Practicing the 10 Truths about Leadership

From: The Truth about Leadership: The No-Fads Heart-of-the-Matter Facts You Need to Know
James M Kouzes and Barry Z. Posner

In The Truth about Leadership James Kouzes and Barry Posner share what they’ve learned from over 30 years of leadership research (over 1 million responses to their Leadership Practices Inventory), teaching, and writing. The book reports on fundamental principles that inform and support the practices of leadership. “The truths we’ve written about are things you can count on. They are realities of leadership that will help you to think, decide, and act more effectively. They provide lessons that will sustain you in your personal and professional development. They are truths that address what is real about leadership.” Here in summary form are the ten truths.

As much as the context of leadership has change over the past three decades, the content of leadership has not changed that much. The fundamental behaviors, actions, and practices of leaders have remained essentially the same since we first began researching and writing about leadership over three decades ago. Much has changed, but there’s a whole lot more that’s stayed the same.

The Truth about Leadership reveals the most important things we’ve learned since we began our collaboration. It’s a collection of fundamental principles that inform and support the practices of leadership. These are lessons that were true thirty years ago, are true today, and we believe will be true thirty years from now. Fundamentals are the necessary building blocks of greatness. You can’t fast-track your way to excellence. Leadership is a demanding, noble discipline not to be entered into frivolously or causally. It requires an elevated sense of mastery. It’s a matter of technique, of skill, of practice. It’s also a matter of desire and commitment. You can gain mastery over the art and science of leadership by understanding these enduring truths and attending to them in your workplace and everyday life.

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Truth One. You Can Make a Difference

This is the most fundamental truth of all. Before you can lead you have to believe that you can have a positive impact on others. You have to believe in yourself. That’s where it all begins. Leadership begins when you believe you can make a difference.

We’ve been tracking the impact leaders have on their constituents and the organization for many years. We’ve analyzed data from well over a million respondents, and hundreds of other researchers have used our model and the Leadership Practices Inventory to gather data from thousands more. The findings from all these students point to one very clear conclusion: leaders who use The Five Practices of Exemplary Leadership are seen by others as better leaders.

The Five Practices of Exemplary Leadership is the model of best practices that emerged from our research (see the “Five Practices and Ten Commitments” at the end of this article.) These five “practices” (not “laws” or “principles”) are:

1. Model the Way
2. Inspire a Shared Vision
3. Challenge the Process
4. Enable Others to Act
5. Encourage the Heart

People working with leaders who demonstrate The Five Practices of Exemplary Leadership are significantly more satisfied with the actions and strategies of their leaders; they feel more committed, excited, energized, influential, and powerful; and they are more productive. In other words, the more you engage in the practices of exemplary leadership, the more likely it is that you’ll have a positive influence on others in the organization.

Truth Two. Credibility is the Foundation of Leadership

You have to believe in you, but others have to believe in you, too. What does it take for others to believe in you? Short answer: Credibility. If people don’t believe in you, they won’t willingly follow you.

It turns out that the believability of the leader determines whether people will willingly give more of their time, talent, energy, experience, intelligence, creativity, and support. Only credible leaders earn commitment, and only commitment builds and regenerates great organizations and communities.

Year after year the results of our research have been striking in their regularity. And year after year they do not vary significantly by demographical, organizational, or cultural dimensions. It has been quite clear that there are a few essential “character tests” someone must pass before others are willing to grant the designation of leader.

Only four qualities have continuously received an average score of over 60 percent of the votes. Before anyone is going to willingly follow you—or any leader—he or she wants to know that you are:

- Honest (85%)
- Forward-Looking (70%)
- Inspiring (69%)
- Competent (64%)

These four are at the core of others’ expectations. They are the basic measures of whether others will consider you to be the leader they’d willingly follow.

In addition to the three factors that measure credibility (honesty, inspiring, and competent), the vast majority of constituents have one other expectation of leaders. They expect leaders to be forward looking. People must also believe that you know where you are headed and have a vision for the future. As a leader you are expected to have a point of view about the future. You are expected to articulate exciting possibilities about how today’s work will result in tomorrow’s world.

Your ability to take strong stands, to challenge the status quo, and to point people in new directions depends on just how credible you are (honest, inspiring, competent). If you are highly credible, people are much more likely to enlist in your campaign for the future. But if others don’t believe in you, then the message you are delivering about an uplifting and ennobling future rests on a weak and precarious foundation. People may actually applaud your vision of the future but be unwilling to follow you in that direction. They may agree that what you are saying needs to be done, but they just won’t have the faith and confidence that you are the one to lead them. If you don’t believe in the messenger, you won’t believe the message.

If you are going to lead, you must have a relationship with others that is responsive to their expectations that you are someone they can believe.
in. If people are going to willingly follow you, it is because they believe you are credible. To be credible in action, you must do what you say you will do. That means that you must be so clear about your beliefs that you can put them in practice every day. The consistent living out of values is a behavioral way of demonstrating honesty and trustworthiness. It proves that you believe in the path you have taken and are progressing forward with energy and determination.

Truth Three. Values Drive Commitment

People want to know what you stand for and believe in. They want to know what you value. They want to know what you value. And leaders need to know what others value if they are going to be able to forge alignments between personal values and organizational demands.

You can only fully commit to organizations and other causes when there is a good fit between what you value and what the organization values. That means that to do your best as a leader you need to know who you are and what you care about. You need a set of values that guide your decisions and actions. To discover who you are and what you care about, you need to spend some time on the inner work of a leader—in reflection on finding your voice. And keep in mind that it’s not just your values that matter. What is true for you is true for others: they too must find a fit with who they are and what they value. Credible leaders listen, not just to their own aspirations, but also to the needs and desires of others. Leadership is a relationship, and relationships are built on mutual understanding.

Truth Four. Focusing on the Future Sets Leaders Apart

The capacity to imagine and articulate exciting future possibilities is a defining competence of leaders. Leaders are custodians of the future. They are concerned about tomorrow’s world and those who will inherit it. They ask, “What’s new? What’s next? What’s going to happen after the current project is completed?” They think beyond what’s directly in front of them, peer into the distance, imagine what’s over the horizon, and move forward toward a new and compelling future.

Your constituents expect you to know where you’re going and to have a sense of direction. You have to be forward-looking; it’s the quality that most differentiates leaders from individual contributors. Getting yourself and others focused on the exciting possibilities that the future holds is your special role on the team.

Developing the capacity to envision the future requires you to spend more time in the future—meaning more time reflecting on the future, more time reading about the future, and more time talking to others about the future. It’s not an easy assignment, but it is an absolutely necessary one. It also requires you to reflect back on your past to discover the themes that really engage you and excite you. And it means thinking about the kind of legacy you want to leave and the contributions you want to make.

Truth Five. You Can’t Do It Alone

No leader ever got anything extraordinary done without the talent and support of others. Leadership is a team sport, and you need to encourage others in the cause. What strengthens and sustains the relationship between leader and constituent is that leaders are obsessed by what is best for others, not what is best for themselves.

Leaders alone don’t make anything great. Leadership is a shared responsibility. You need others, and they need you. You’re all in this together. To build and sustain that sense of oneness, exemplary leaders are sensitive to the needs of others. They ask questions. They listen. They provide support. They develop skills. They ask for help. They align people in a common cause. They make people feel like anything is possible. They connect people to their need to be in charge of their own lives. They enable others to be even better than they already are.

Truth Six. Trust Rules

If you can’t do it alone and have to rely on others, what’s needed to make that happen? Trust is the social glue that holds individuals and groups together. And the level of trust others have in you will determine the amount of influence you have. You have to earn your constituents’ trust before they’ll be willing to trust you. That means you have to give trust before you can get trust.
Trust rules your personal credibility. Trust rules your ability to get things done. Trust rules your team’s cohesiveness. Trust rules your organization’s innovativeness and performance. Trust rules just about everything you do.

How can you facilitate trust? Research has shown that a few key behaviors contribute to whether or not others perceive you as trustworthy. Here are four actions to keep in mind:

- Behave predictably and consistently.
- Communicate clearly.
- Treat promises seriously.
- Be forthright and candid.

Getting people to work together begins with building mutual trust. Before asking for trust from others, you must demonstrate your own trust in them. That means taking the risk of disclosing what you stand for, value, want, hope for, and are willing and unwilling to do. You also have to be predictable and consistent in your actions: forthright, candid, and clear in your communication; and serious about your promises. And, as we’ve learned so many times, leaders are far better served when they’re forthcoming with information. There’s nothing more destructive to trust than deceit, and nothing more constructive than candor.

Truth Seven. Challenge Is the Crucible for Greatness

Exemplary leaders—the kind of leaders people want to follow—are always associated with changing the status quo. Great achievements don’t happen when you keep things the same. Change invariably involves challenge, and challenge tests you. It introduces you to yourself. It brings you face-to-face with your level of commitment, your grittiness, and your values. It reveals your mindset about change.

The study of leadership is the study of how men and women guide people through uncertainty, hardship, disruption, transformation, transition, recovery, new beginnings, and other significant challenges. It’s also the study of how men and women, in times of constancy and complacency, actively seek to disturb the status quo, awaken new possibilities, and pursue opportunities.

All significant and meaningful accomplishments involve adversity, difficulty, change, and challenge. No one ever got anything extraordinary done by keeping things the same. Risk, uncertainty, and hardships test us. Initiative and grit are imperatives in times of uncertainty. You have to embrace the challenge, control what you can, and take charge of change to be successful in these turbulent times. To deal with setbacks and to bounce back from mistakes, you need grit. You also need to find ways to learn from failure, knowing that’s one of the best teachers you can have.

Truth Eight. You Either Lead by Example Or You Don’t Lead At All

Leaders have to keep their promises and become role models for the values and actions they espouse. You have to go first as a leader. You can’t ask others to do something you aren’t willing to do yourself. Moreover, you have to be willing to admit mistakes and be able to learn from them.

We know that credibility is the foundation of leadership (Truth #2). What is credibility behaviorally? How do you know it when you see it? The most frequent answer we get in our research is: You have to Do What You Will Say You Will Do, or DWYSYWD for short.

Seeing is believing, and our constituents have to see you living out the standards you’ve set and the values you profess. You need to go first in setting the example for others. That’s what it takes to get others to follow your lead. A big part of leading by example is keeping your promises. Your word is only as good as your actions. You have to realize that others look to you and your actions in order to determine for themselves how serious you are about what you say, as well as understand what it will mean for them to be “walking the talk.” Your statements and actions are visible reminders to others about what is or is not important. And when you make a mistake, admit it. Admitting your mistakes and shortcomings goes a long way toward building up people’s confidence in your integrity. It gives them one more important reason to put their trust in you.

Truth Nine. The Best Leaders Are the Best Learners

You have to believe that you (and others) can learn to lead, and that you can become a better leader tomorrow than you are today. Leaders are constant improvement fanatics, and learning is the master
skill of leadership. Learning, however, takes time and attention, practice and feedback, along with good coaching. It also takes a willingness on your part to ask for support.

Leadership is not preordained. It is not a gene, and it is not a trait. There is no hard evidence to support the assertion that leadership is imprinted in the DNA of only some individuals and that the rest of us missed out and are doomed to be clueless.

Leadership can be learned. It is an observable pattern of practices and behaviors, and a definable set of skills and abilities. Skills can be learned, and when we track the progress of people who participate in leadership development programs, we observe that they improve over time. They learn to be better leaders as long as they engage in activities that help them learn now.

But here’s the rub. While leadership can be learned, not everyone learns it, and not all those who learn leadership master it. Why? Because to master leadership you have to have a strong desire to excel, you have to believe strongly that you can learn new skills and abilities, and you have to be willing to devote yourself to continuous learning, and deliberate practice. No matter how good you are, you can always get better.

You can develop yourself as a leader, but it takes a continuous personal investment. It takes time, it takes deliberate practice, it requires setting improvement goals, staying open to feedback, working on your strengths and weaknesses, and having the support of others. Moreover, the very best leaders also believe that it’s possible for everyone to learn to lead. By assuming that leadership is learnable, you stay open to opportunities to turn the workplace into a practice field and every experience into a chance to grow. By believing in yourself and your capacity to learn to lead, you make sure you’re prepared to take advantage of the many opportunities that are open to you.

Truth Ten. Leadership Is an Affair of the Heart

It could also be the first truth. Leaders are in love with their constituents, their customers and clients, and the mission that they are serving. Leaders make others feel important and are gracious in showing their appreciation. Love is the motivation that energizes leaders to give so much for others. You just won’t work hard enough to become great if you aren’t doing what you love.

There’s no integrity and honor with heart. There’s no commitment and conviction without heart. There’s no hope and faith without heart. There’s no trust and support without heart. There’s no learning and risk taking without heart. Nothing important ever gets done without heart. Purely and simply, exemplary leaders excel at improving performance because they pay great attention to the human heart.

Leaders put their hearts in their organizations and their organizations in their hearts. They love what they’re doing and they stay in love with leading, with the people who do the work, with what their organizations produce, and with those who honor them by using their products and services. They show they care by paying attention to people, sharing success stories, and making people feel important and special. Exemplary leaders are positive and upbeat, generating the emotional energy that enables others to flourish.

The Truth about Leadership


In these turbulent times, when the very foundations of organizations and societies are shaken, leaders need to move beyond pessimistic predictions, trendy fads, and simplistic solutions. They need to turn to what’s real and what’s proven. In their new book, Kouzes and Posner reveal ten time-tested truths that show what every leader must know, the questions they must be prepared to answer, and the real-world issues they will likely face. Based on thirty years of research, the book explores the fundamental, enduring truths of leadership that hold constant regardless of context or circumstance—leaders make a difference, credibility, values, trust, leading by example, heart, and more; and shows leaders what they need to know to be effective.
In *The Leadership Challenge* James Kouzes and Barry Posner identify five practices and ten commitments for leadership drawn from their extensive research with leaders in organizations. They write that leadership is about how leaders mobilize others to want to get extraordinary things done in organizations. “It’s about the practices the leaders use to transform values into actions, visions into realities, obstacles into innovations, separateness into solidarity, and risks into rewards.” The following overview introduces the practices and commitments and provides a tool for leaders to examine their own leadership practices and ways to improve their effectiveness.

**Practice 1. Model the Way**

Leaders stand for something, believe in something, and care about something. They find their voice by clarifying their personal values and then expressing those values in their own unique and authentic style. Leaders also know that they cannot force their views on others. Instead, they work tirelessly to forge consensus around a set of common principles.

Leaders must set the example by aligning their personal actions with shared values. Modeling the way is essentially about earning the right and the respect to lead through direct individual involvement and action. People first follow the person, then the plan.

**Commitments**

1. Find your voice by clarifying your personal values.
2. Set the example by aligning actions with shared values.

**Personal Reflection**

- *What are the personal values you bring to your leadership approach and style?*
- *How well aligned are your leadership actions with the shared values in your congregation?*

**Practice 2. Envision the Future.**

Leaders envision the future by imaging exciting and ennobling possibilities. They dream of what might be, and they passionately believe that they can make a positive difference. They envision the future, creating an ideal and unique image of what the community or organization can become. But visions seen by the leader are insufficient to mobilize and energize. Leaders enlist others in exciting possibilities by appealing to shared aspirations.

**Commitments**

3. Envision the future by imaging exciting and ennobling possibilities.
4. Enlist others in a common vision by appealing to shared aspirations.

**Personal Reflection**

- *What is your vision for the future of your congregation? for the future of faith formation?*
- *How do you enlist others in envisioning the future?*

**Practice 3. Challenge the Process**

The work of leaders is change. To them the status quo is unacceptable. Leaders search for opportunities by seeking innovative ways to change, grow, and improve. They seize the initiative to make things happen. And knowing they have no monopoly on good ideas, leaders constantly scan the outside environment for creative ways to do things. Leaders experiment and take risks by constantly generating small wins and by learning from mistakes. And, despite persistent opposition and inevitable setbacks, leaders demonstrate the courage to continue the quest. Exemplary leaders know that they have to be willing to make some personal sacrifices in service of a higher purpose.
Commitments
5. Search for opportunities by seeking innovative ways to change, grow, and improve.
6. Experiment and take risks by constantly generating small wins and learning from mistakes.

Personal Reflection
■ How do you seek out opportunities for innovation? What are the current opportunities for innovation?
■ How do you lead the implementation of new, innovative projects?

Practice 4. Enable Others to Act.
Leaders know they cannot do it alone. It takes partners to get extraordinary things done in an organization. So, leaders foster collaboration by promoting cooperative goals and building trust. They develop teams with spirit and cohesion. They promote a sense of reciprocity and a feeling of “we’re all in this together.” Leaders understand that mutual respect is what sustains extraordinary efforts. Leaders strengthen others by sharing power and providing choice, making each person feel competent and confident. They nurture self-esteem and sustain human dignity.

Commitments
7. Foster collaboration by promoting cooperative goals and building trust.
8. Strengthen others by sharing power and discretion.

Personal Reflection
■ What are the ways you enable others to act by fostering collaboration and strengthening others?

Practice 5. Encourage the Heart.
Getting extraordinary things done in organizations is hard work. To keep hope and determination alive, leaders need to recognize contributions by showing appreciation for individual excellence. Genuine acts of caring uplift spirits and strengthen courage. On every winning team, the members need to share in the rewards of their efforts. So leaders should celebrate the values and the victories by creating a spirit of community. This means expressing pride in the accomplishments of their team and making everyone feel like everyday heroes.

Commitments
9. Recognize contributions by showing appreciation for individual excellence.
10. Celebrate the values and victories by creating a spirit of community.

Personal Reflection
■ How do you recognize the contributions of others?
■ How do you celebrate accomplishments?

The Leadership Challenge (4th Edition)
James M. Kouzes and Barry Z. Posner (Jossey-Bass, 2007)
This leadership classic continues to be a bestseller after three editions and twenty years in print. It is the gold standard for research-based leadership, and the premier resource on becoming a leader. This new edition, with streamlined text, more international and business examples, and a graphic redesign, is more readable and accessible than ever before. The Leadership Challenge, Fourth Edition, has been extensively updated with the latest research and case studies, and offers inspiring new stories of real people achieving extraordinary results. The authors’ central theme remains the same and is more relevant today than ever: “Leadership is Everyone’s Business.” Their “five practices” and “ten commitments” have been proven by hundreds of thousands of dedicated, successful leaders. This edition, with almost one-third new material, emphasizes the global community and refocuses on business leaders.