



Review: The Leadership Challenge
By James Kouzes and Barry Posner
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Reviewed by Jonathan Poisner, www.poisner.com

Peter Lane of the Institute for Conservation Leadership suggested I read *The Leadership Challenge (4th Edition, 2007)*, by James Kouzes and Barry Posner.

I'm glad he did.

I've become very interested in how to evaluate and teach leadership. I've encountered more and more situations in my own consulting practice where client organizations come to me looking for training on discrete skills (e.g. fundraising) or good group process (e.g. strategic planning), but are also in dire need of staff and board members who act as "leaders." The good I can do as a consultant is severely constrained as a result.

The question I've become focused on is can leadership be taught? And, if so, how?

Kouzes and Posner believe the answer is definitely yes to the former and offers up some concrete ideas on the latter. In their view: "Leadership is not a gene and it's not an inheritance. Leadership is an identifiable set of skills and abilities that are available to all of us."

Based on research they've been conducting and updating starting in 1983, the book outlines five "practices of exemplary leadership." They are:

- Model the Way
- Inspire a Shared Vision
- Challenge the Process
- Enable Others to Act
- Encourage the Heart.

Each "practice" is the subject of two chapters that break out two "commitments" that leaders display in order to follow the practices.

I'm not entirely convinced these five "practices" (broken out into ten "commitments") are the only way to slice and dice the subject of leadership into its essential parts. However, I very much appreciated the authors' attempt to bring order out of what could be a chaotic subject.

The chapters lean heavily on case studies and anecdotes that the authors pulled together out of years of research. The case studies aren't all about CEOs -- a majority are about people who've had the chance

to display leadership in situations where they were merely in charge of a piece of some larger organization or project. I appreciated the way the case studies allowed storytelling to convey information in an enjoyable and memorable manner. The case studies also were laden with examples of actions that I realized I could've taken to be more effective in former roles.

Perhaps most useful, the authors end every chapter with two or three practical suggestions for how someone who wants to flex their skill with regard to the specific leadership "commitment" can do so. Not every one of these suggestions rang true to me, but my guess is every one of them will be useful to someone.

The book is not without its faults.

My biggest complaint is that many chapters were internally repetitive -- saying the same essential thing two or three times over the course of five pages. For me, it would have been a stronger and more useful book at 250 pages than 350.

I also wish that the book offered up practical ideas for how those doing hiring can identify ahead of time who already exhibits the leadership practices. It's good to know there's a path by which those already on the team can become better leaders. But most organizations should prioritize figuring out how to choose their team in a way where they need to provide less coaching on leadership.

The *Leadership Challenge* identifies the purpose of the book as assisting people "in furthering their abilities to lead others to get extraordinary things done. Whether you're in the private sector or public, an employee or volunteer, on the front line or in the senior echelon, a student or a parent, we have written this book to help you develop your capacity to guide others to places they have never been before."

By that standard, I believe the book is a clear success. I intend to utilize elements of it in my own consulting and coaching practice. And I'd recommend it to anyone who wants to better understand how they can be a more effective leader.

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