



## The Leadership Challenge

How to Keep Getting Extraordinary Things Done in Organizations

by James M. Kouzes and Barry Z. Posner  
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405 pages

### Focus

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### Take-Aways

- Leadership is not a genetic trait. Anyone can learn to be a leader.
- Almost everything taught about leadership in traditional management circles is wrong.
- Leadership requires specific skills and commitments.
- It is possible to learn these behaviors and attitudes, and become an effective leader.
- Successful leaders challenge the status quo.
- The ability to communicate a compelling vision is a critical leadership ability.
- Leaders become more powerful by granting power to their subordinates.
- A leader must set an example for the organization.
- It's a leader's job to encourage the heart of the organization.
- Leadership is for the many, not the few.

### Rating (10 is best)

Overall	Applicability	Innovation	Style
<b>9</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>8</b>

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## Review

### What You Will Learn

In this Abstract you will learn: 1) A series of best practices for effective leadership; 2) What qualities employees consider most important in their leaders, and 3) What principles leaders should follow to inspire and motivate their organizations.

### Recommendation

James M. Kouzes and Barry Z. Posner's remarkable guide debunks the myth of the leader as a maverick rather than a team player. It also tackles the image of the leader as a special breed. Indeed, the book's basic premise is that there are certain critical and identifiable skills that most anyone can learn and adopt in order to become an effective leader. The authors spell out these skill sets, and list the guiding principles that leaders should follow and represent to their organizations. The seminal book is a mile deep and a mile wide. *getAbstract.com* recommends this excellent manual to all current and future leaders.

## Abstract

### Mastering Leadership

Abraham Lincoln once characterized the leader's lonely job this way: "If the end brings me out all right, what's said against me won't amount to anything. If the end brings me out wrong, ten angels swearing I was right would make no difference." Leadership is often treated as a mystical, inexplicable quality, like charisma or spirituality. But, what if leadership was actually a set of behaviors and attitudes that you can study and master?

A decade of research with almost 1,400 leaders indicates that exemplary leadership rests upon five fundamental practices and 10 leadership commitments that make the five principles work. If you master these critical attributes, you will be able to inspire any organization, no matter how difficult the circumstances. Universally, effective leaders follow these principles: 1) They challenge the process; 2) They inspire a shared vision; 3) They enable others to act; 4) They set an example, and 5) They encourage the heart.

### Challenge the Process

One of the differences between leaders and followers is that leaders are inherently inclined to challenge the processes that constrain their organizations. Because they take action, leaders seem to be in the right place at the right time. Correspondingly, leaders push innovation and change the status quo. Not a single leader interviewed focused on keeping things unchanged. In this sense, leaders are pioneers who are willing to try something new and better. They have a relatively high tolerance for risk. While leaders are not always creators or innovators, they can recognize new ideas and promote the adoption of those new concepts or practices. To be an exemplary leader, be an early adopter of ideas that are good for your organization. Leaders seem to learn best when challenged by difficult circumstances. Their resourcefulness enables them to take chances and succeed.

When employees are asked about key leadership traits, they say leaders should be honest, forward-looking, inspiring, competent and fair-minded, qualities that might induce

"The leader's primary contribution is in the recognition of good ideas, the support of those ideas and the willingness to challenge the system in order to get new products, processes, services and systems adopted."

"To get a feel for the true essence of leadership, assume that everyone who works with you is a volunteer. Assume that your employees are there because they want to be, not because they have to be."

“Leaders enable others to act not by hoarding the power they have but by giving it away.”

“Credibility of action is the single most significant determinant of whether a leader will be followed over time.”

“Love — of their products, their services, their constituents, their clients and customers, and their work — may be the best-kept leadership secret of all.”

someone to challenge the status quo. Such leaders are seen as credible, and credibility makes their challenges of the status quo more likely to succeed.

1. The first leadership commitment is to seek challenging opportunities to grow, change, innovate and improve. This means treating every job like an adventure rather than a task. Think from the ground up; approach every assignment like a turnaround project. Constantly question the status quo, and never accept the answer, “Because that’s how we’ve always done it.” Don’t try to think up all the solutions — send your people out to shop for ideas. Make it everyone’s job to find better ways to operate. Add adventure to everyone’s work. Learn new skills to stimulate your creativity.

### **Inspire a Shared Vision**

Leaders believe they can make extraordinary things happen. They can envision a bright future and can convince colleagues to support their visions. Leaders develop clear visions of where they want to go, and then construct events and systems to get there, because vision is the force that invents the future. While visions alone are insufficient — since leaders need constituents — people decide to follow leaders whose visions they share.

If you understand people, you can convince them to believe in your vision by breathing life into their hopes, dreams and aspirations. Leadership, in this sense, is a dialogue rather than a monologue. Once you understand your constituents, you can breathe life into their hopes and dreams and paint a picture of a brighter future for them, a future in which they have a prominent role. To have your vision accepted, you must communicate it enthusiastically. When leaders identify the innovations that give them the most pride, they name projects that they were the most enthusiastic about before the outcome could be known. Of course, challenging the status quo and being a visionary carries risk, so your risk tolerance matters.

2. The second leadership commitment is to experiment, take risks and learn from your mistakes. A leader-visionary can test ideas by setting up small experiments, making it safe for others to try new ideas, too. Some of your bright ideas won’t work, but that’s fine as long as you learn from your mistakes. Most people, when confronted with change, immediately douse any enthusiasm for it. Don’t discard an idea that initially sounds strange. Instead, insist that your organization honor its risk takers. Study your failures as carefully as your successes, and encourage people to think of solutions, not obstacles.
3. The third leadership commitment is to envision a future that is more uplifting and ennobling. You can think about your past in specific ways to determine where you want to be in the future. Be specific; determine exactly what you want. Write a vision statement and dare to act on your intuition. Test your assumptions; become a futurist. Craft a vision that improves your co-workers’ lives and prepares your company’s future.

### **Enable Others to Act**

Effective leaders, no matter how skilled or smart, know that even their best ideas will fall on barren soil without other people’s assistance. Effective leadership is always a team effort — a leader without a team is no leader. Exemplary leaders inspire a sense of organizational teamwork far beyond an inner cadre. People respond to leaders who enable them to act. Leaders understand that people cannot do their best work if they feel weak, insignificant or alienated from the process. Give them the sense of ownership they need.

“Flesh-and-blood leaders know that the more they control others, the less likely it is that people will excel. They also know that the more they control, the less they’ll be trusted. Leaders don’t command and control, they serve and support.”

“Leadership is certainly not conveyed in a gene, and it’s most definitely not a secret code that can’t be understood by ordinary people.”

“Leadership is a reciprocal process between those who choose to lead and those who choose to follow.”

4. The fourth leadership commitment is to appeal to others people’s values, dreams and hopes to share your common vision. Learn the interests of the people you lead, and then present them with a vision that makes the intangible tangible. To do this effectively, you first must listen passionately to your people.
5. The fifth leadership commitment is to foster collaboration by promoting cooperative goals and building trust. Think in terms of mutual goals, because no one ever accomplishes anything significant alone. Instead of saying, “Here’s what I want to do,” say, “Here’s what we need to do.” Encourage people to collaborate and exchange ideas.

### Set an Example

It’s not enough to talk the talk — your followers will watch to see if you walk the walk. True respect is not earned with a title. Many leaders explain that they would never ask someone to do something they are not willing to do first. Leaders are leaders because they are willing to go first. Leaders are expected to set an example and stand up for their beliefs. Correspondingly, leaders need detailed operational plans. You can succeed as a leader by steering projects along a carefully planned course, measuring performance and providing feedback. If you know the steps toward success, you’ll have a better chance of arriving there.

6. The sixth leadership commitment is to strengthen others, give away power, assign critical tasks and offer support. If you want your people to empower those who report to them, you’ll have to do the same thing. At Ritz-Carlton Hotels, associates who work the registration desk have the authority to sign off on as much as \$2,000 without management approval. You should increase signature authority at all levels, reduce unneeded steps and procedures, and generally support the exercise of independent judgment. One of the great leadership skills is to make other people heroes.
7. The seventh leadership commitment is to make your behavior consistent with shared values. Write your own leadership credo — what are the principles, beliefs and values that will guide your leadership style? Begin by knowing yourself, your strengths and the things that matter to you. Share your personal values. Take an action audit, evaluating what you do to ensure that your behavior is consistent with the beliefs you espouse.
8. The eighth leadership commitment is to achieve small wins that promote consistent progress and build commitment. Progress is always incremental. To build your organization’s confidence and enthusiasm, recognize each small step along the way.

### Encourage the Heart

People often get frustrated and exhausted during the climb toward excellence. Because this is an arduous process, naturally people may be tempted to give up along the way. It’s your job as leader to restore the heart of your organization and encourage your constituents to carry onward. Leaders rally the troops.

Sometimes you can achieve this through dramatic gestures: an all-hands meeting, a special theme or program, or effective use of symbolism. At other times, however, a simple action is enough to invest your organization with a new spirit. One plant manager used to dress up as a clown and give balloons to the employees. But make no mistake: encouraging the heart of your organization to help people persevere through difficult

"If there's a clear and distinguishing feature about the process of leading, it's in the distinction between mobilizing others to do and mobilizing others to want to do."

"Never let a moment of learning pass you by — and use these teachable moments for stories after the fact."

times is tremendously serious business. The best-kept leadership secret may be love: love of product, love of service, love of customers and love of employees.

9. The ninth leadership commitment is to recognize individual contributions that lead to the success of each project. Recognize people with rewards that have personal meaning to them. Creative awards encourage creative thinking.
10. The tenth leadership commitment is to celebrate team achievements, not just individual ones. After all, you want your staffers to think as a team, so you must recognize and reward team accomplishments. Be a cheerleader, but in a way that feels comfortable to you. Celebrations help to acknowledge small wins on the larger road to victory.

### Myths of Leadership

Just about everything taught about leadership in traditional management circles is wrong. Perhaps that explains why there aren't more leaders in society and business. Indeed, the first challenge a leader must face is getting rid of flawed notions about what a leader really is. For example, traditional management suggests that organizations are stable, orderly and run like clockwork, but most real leaders shake things up instead of protecting the status quo.

Control is the focus of traditional management theory. The leader's job is to control resources, material and personnel. In reality, true leaders know that the more they seek to control their organizations, the more they keep people from attaining excellence. Leaders who emphasize their own control are rarely trusted, because trust must go both ways.

Yet another myth is that leaders are in a superior position. Leaders who exaggerate their own significance will struggle to achieve their objectives. Leadership is a process, not a position. The idea that only a few can master that process is a myth. You can learn to use the skills that promote that process, whether you sit in the executive suite or sweep up after the building closes. More than 10 years of research has shown that ordinary people can learn to get extraordinary things done. Leadership is for the many, not the few.

## About The Author

James M. Kouzes is the CEO and chairman of Tom Peters Group/Learning Systems. Barry Z. Posner is dean of Santa Clara University's Leavey School of Business and Administration. *IndustryWeek* magazine named their previous book, *Credibility*, as one of the best business books of 1993. The authors are also frequent speakers and corporate consultants to 3M, AT&T, Kodak and many other organizations.

## Buzz-Words

Action audit / Process / Risk tolerance / Status quo