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The Truth About Leadership

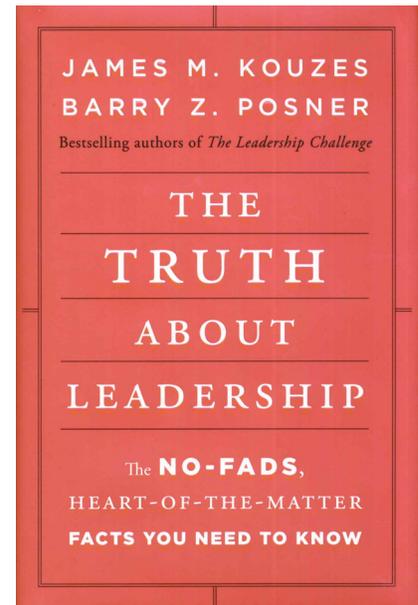
The No-Fads, Heart-of-the-Matter Facts You Need to Know

James M. Kouzes and Barry Z. Posner

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INTRODUCTION

Although the context of leadership has changed significantly in recent years due to factors like globalization and new technologies, the content of leadership has remained constant. In **The Truth About Leadership**, James M. Kouzes and Barry Z. Posner describe what research has revealed about leadership and how certain aspects of leadership endure over time. For three decades, Kouzes and Posner have travelled worldwide, researching the topic of exemplary leadership. This research is used to substantiate each of the book's conclusions. Using ten "truths," the authors clearly describe the foundations of great leadership and lessons about how to become more effective leaders.

INDIVIDUALS MAKE A DIFFERENCE

Kouzes' and Posner's first truth is that each individual can make a difference. Although many believe that leadership is a quality that is found primarily at the

highest levels of organizations, in reality leadership is accessible to anyone who is determined to change the status quo. Leadership can be exhibited at any age, and is not tied to one's position, degree of authority, or power.

In Kouzes' and Posner's research, they ask different people to identify their most important leader role models. Universally, individuals are most likely to select a member of their family. For those less than thirty years old, second place is typically a teacher or coach and third place is held by a community or religious leader. When people are older than thirty, the second place is held by a business leader and more specifically by an immediate supervisor. This research found that the most important leader role models interact with people frequently and are close to where individuals work and live.

The authors also discover that leaders who used “The Five Practices of Exemplary Leadership” are perceived to be better leaders. These practices were developed by Kouzes and Posner and are discussed in more detail in their book, **The Leadership Challenge**. The five practices include:

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

Individuals working with leaders who use the Five Practices find that they are more satisfied with the leaders, more excited about their work, and more productive.

CREDIBILITY IS A CORNERSTONE OF LEADERSHIP

The second truth is that credibility is the foundation of leadership. When a leader is believable, people are more likely to be committed and to provide their time, energy, intelligence, and support. Kouzes and Posner investigated which qualities people looked for in leaders. After years of research, they found that four traits consistently received an average of over 60 percent of the votes.

- *Honest.* Honest leaders not only tell the truth, they also live using a set of ethical principles and clear standards.
- *Forward-Looking.* Good leaders have a vision for the organization, but they also connect that vision to others’ hopes and aspirations. When people share in a future vision, they are more likely to willingly follow a leader.
- *Inspiring.* Inspiring leaders share their excitement about future possibilities. This excitement is accompanied by a positive attitude.
- *Competent.* Competent individuals have a proven track record for getting things done. This generates confidence in a leader.

Three of these characteristics are essential for “source credibility.” When a person communicates information and is believable, they are said to have source

KEY CONCEPTS

In **The Truth About Leadership**, James M. Kouzes and Barry Z. Posner describe what research has revealed about leadership and how certain aspects of leadership endure over time. They identify ten essential lessons that effective leaders must learn.

1. Individuals make a difference.
2. Credibility is the foundation of leadership.
3. Values drive commitment.
4. Focusing on the future sets leaders apart.
5. Leaders cannot do it alone.
6. Trust rules.
7. Challenge is the crucible for greatness.
8. Leaders either lead by example or they do not lead at all.
9. The best leaders are the best learners.
10. Leadership is an affair of the heart.



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credibility. To determine source credibility, researchers usually evaluate speakers on their perceived trustworthiness, expertise, and dynamism. These qualities are similar to being honest, competent, and inspiring.

Kouzes and Posner research whether credibility plays a key role in leading others. They find that when a manager is highly credible, his or her direct reports are more likely to tell others that they are a part of the organization. They develop the “Kouzes-Posner First Law of Leadership” which states that “If you don’t believe in the messenger, you won’t believe the message.” Credibility and personal integrity affects more than just employees. It also plays a role in customer and investor loyalty.

Credibility is evident when people do what they say they will do. There is, in essence, alignment between an individual’s actions and words. The “Kouzes-Posner Second Law of Leadership” is DWYSYWD or “Do What You Say You Will Do.”

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Jim Kouzes and Barry Posner are co-authors of more than a dozen leadership books, including the award-winning, best-selling *The Leadership Challenge*.

Jim Kouzes is the Dean’s Executive Professor of Leadership, Leavey School of Business, at Santa Clara University. He lectures on leadership around the world and is a highly regarded leadership scholar and experienced executive, and *The Wall Street Journal* cited him as one of the 12 best executive educators in the United States.

Barry Posner is professor of leadership at Santa Clara University, where he has received numerous teaching and innovation awards and served as dean of the Leavey School of Business for 12 years (1996 – 2009). Posner is author or co-author of more than 100 research and practitioner-focused articles.

VALUES DRIVE COMMITMENT

Effective leaders understand who they are, where they came from, and the values that guide them. This knowledge helps individuals comprehend what they care about and why they take the actions that they do. Kouzes and Posner believe that a person’s ultimate success in business and life depends on how well that person knows him or herself and what they value, and suggest that the third leadership truth is that values drive commitment.

Clarity of values gives you the confidence to take the right turns, to make the tough decisions, to act with determination, and to take charge of your life.

Good leaders are known for standing by their principles. Research suggests that clarity about personal values has the greatest effect on employees’ feelings about their work. The authors indicate that the first step to leadership is finding the answer to the question, “What is my framework for living?” It is only possible to fully commit to an organization and its work when a good fit exists between what a leader values and what the organization values.

LEADERS FOCUS ON THE FUTURE

One of the defining qualities of leaders is their ability to imagine and communicate exciting future possibilities. The fourth truth of leadership is that focusing on the future sets leaders apart. Based on their surveys of what characteristics people want in leaders, Kouzes and Posner found that only honesty was more important than being forward-looking. Interestingly, in Asia, Europe, and Australia, the preference for forward-looking leaders is higher than in the United States. As a leader gains more work experience and moves higher up in the organizational hierarchy, the importance of being forward-looking increases.

For young leaders, it can be difficult to envision the future, and few devote any time to this discipline. This can be a barrier to success. Front-line leaders must anticipate events that will occur approximately three months into the future. Middle managers, however, may need to look three to five years out and executives typically have a planning horizon that is ten or more years into the future.

To develop the capacity to be forward-looking, leaders must spend time each week investigating what could occur in the future. Research shows that most executives spend just three percent of their time focused on issues that will affect business in ten years or more. This is not sufficient. Leaders must remind others who are focused on day-to-day details about the longer-term vision for the organization. All leaders should view themselves as their organization's "future department." This means making time to study the future. When considering emerging business trends, it can be helpful to categorize them. The World Future Society suggests using six different trend groups: (1) demographics, (2) economics, (3) governments, (4) environment, (5) society, and (6) technology.

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.

University of Southern California professor and leadership expert, Warren Bennis, says that an appropriate motto for leaders is, "Only the optimists survive." Optimism does not mean that leaders should ignore hard realities. By understanding reality, leaders can be better prepared to address and even prosper in adverse times. A leader's outlook on the future has a large influence on an organization's success. A special role for leaders is getting themselves and their team excited about future possibilities.

LEADERS DO NOT WORK ALONE

The fifth truth of leadership is that leaders cannot do it alone. No leader has done anything extraordinary without the help of others. One of the essential aspects of leadership is the relationship between leaders and constituents. Making this connection requires leaders to listen carefully. Effective leaders understand others' points of view and this creates a resonance with constituents.

After listening to constituents' desires, it is necessary to engage in a dialogue about the future. One important part of a leader's work is to discover and then reflect the meaning that others are looking for. Inspirational leadership focuses on showing people how

the vision can benefit them and meet their needs.

Because good leaders do not accomplish their goals alone, it is necessary to build a team that feels capable of taking action. Empowering people to act like leaders themselves requires an investment in their personal development. Leadership is a shared responsibility.

TRUST RULES

Research shows that high trust organizations outperform low trust ones by 286 percent in total return to shareholders. When leaders do not inspire trust, there is a risk that their organizations will underperform and lag in innovation. Kouzes and Posner state that the level of trust people have in leaders is directly related to the amount of influence they will accept willingly. The fifth truth of leadership is that trust rules.

When trust exists between a leader and constituents, energy is generated. Until people feel safe, they will not take risks. The more people trust, the more they will risk. An environment of trust begins when one person takes a risk by opening up to another. Leaders must be the people who take that first step and start the cycle of trust. Leaders earn trust by showing that they have the competence, the system, and the processes necessary to make people feel safe and trusting.

Research indicates that four behaviors contribute to whether a person is perceived as trustworthy or not:

1. *Predictable and consistent behavior.* When people know they can count on a leader, then the leader's words and actions are more likely to influence others.
2. *Clear communication.* When a leader communicates about an intention, it will be viewed as a promise by others. Effective leaders are clear about their meaning and as a result, do not mislead.
3. *Promises are treated seriously.* When leaders treat commitments seriously, others do also.
4. *Forthright and candid behavior.* If leaders are forthright and honest, others will have less reason to be angry or try to deceive in retaliation.

Communication is essential to maintaining trust over

the long term. A key responsibility for leaders is to provide people with the information they need in a timely manner and in an understandable and usable form. If people feel that information is being withheld or if it is late in coming, distrust begins to grow.

CHALLENGES LEAD TO GREATNESS

When Kouzes and Posner ask people to describe experiences of personal best leadership, the responses almost always relate to situations related to challenge and change. This illustrates how important it is to view challenge as an opportunity, rather than a threat. The seventh leadership truth is that challenge is the crucible for greatness.

Leaders view challenges differently than other people. They tend to see the opportunities that lie inside adversities and they take the action needed to move things forward. This can be stressful work and the authors reiterate that successfully leading change requires strength and resilience. Although it may be impossible to control what is occurring in the larger environment, it is possible to control one's response to the situation. Leaders must believe that they can positively influence the direction of a situation through their own efforts. Even small steps can get an organization moving in the right direction.

It is possible to learn how to respond positively to challenging situations. Researchers have found that "grit" is a necessary quality for attaining difficult goals. Grit is defined by Angela Duckworth, professor of psychology at the University of Pennsylvania, as "perseverance and passion for long-term goals." Leaders need to find goals that will hold the attention of the organization for a long period of time. Those organizations that are successful have a passion for a purpose and the perseverance to stick with that purpose for the long term.

One of the realities of facing challenges is that sometimes they lead to failure. However leaders do not perceive failure as a bad thing, and instead view it as a signal that the organization was doing something difficult and extraordinary. Learning is one of the by-products of failure. When mistakes happen, leaders must ask, "What can be learned from this experi-

ence?"

LEAD BY EXAMPLE

Leaders must demonstrate to others how they should feel, think, and act. It is also incumbent on leaders to demonstrate that they will engage in the same behaviors that they are asking others to engage in. Actions speak louder than words. Kouzes' and Posner's eighth truth of leadership is that leaders either lead by example or they do not lead at all.

People are constantly watching leaders to see what they do and to compare that behavior to what the leaders said they would do. Actions that are consistent with words provide evidence that leaders mean what they say. When leaders' actions are inconsistent with their words, people grow cynical and disenchanting.

It is also essential for leaders to take responsibility when they make mistakes. Not doing so undermines and erodes credibility. Admitting mistakes sets a positive example for others and it makes it easier for others to make and acknowledge their own mistakes. This sends a signal that it is acceptable to take risks and learn from mistakes. Leaders can also hold themselves accountable by asking for feedback from others. This input is necessary for leaders to grow.

All significant and meaningful accomplishments involve adversity, difficulty, change, and challenge. No one ever got anything extraordinary done by keeping things the same.

LEARNING IS ESSENTIAL FOR LEADERS

Kouzes and Posner believe that leadership is an observable pattern of practices, behaviors, skills, and abilities that can be learned. This leads to the ninth truth of leadership: the best leaders are the best learners. To become a better leader, individuals must want to excel and devote time to continuous learning and deliberate practice.

Unfortunately, there is an enduring myth that leadership cannot be learned. This is a significant deterrent to leadership development. There are many different ways that leadership can be learned, such as active experimentation, observing others, classroom study,

reading books, and reflecting on experiences. While no single learning approach is most effective, research shows that leaders who engaged enthusiastically in the style that worked for them learned the most.

When researching their book *100 Things You Need to Know: Best Practices for Managers and HR*, Bob Eichinger, Mike Lombardo, and Dave Ulrich found that the best predictor of future success in new and different managerial jobs is learning agility. This is the ability to reflect on experiences and then modify one's behavior based on those reflections. A "growth mindset" helps to build individuals' capacity for lifelong and agile learning. This mindset is based on the belief that one's basic qualities can be cultivated through different types of effort. Experts discovered that people with fixed mindsets perform more poorly than those with growth mindsets. As a result, mindsets are more important in taking on challenges than skill sets.

There is no fast track to excellence in leadership. The best leaders reached their level of performance due to the amount of time spent learning and practicing. The authors indicate that expertise is developed through deliberate practice. Deliberate practice has five components: (1) it is designed to improve performance, (2) it must be repeated many times, (3) feedback on results is continuously available, (4) it is highly demanding mentally, and (5) it is not intended to be fun. Another contributor to developing expertise is a supportive environment, and this may come from coaches, mentors, and teachers.

LEADERSHIP REQUIRES HEART

Many people believe that managers must separate their emotions from their work and approach situations rationally. However, research shows that the best managers and leaders are those who are open and caring. Kouzes and Posner suggest that high performing leaders improve performance because they pay significant attention to the human heart. The tenth truth of leadership is that leadership is an affair of the heart.

Leaders are in love not only with leading, but also with their organization's products and services, and the people in the organization. One style of leadership with heart is called "servant leadership." This occurs when leaders place others at the center, deflect atten-

tion to people in the organization, and respond to the needs and interests of their constituents. These behaviors make people feel more confident and elevated to a higher level.

Good leaders also show their love by recognizing constituents in formal and informal ways. The most effective forms of recognition are personal, rather than elaborate or expensive. Another way that leaders demonstrate their appreciation is by engaging with people. When leaders are visible and available, they are perceived as more genuine, approachable, and human.

Positive leadership generates positive emotions throughout an organization. Barbara L. Frederickson, professor of psychology at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, discovered that a positive outlook leads to greater creativity and innovation. When managers feel positive, they are more accurate and careful when making decisions. People with a positive attitude are also better equipped to deal with challenges and more resilient when under high stress. Positive energy is particularly important during volatile times. When the environment is uncertain, leaders must accentuate the positive.



FEATURES OF THE BOOK

Reading Time: 5 hours, 197 pages

The Truth About Leadership describes ten key lessons that help leaders think, decide, and act more effectively both in their personal and professional lives. Although Kouzes and Posner wrote the book for emerging leaders, the concepts are equally relevant to individuals with many years in a leadership role. Important ideas are illustrated through compelling examples and the book is written in an easy-to-read style. Each chapter builds on the next, so it is advisable to read **The Truth About Leadership** from cover to cover. At the conclusion of the book, there are endnotes for each chapter, as well as a comprehensive index.

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