most like to be seen by others. Record the lessons from the leaders you admire, and collect stories that teach values. To provide a helpful starting point for articulating your guiding principles, write your credo. Read the credo aloud to trusted colleagues and ask them to provide feedback on how clearly they understand what you value as a leader. And, audit your ability to competently meet the specific leadership challenges that confront your group or organization.

Commitment Two: Set the Example by Aligning Actions with Shared Values. Kouzes and Posner believe that leadership is a performing art because leaders earn and sustain credibility over time by doing what they say they will do. How leaders spend their time; how they react to critical situations; the stories, analogies, and metaphors they use; the language and questions they choose; and the measures they employ form an essential “repertoire.” Application of these tools cannot, however, be haphazard, but must be consciously managed so that leadership performance can be improved. Thus, the following measures are suggested: Create alignment around high performance standards, a caring attitude toward people, and a sense of uniqueness and pride. Research has found that successful organizations, with strong cultures, are characterized by these key values. Speak about shared values with enthusiasm, confidence and, even, drama. Teach and reinforce through symbols, artifacts, and storytelling. And, hold yourself accountable by keeping score of your leadership practices and your commitments to shared values.

“We all have to ask ourselves, ‘How do I go to work today and do something that will move the enterprise and myself another step in the right direction?’ ”

—Elaine Fortier, New Focus

Asking good questions, rather than providing “good” answers is extremely important. Because questioning forces you to understand what you are trying to teach and achieve, every question is a potential learning opportunity. Questions develop others by helping them escape the confining trap of their own paradigms. And, asking good questions forces you to listen carefully to your followers, which demonstrates that you respect their ideas and opinions. This not only increases support for any subsequent decision, it offers the added benefit of enhancing people’s self-worth.

Finally, the authors recommend that you conduct an audit of your daily routines and calendar, your meeting
agendas, your questions, how you deal with critical situations, your written communications, your in-basket (to ascertain what percentage of incoming mail relates to shared values), and your rewards and recognitions. This assessment lets you know what kind of example you are really setting.

Commitment Three: Envision the Future by Imagining Exciting and Ennobling Possibilities. Kouzes and Posner believe that the most important role of visions is to give focus to human energy. Whether it is a small department, a large organization, or an entire community, shared vision sets the agenda and gives the endeavor direction and purpose. Moreover, people expect the leader to take responsibility to keep the “big picture” in view so that they can contribute to it, efficiently and with confidence. Without this kind of leadership, people become frustrated, impatient, confused, angry, and, sometimes, even ill.

“Team members felt strong and capable because their input made a difference. Support others, and they are more likely to support you.”
---Marianne Hane, Applied Biosystems

However, before leaders can inspire others to enlist in a common cause, they must enhance their own capacity to envision the future and to open up to exciting possibilities. Thus, the following guidelines are offered: Read a biography of a visionary leader to learn the practical lessons of leadership. Use an understanding of your past to discover key message about your future direction. If you are in a job in order to do something, rather than being there for something to do, determine what that “something” is. Write an article about how you have made a difference as a means of clarifying what is truly important to you. Using all the information just gathered, write your “ideal and unique image of the future” for yourself and for your organization. Make it your business to spend some time studying the future. Test the assumptions underlying your vision. And, after you have clarified your vision, use visual imagery to mentally rehearse the skills and attitudes needed to realize the vision.

Commitment Four: Enlist Others in a Common Vision by Appealing to Shared Aspirations. Leaders breathe life into visions by communicating their hopes and dreams so that others clearly understand and accept them as their own. Knowing what motivates their followers, leaders show these constituents how their values and interests will be served by a particular long-term vision of the future. Most importantly, leaders are convinced of the value of that vision and share that genuine belief with others. Getting to know your constituents, finding the common ground, drafting a collective vision statement, expanding your communication skills, breathing life into your vision statement, speaking from the heart, and hanging out with constituents so that you can listen are just some of the action steps that can be taken to increase your ability to enlist support.

Commitment Five: Search for Opportunities by Seeking Innovative Ways to Change, Grow, and Improve. Kouzes and Posner have found that leadership is closely associated with the challenge of change and innovation. In fact, they say that, “innovation and leadership are nearly synonymous.” However, this is not necessarily about changing history, but about making a change in “business as usual.” Because exemplary leaders understand that the quest for change is the training ground for leadership—testing one’s skills and abilities and developing dormant talents—they proactively seek and create new opportunities. They are always on the lookout for ways to keep the group from lulling itself into a false sense of security. And, they are “net importers” of ideas—always open to insight from anyone, anywhere.

To facilitate your search for opportunities, the authors recommend the following action steps: Treat every job as an exciting adventure into unexplored territory. Seek meaningful challenges for yourself and look for ways to add challenge to the work of others; challenge, along with skill and interest, is a major motivator. Add fun to everyone’s work. Question the status quo; separate the critical practices, policies, and procedures from those that are simply matters of tradition. Renew your teams. Create an open-source approach to searching for opportunities. And, make shopping for ideas everyone’s priority.

Commitment Six: Experiment and Take Risks by Constantly Generating Small Wins and Learning from Mistakes. Kouzes and Posner note that a major leadership task involves identifying and removing self-imposed and organizational constraints that block innovation. At the same time, it is important to also understand that failure is a necessary component of creativity. Thus, rather than punishing failure, fixing blame for mistakes, and/or creating
more rules to lessen risk, leaders should encourage risk, learn from mistakes, and promote flexibility. In this regard, exemplary leaders have a hardy attitude about change that allows them to venture outside the normal constraints of normal routine and to create organizational cultures that are accepting of change. They start by creating small wins: They set up little experiments and develop models. They make it safe for others to experiment. They encourage people to break out of mindsets by questioning routines, challenging assumptions, and appreciating diversity. They break monumental challenges down into small, incremental steps. They give people choices so that they feel ownership. They say yes as often as possible and try to get others to say yes as often as possible. They admit their mistakes. And, they conduct pre- and postmortems for every project.

Commitment Seven: Foster Collaboration by Promoting Cooperative Goals and Building Trust. Understanding that it is impossible to accomplish extraordinary things alone, exemplary leaders collaborate. Thus, Kouzes and Posner view collaboration as “the master skill that enables teams, partnerships, and other alliances to function effectively.” However, they warn that collaboration can only be sustained when leaders promote a sense of mutual reliance. “Help begets help just as trust begets trust.”

Fostering collaboration and creating positive interactions among all constituents can effectively be accomplished by pursuing the following actions: Conduct a collaboration audit. Be the first to trust. Ask questions, listen, and take advice. Always say we rather than I. Create “Jigsaw” groups—a cooperative approach to learning in which each member of the group represents an expert “piece of the puzzle,” but still acts as an interdependent team member. Focus on gains rather than on losses. Customize rewards according to the needs of the different parties involved in the project. Take time for a lot of “human moments” (i.e., face-to-face conversations). And, create places and opportunities for informal interactions.

Commitment Eight: Strengthen Others by Sharing Power and Discretion. Kouzes and Posner view strengthening others as essentially the process of turning followers into leaders. Leaders accomplish this when they make it possible for followers to exercise choice and discretion, when they help others develop the competence and confidence to act and to excel, and when they foster the accountability and responsibility that compels action. Knowing that capable, confident people perform better, exemplary leaders employ the following action steps as a means of deploying their power to this end. They assign critical tasks and offer visible support. They enrich people’s jobs and use modeling to develop competencies. They use staff meetings as an opportunity to listen and to let others talk. They enlarge people’s sphere of influence. They educate, educate, educate. And, they create a learning environment.

Commitment Nine: Recognize Contributions by Showing Appreciation for Individual Excellence. Not only do leaders have high expectations of themselves, they have high expectations of their followers so that they too can become winners. Understanding that winners raise the standards of the entire enterprise, exemplary leaders recognize and reward what these individuals do to contribute to vision and values. They pay attention, offer encouragement, personalize appreciation, and maintain a positive outlook so that they can stimulate, rekindle, and focus people’s energies and determination. In addition, Kouzes and Posner believe that the following diverse strategies can be adapted to any situation so that recognition becomes a leadership process that effectively links rewards with performance: Be creative about rewards and make the recognition public and meaningful. Provide feedback as people progress. Set high expectations that are directly linked to what is important to the success of the organization. Promote positive expectations by letting others take the lead in setting their own goals. And, find people who are doing things right, be sure to inform them and others why they have been singled out, and be generous about saying thank you.

Commitment Ten: Celebrate the Values and Victories. The authors note that celebrating values and victories together reinforces the fact that extraordinary performance is the result of the efforts of many. When leaders celebrate the accomplishment of individuals visibly and in group settings, they sustain team spirit. And, when they base these celebrations on the accomplishment of key values

“Never underrate the importance of visibly appreciating others and their efforts.”

--Joan Nicolo, Computing Resources, Inc.
and milestones, they sustain the focus of the group. This adds value and a sense of appreciation to the workplace, which is what encouraging the heart is all about. The following action steps can be used to implement this final commitment: Bring celebration into as many critical events as possible. Install a public “Bragging Board.” Create a commemorative award that honors exemplary actions. Demonstrate caring by walking around. To spread passion and compassion, show passion and compassion—emotions are contagious. Find informal, inclusive, fun, and authentic ways to celebrate successes, and make it easy for others to do the same. And, set the example by planning a celebration now. Kouzes and Posner stipulate that encouraging the heart is not the end of the leadership process, but “a continuous part of the leadership journey.” In their view, leadership is about “[giving] courage, [spreading] joy, and [caring] about people, product and process all along the way.”

APPENDIX: GUIDE TO THE RESEARCH

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Bibliographic notes by chapter and a subject index are provided.

Remarks

In their advance praise, Peppers and Rogers (coauthors of The One to One Manager and One to One B2B) tell readers: “If you didn’t read The Leadership Challenge when it first came out, don’t miss it this time. If you did see it before, read it again. Kouzes and Posner have updated their powerful lessons on leadership, and we’ve never needed them more.” As Kouzes and Posner point out, we are living in a new world of chaos and uncertainty where: people matter more than profits, people and the economy are globally connected, social capital has replaced intellectual capital, time is at a premium, a diverse society brings an equally diverse workforce, distrust and wariness have crept into the workplace, and the search for meaning is more intense than ever.

This new context has significant implications for the practice of leadership. The authors note that each of these situations provides countless opportunities to make a difference, and that now, more than ever, business and society need for people to seize these opportunities to lead everyone to greatness. The Leadership Challenge is about those who do. The set of leadership practices offered is based on real-world experiences of thousands of people who have answered the call for leadership.

The authors’ vision of leadership is not based on celebrity or charisma, but is based on the actions of ordinary people. And, they demonstrate through the examples they use that leadership is a set of identifiable skills and practices available to anyone willing to avail themselves of them. Kouzes and Posner show that leadership is not about a position, a title or a capital L, but about credibility—what one does. It is about seizing the opportunity to learn on the job. Thus, “Beyond the practices, beyond the action steps, there’s [a] … fundamental truth about leadership: leadership is everyone’s business.”

Kouzes and Posner offer guidance on the specific issues about which actual leaders have indicated they need guidance. For example: the values that should guide the leaders’ actions, how to set the best example, how to articulate a vision of the future in unpredictable times, how to inspire others toward a common goal, how to create an environment that promotes innovation and risk, how to build cohesive and spirited teams, and how to share power and information effectively.

Nonetheless, this is much more than a business how-to, it is a primer on living successfully. The authors promise that, “if you read to the very end of this book, we’ll tell you the secret to success in life.” In the sense that they demonstrate unequivocally that leadership development is ultimately about self-development and that leadership is a relationship (success in leadership like success in life is a function of how well people interact) they more than fulfill that promise. They present abundant evidence that leadership is essentially, a “do unto others” proposition that’s a prerequisite for any human endeavor.

Despite the spiritual quality of the book’s insights and guidelines, the principles and practices offered are based on solid research begun almost two decades ago. Through the authors’ ongoing surveys of ordinary people, describing extraordinary experiences, they found patterns of leadership success, which they have transformed into practical tools that anyone can use to build deep personal and organizational leadership skills.
Reading Suggestions

Reading time: 16-18 hours 486 Pages in Book

In “A Field Guide for Leaders,” found in the preface, Kouzes and Posner advise that there is no “sacred order to this book”—that after starting with the first two chapters, you can go wherever your interests take you. If you decide to use this approach, we recommend that you read the preface in addition to the first two chapters, and that you pay particular attention to the Field-Guide section. Here, you will find a brief overview of the book’s contents that you can use to guide your exploration. Having said that, however, we must note that if you skip any of the material, you’re likely to miss many useful insights and guidelines.

We must also warn those who have read the first and/or second editions of The Leadership Challenge that 50 percent of the material in this current publication is brand new—new cases, new concepts, and new action steps. So, don’t assume you already know what to expect. We again draw your attention to Peppers and Rogers’s advice: “If you did see it before, read it again.”

Finally, we recommend that you take the time to glance at the appendix and the bibliographic notes. Both stand as very useful primary sources for further study.