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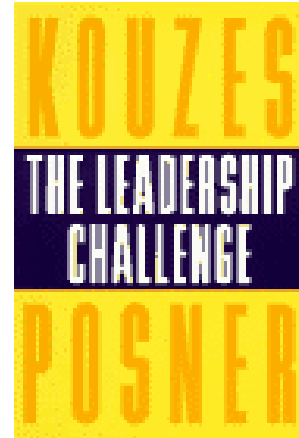
## Leadership, Who's Business is it Anyway?

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*James Kouzes and Barry Posner distill years of experience and research into a down-to-earth guide on getting extraordinary things done in organizations...*

By TARAK MODI

In “The Leadership Challenge”, Kouzes and Posner, renowned leadership experts and teachers, attempt to clarify in a revolutionary way, a topic that has baffled man from time immemorial – the topic of leadership. The intent of the book is to describe the critical role of leadership in human organizations. The practices and principles discussed in this book are based on years of extensive research studies conducted by the authors themselves. The book’s origins are in a research project the authors began in 1983 with an objective of understanding what people did when they were at their “personal best” in leading others. The uniqueness of their approach is that instead of interviewing star performers in excellent companies to discover best practices, the authors decided to interview ordinary people about their extraordinary experiences. This fits in nicely with the primary goal of the book, which is to “strengthen the abilities and uplift the spirits” of the everyday person faced with the daunting challenge of “leading” others, whether it be on the job, in the community, or at home. The book isn’t about leaders themselves, but rather about *leadership*; how ordinary people exercise it and in the process become effective leaders who get extraordinary things done in their organizations.



The authors take over where most books leave off, considering two sides of the leadership equation – the leaders and their constituents – arguing that one side cannot be successful without the support of the other. The authors claim leadership to be a reciprocal process between those who choose to lead and those who choose to follow. In fact, to stress the importance of this view, the authors devote an entire chapter describing the dynamics of the relationship between “the two sides of the coin.” Among the dynamics of this relationship is the expectation that the constituents have of their leader, which the authors have effectively summarized at the beginning of the chapter with a quote from Brian Carroll, “Without credibility, you can’t lead.”

The authors work hard to bust many of the prevailing myths of leadership, such as the notion of the leader being a so called “Robin Hood,” magnetizing a band of followers with courageous acts, or that of the leader being a prescient visionary with Merlin-like powers, and perhaps the most pernicious myth of all, that leadership is reserved only for the few “chosen ones.”

The authors take great care from the very beginning to make crystal clear their most important conclusion that leadership is a set of observable, learnable practices, which can be mastered by anyone with the desire to lead effectively. In my opinion though, the book's most valuable contribution is the distillation of their findings into a set of five practices encompassing a total of ten commitments.

The book is very logically organized around these practices and commitments. Part one of the book is a good "warm up" to prepare the reader for the meat of the text, the actual practices and commitments themselves. Parts two through six of the book are devoted to the set of five practices, dedicating one chapter for each of the ten commitments. It is this organization of the book also makes it an excellent reference book. The book is supplemented with a comprehensive appendix that explains and validates the theoretical foundations of their Leadership Practices Inventory (LPI). This inventory is extremely useful for identifying places of possible improvements for a leader within the context of the five practices discussed in the book.

While most of the ideas and concepts presented by the authors are revealing and supported by examples, these must be taken with a grain of salt, since most of the discussions seem to be very "purist" in nature. Take, for example, the first practice of the set of five practices – "Challenging the Process." The essence of this practice is to constantly question and possibly refine every activity within the organization, which by itself is a noble thought. But where do you draw the line? What about that age-old adage, "If it's not broke, don't try to fix it"? The authors do not lay down guidelines for the novice leader to answer these questions. The authors suggest treating "every assignment as a start-over, even if it isn't." This is probably not going to be feasible in a production environment in which businesses capitalize on learning curve efficiencies. "Starting over again" is, in essence, discarding these efficiencies. Maybe it's not, but the authors do not clarify this point. The authors encourage leaders to make mistakes and learn from them, but they never clarify to the novice leader that that's not all they should be doing. I believe that there must be a balance between engaging in innovative and potentially risky behavior and actually "getting the product out to the market", but the authors do not explicitly mention this.

This leads us to perhaps the most glaring shortcoming of the book: the lack of any guidelines of how to gauge a particular situation and apply the proper mix of the five practices to that situation. Does a commander leading a battalion through enemy territory, in the midst of a war, apply the same mix of the five practices as a community leader organizing a charity fundraiser with volunteer-only help? In my opinion, the book does not answer this question. It is as important to know what behaviors to engage in, as it is to know what behaviors *not* to engage in. A definition of diplomacy "Not the art of knowing what to say but rather knowing what not to say" comes to mind here.

Regardless of whether one completely agrees with the philosophy of the authors' "*Five Practices And Ten Commitments of Leadership*" and the supporting examples, one is compelled to concede that this remarkably rich and detailed, yet easy-to-read book, provides nutritious "food for thought" and sharpens our understanding of a challenge that

most of us face today – the leadership challenge – and ultimately gives us the tools for meeting this challenge head on. After all, as Kouzes and Posner would say, and I agree, “*Leadership is everyone’s business.*”

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