

# 5 Practices of Leadership

Reference: Kouzes & Posner – “The Leadership Challenge”

Kouzes and Posner’s research, over 30 years, identified five common practices of leaders who make extraordinary things happen. They define a leader as someone whose direction you will willingly follow. This paper assumes that someone is a leader when they are leading, not because they hold a title or position. Anyone and everyone leads. People step in and out of leading throughout a day or a lifetime. We don’t believe in ‘A leader’. Rather our aim is that *all* people have attitudes and skills for leadership, and all people are capable of contributing more and better leadership.

Kouzes and Posner found that what most of us admire in leaders are those who are honest (85%), forward-looking (70%), inspiring (69%), competent (64%). Over thirty years of research these four attributes have stayed consistently at the top, in that order. When looked at collectively, they underscore the importance of *credibility* in leadership.

**The top Five Practices of Exemplary Leadership** identified by Kouzes and Posner are:

## 1. Model the Way

People most admire leaders who believe in something and who will stand up for those beliefs. Kouzes and Posner’s First Law of Leadership is “*If you don’t believe in the messenger, you won’t believe the message*”. It then follows that:

- You can’t believe in the messenger if you don’t know what the messenger believes.
- You can’t be the messenger until you’re clear about what you believe.

To credibly lead, you need to have a deep understanding of the values, principles, standards, ethics, and ideals that drive you. And when leading, you are not just speaking for yourself, but for the whole group. You must not only be clear about your own personal values but also make sure there’s agreement on a set of shared values among everyone involved.

Think of leaders you admire. What do they have in common? They have *strong beliefs about matters of principle*. They are committed to a clear set of values. They are passionate about their causes.

Modelling the Way goes deeper than acting at a simple ‘task’ level. When leading, you must first clarify what *you* believe in and what you’re willing to take a stand for before you can articulate it to others. Then you must develop your own voice and vocabulary to communicate your values and beliefs.

When you align your actions with what you believe (ie. You do what you say you will do), people will be more likely to trust and follow you. Model how you expect others to act – that is, demonstrate integrity. Then you will be credible, people will trust you and want to join forces with you.

### **AFFIRM SHARED VALUES**

When leading, we understand the importance of diversity in our groups and yet we still need to be clear about common values. When individual and group values are in synch, great energy is generated, along with commitment, enthusiasm and drive. Shared values are the foundation for building productive and genuine working relationships. Then people care about their work. Shared values enable people to act both independently and interdependently. Shared values mobilise people to act as one.

Research from highly successful organisations reveals three central themes in their values:

- High performance standards
- A caring attitude about people
- A sense of uniqueness and pride

Research also shows that those organisations who help their employees or members to discover their own individual values perform much better than those that set organisational values and ask employees to live these values. The most powerful thing you can do as a leader is to know your own values, live them, and assist others to know and live their values.

### **FIND YOUR VOICE**

To act with integrity, you must first know who you are. We can only speak the truth about who we are by speaking in our own voice. If your first task is to explore your values - find what really matters to you – then the next step is to develop the vocabulary to communicate it, by finding your unique voice.

Keeping a journal is a powerful way to develop and practise your voice. Take time out every day to dialogue with the small, still voice within. Practice integrity by regularly asking, “What have I done today that demonstrates this value that is dear to me? How might I have acted that says this is not a value for me? What will I do more of to fully express my values?” In this way your values become your guides, a moral compass to guide your day.

At the same time, you are building your vocabulary to be able to express your voice succinctly, powerfully, and originally, so people know it's *you* who is speaking. Leadership, like other art forms, such as painting and playing music, is a means of personal expression. In your journal and daily life, you will learn to express yourself in ways that are uniquely your own. As you do so, you will grow in confidence and your ability to influence others. In addition, because your first follower is yourself, your honest dialogue with self will build self-knowledge, commitment to self, and self-respect.

## **2. Inspire a Shared Vision**

When leading, you look forward and beyond the horizon. You envision a future that is worth working together to achieve. You have a positive outlook that engenders hope. You are expressive and attract followers through your genuineness and skillful communication. You show others how mutual interests can be met through commitment to a compelling, common purpose. It's not necessarily *your* view of what

that purpose should be. Rather, your leadership tunes into what you are hearing as others' aspirations and passion. Help them identify a shared and powerfully attractive vision, and where they fit in that vision.

## **3. Challenge the Process**

When leading, you are a pioneer who seeks out new opportunities. You will need courage and strength to take risks by challenging and changing the status quo. To achieve the Vision, you must also help the group gain clarity what the current reality is – which bits are worth keeping, which bits should be changed, and what is the path from where we are now to the imagined future Vision. You will innovate, experiment, and explore ways to improve a situation. Make it easier for others to achieve goals by focusing on key priorities and breaking projects into achievable steps. Create opportunities for small wins and celebrate them. Treat disappointments as valuable learning experiences; creating a space of 'safe to fail'. Fail early, fail small, fail often and turn 'failure' into knowledge.

You are courageous and prepared to meet whatever challenges confront you. On a weekly basis, you can keep this exemplary practice at the forefront by asking, “What have I done this week to improve, so that I am more effective than I was last week?”

## **4. Enable Others to Act**

As a leader, you infuse people with spirit-developing relationships based on mutual trust. This can sustain extraordinary effort. You stress collaborative goals. You actively involve others in designing and planning the way forward, giving them discretion to make their own decisions. Through developing others, you ensure people feel strong and capable, and that they have the confidence, skills, resources and support to succeed. Before every interaction with another, you can ask, “What can I do in this interaction to make sure this person feels more capable as a result of what I say and do?”

## **5. Encourage the Heart**

Research shows that the highest performing leaders are more open and caring, express more affection, demonstrate more passion and are more positive, grateful and encouraging than

lower performers. Knowing that achieving extraordinary results takes hard work, strong leadership understands the power of recognising and celebrating how others are making a difference. Encourage people to persist in their efforts by recognising their contribution to progress towards the common vision. Express pride in the team's accomplishments. Find and plan for ways to celebrate achievements in a way which nurtures and inspires people to sustain their effort.

## Commit to the Five Practices

When all five practices are done together, in an integrated way, they have much more impact than any of them done alone.

They can be used as a checklist. If you are doing these practices, you are leading.

Identify which ones you already do well and choose one practice to emphasise further. These practices don't have to be time consuming. Do

the small steps that lead to big results. Choose a small step from the list below, or identify one of your own:

- Think about when you performed at your best as a leader. What of the Five Practices were you doing in that situation that you can do more often? (Several Exemplary Practices)
- Take five minutes to talk to your group or team about exciting possibilities you see for the future. (Inspire Shared Vision)
- Ask, "What have I done this week to improve, so that I am more effective than I was last week?" (Challenge the Process)
- Ask, "What can I do in this interaction to make sure this person feels more capable as a result of what I say and do?" (Enable Others to Act)
- Ask, "What can I do this week to encourage my team, so they are more energised towards achieving the vision?" (Encourage the Heart)

## Bibliography

Kouzes, J. P. (2017). *The leadership challenge : How to make extraordinary things happen in organizations (Sixth ed.)*. . Hoboken, New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons.