
Reviewed by Chelsea Truesdell

**Introduction**

*The Leadership Challenge* serves as a resource for any leader, whether a college student organization president or a Fortune 500 company’s Chief Executive Officer. First published in 1987, Kouzes and Posner’s book is organized in a series of chapters that explain and clarify their suggested “Five Practices of Exemplary Leadership”. The book aims to help leaders engage in these best practices, in order to strengthen their leadership skills and abilities. The Five Practices of Exemplary Leadership are: Model the Way, Inspire a Shared Vision, Challenge the Process, Enable Others to Act, and Encourage the Heart. Kouzes and Posner describe these Practices not as components of a leader’s personality, but behaviors that are available to anyone through committed practice. Within the Five Practices outlined in *The Leadership Challenge* there are also “Ten Commitments of Leadership”. Through their explanation of the Five Practices and Ten Commitments, Kouzes and Posner showcase real-life success stories of leaders, as they apply to each practice and/or commitment.

**The Leadership Challenge: A Theoretical Frame**

Kouzes and Posner’s *The Leadership Challenge* began with a research project they began many years prior to publishing the book. The authors were interested in finding out what “people did when they were at their ‘personal best’ in leading others” (p. xiii). Through countless interviews, they discovered that all types of leaders, across different industries, professions, and countries, exhibited similar practices when describing their most exceptional leadership accomplishments. A compilation of Kouzes and Posner’s original research, *The Leadership Challenge* serves as guide for leaders across disciplines looking to improve their leadership capabilities.

**Elements of the book**

*The Leadership Challenge* is organized into seven parts. Part 1 serves as an introduction to Kouzes and Pozner’s leadership framework, introducing the reader to the Five Practices of Exemplary Leadership, and emphasizing the relational nature of leadership. Kouzes and Posner suggest that successful leadership is a function of how well people interact. Positive relationships between leaders and followers are crucial in “enabling people to get extraordinary things done” (p. 25). The book notes the importance of constituents in the leadership process, as they are a key factor in achieving the team’s goal. In part 1, Kouzes and Posner write about the importance of specific traits possessed by a good leader, including honesty, competence, and the ability to be forward-looking in achieving followership. The compilation of these traits leads to “The Kouzes-Posner First Law of Leadership” which states that “if you don’t believe in the messenger, you won’t believe the message” (p. 38). While the aforementioned traits are important in leadership, the most essential is credibility. Kouzes and Posner remark that without credibility, the leader will not be able to motivate or lead his team. Thus, “The Kouzes-Posner Second Law of Leadership” is “DWYSYWD: Do What You Say You Will Do”. 
In part 2, Kouzes and Posner explain the first of their Five Practices, Model the Way. The practice of Model the Way includes the Commitments “Clarify Values” and “Set the Example”. To Clarify Values, the authors suggest you must find your voice and affirm shared values. If you are unable to find your voice, Kouzes and Posner say you will end up mimicking someone else, and never gain the integrity to lead (p. 49). Shared values promote loyalty, teamwork, and a strong sense of the goal at hand. To Set the Example, leaders need to personify the shared values, and teach other to model the team’s values. Watching what you say, making sure your actions align with how you act, and reinforcing the behaviors you want to see are all important aspects of Setting the Example. This section, along with all others, incorporates real-life examples of leaders carrying out these Commitments in their teams.

In part 3, the second of the Five Practices, Inspire a Shared Vision, is explained. “Envisioning the Future” and “Enlisting Others” are the two commitments embedded within this Practice. To Envision the Future, the authors stress the importance of imagining your team’s possibilities and finding a common purpose. In imagining possibilities, the leader is charged to reflect on the group’s past, attend the present, and prospect for the future. Depending on the nature of your role as a leader, you may need to focus more on the present or the future. Finding a common purpose comes from listening to others and determining what is truly meaningful to your constituents. To Enlist Others, leaders must appeal to common ideals and animate the vision. Appealing to common ideals includes first finding out what is meaningful to group members, and then aligning their dreams and goals with your own. To animate the vision, leaders must “see and feel how their (group members) own interests and aspirations are aligned with the vision” (p. 141). This can be accomplished through expressing emotions (often termed “charisma”) and speaking from the heart. Being open and emotional with their team will help leaders to Inspire a Shared Vision.

Part 4 of The Leadership Challenge explains Practice number three, Challenge the Process, through the Commitments “Search for Opportunities” and “Experiment and Take Risks”. In order to Search for Opportunities, leaders must seize the initiative and exercise outsight. To succeed, leaders need to be innovative and be creative in developing solutions. Leaders must also allow for communication between their group and the outside world. Limiting communication cuts off the formulation of new ideas. To improve the team, Kouzes and Posner say that a leader must facilitate a climate where it is encouraged to Experiment and Take Risks. Leaders can accomplish this by generating small wins, where a series of smaller scale programming is introduced to produce larger results, and by learning from experience, where challenges are accepted and learned from. It is important to note that failure is an important component of success, and leaders must be able to learn from both their team’s successes and failures in order to progress (p. 200).

In part 5, Kouzes and Posner outline the fourth Practice, Enable Others to Act. Enabling Others to Act combines the Commitments “Foster Collaboration” and “Strengthen Others”. Fostering Collaboration begins with creating a climate of trust and
facilitating relationships. Without trust, a team is unable to reach maximum potential. Trust is contagious, and if the leader shows he trusts team members, others will follow suit. Relationships can be positively facilitated through face-to-face communication with team members and encouraging joint efforts on projects. Enhancing self-determination and developing competence and confidence are components of Strengthening Others. To best enhance self-determination, leaders must learn that greater power comes from giving power away (p. 251). Giving team members’ power increases group/individual accountability and leads to optimal results. Developing a team member’s competence and confidence stems from a leader’s effective coaching and positive reinforcement through visible support and encouragement.

Part 6 of *The Leadership Challenge* focuses on the final Practice for Exemplary Leadership, Encourage the Heart. This final Practice encompasses the final Commitments, “Recognize Contributions” and “Celebrate the Values and Victories”. Recognizing Contributions includes expecting the best and personalizing recognition. Having high expectations for your team shows a leader believes in the abilities of his team, which increases the likelihood of a higher performing group (p. 282). Encouraging feedback makes group members feel like they are valued, and increases their commitment to the project at hand. Personalizing recognition shows teammates that you notice and appreciate their hard work. Kouzes and Posner encourage leaders to be thoughtful, creative, and regular in offering kudos to their constituents. Celebrating the Values and Victories of a team can be done effectively by creating a spirit of community and being personally involved. Community can be established by public and regular celebrations. Showcasing team members’ efforts in a public setting reminds people why they are a part of the organization, and regularly celebrating accomplishments shows you value their dedication to the task. When you are personally involved, you show your teammates you care, while simultaneously showing them you respect them, which enhances a leader’s credibility.

In the final section of *The Leadership Challenge*, Kouzes and Posner offer concluding thoughts and advice. The authors explain that to a leader’s constituents, they are the most important leader in the organization. It is important to realize that leadership is not comprised of innate behaviors and skills, but instead a skill set that can be learned and improved upon. In conclusion, Kouzes and Posner state the most important component of leadership is “love”. “Staying in love” with leadership is the best kept secret of the most successful leaders, because “leadership is not an affair of the head. Leadership is an affair of the heart.” (p. 351).

**Best Target Audience**

In the initial pages of *The Leadership Challenge*, Kouzes and Posner explain that opportunities for leadership are everywhere. They write that *The Leadership Challenge* can be adopted for any type of leader looking to improve his leadership skills. While this proves true, the majority of the examples of leadership provided by Kouzes and Posner are related specifically to business and/or organizational leadership. The presented material can be translated and applied to college students in their leadership development
process, but *The Leadership Challenge* is most applicable to business leaders and managers.

**The Leadership Challenge in Collaboration with a Leadership Program**

Although *The Leadership Challenge* is likely more commonly applied to leaders in a business setting, the book could definitely be used to supplement a college student leadership program. The Five Practices are an excellent framework for understanding leadership, and are directly applicable to many college students’ leadership experiences. At the end of each chapter, Kouzes and Posner include suggested activities and reflections for leaders to further develop the previously explained Commitment. Many of these activities could be implemented into a university’s leadership program. For example, one of the activities outlined in “Setting the Example” (one of the Commitments under Model the Way) is conducting a personal audit, where students audit their actions to better understand the example they are really setting. Reflecting on this audit helps students see how much time they are spending reinforcing the values they preach and how they deal with critical incidents. Self-awareness is a crucial piece of a student’s leadership development, and the reflection activities presented in *The Leadership Challenge* can assist practitioners in their programs.

Having students read *The Leadership Challenge* as part of their leadership program could be daunting, as the book is over 350 pages and contains many examples that are not directly relevant to their leadership experiences so far. However, the meat of *The Leadership Challenge* is excellent and contains important takeaways for student leaders. *A Leader’s Legacy*, also by Kouzes and Posner (2006), is a condensed version of *The Leadership Challenge* that features the Five Practices and is easier for students to digest. The themes presented in *The Leadership Challenge* are crucial elements of leadership, and having students read *A Leader’s Legacy* makes sure these lessons are conveyed, but in a more simplistic manner.

**Critique**

*The Leadership Challenge* is a very well researched, thoughtful, and applicable leadership framework. Throughout the book, Kouzes and Posner provide the reader with a whole host of real-life examples that help better understand the Practices and Commitments being described. While many of the Practices and Commitments are easily explained, some are more complex, and Kouzes and Posner’s examples help the reader better understand the theme at hand. In part 5, Enable Others to Act, Kouzes and Posner seek to explain the Commitment “Strengthen Others”. In their expansion, they write about a leader’s influence in creating a climate where group members are fully engaged and self-determined, or empowered to make their own decisions. Self-determination leads to a greater sense of accountability. When initially reading about Strengthening Others, the reader might not have thought about self-determination as an important component, but the authors explain how the themes are interconnected.

The book is also strong in that Kouzes and Posner give tips to struggling leaders regarding the various Practices and Commitments rather than just showcasing examples of leaders who have done something well. In part 6, the authors write about strategies for
further Encouraging the Heart of group members, ranging from taking time to thank teammates, to personalizing recognition (a thoughtful gift or token of appreciation), to creating a culture that incorporates celebration into daily work life. When Challenging the Process, Kouzes and Posner suggest that leaders need to continue to look outside their group for new ideas and innovative strategies, and not minimize the potential of small steps. All of these suggestions are supported by real-life leadership examples that allow the reader to completely absorb the presented information.

The Leadership Challenge provides the reader with a variety of “best practices” to implement, but the examples are largely confined to a business world setting. In the beginning of the book, Kouzes and Posner write that the lessons in The Leadership Challenge can be applied to any leader, across disciplines. However, because the examples are focused mostly on managerial experiences in the corporate world, other types of leaders may have challenges applying their examples to their situation. Students reading the book for a leadership class may have trouble applying the Practices outlined because they lack an understanding of how they relate to their organizations. In this instance, it is important that the teacher or group facilitator be prepared to answer questions about adapting the framework to a collegial setting.

Kouzes and Posner’s book has been translated into over twelve different languages, but the Five Practices presented in The Leadership Challenge may not apply to leaders working in different countries with different populations. As seen in chapter 2, the most preferred leadership characteristics are not the same globally. In eastern countries like Japan and Korea, being forward-looking is a much more desirable leadership trait than being inspiring (p. 31). Kouzes and Posner’s Five Practices focus on recognizing and celebrating accomplishments (specifically in Encouraging the Heart), which may not be well received in other countries. Countries outside of the United States may value enthusiasm, positive energy, and optimism less than other traits, such as competence and accountability (p. 30-31). The Five Practices of Exemplary Leadership may not be the “best practices” in another country. In response to this critique, further research on the “best practices” of leadership globally is recommended.

A final critique of The Leadership Challenge is the length. The book was very detailed and provided the reader with countless examples of the Practices in everyday life, but at times went too deep. In Kouzes and Posner’s defense, they do start the book by saying that it is not meant to be read from cover-to-cover, but instead they encourage the reader to jump around to the chapters and sections most relevant to their situation. The preface gives the reader an excellent idea of what is found in each chapter, and can be used as a guide for navigating the thick book.

Kouzes and Posner’s The Leadership Challenge is an excellent book for leaders of any kind looking to strengthen their leadership skills. The book provides a clear framework for understanding the Five Practices of Exemplary Leadership and presents a series of attainable examples from real-life leaders that the reader can apply to his own leadership journey.
References


Reviewer
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