

Learning Leadership: The Five Fundamentals of Becoming an Exemplary Leader

BY JAMES M. KOUZES & BARRY Z. POSNER

The last four months, as I write this, have seen unprecedented crisis and chaos across our country. Let me start by saying I hope this finds everyone healthy and safe during these times. It is fitting to be writing an article on leadership during the pandemic because, simply put, leaders should bring order to chaos. There is growing worldwide mistrust of leaders and a growing percentage of people, about four-fifths of those surveyed, who don't believe they can be a leader. However, in studying leadership for over 30 years, James Kouzes and Barry Posner have discovered that 99.999% of people can be leaders. The long-standing belief that leaders are born is a fallacy. However, Kouzes and Posner would submit that anyone can be a great leader, if you take the time to learn how.

"The truth is the best leaders are the best learners" is the opening line on the inside cover for *Learning Leadership* written by Kouzes and Posner, who also authored *The Leadership Challenge*, commonly used as a textbook in graduate leadership studies. Corporations are very concerned about the lack of a pool of leaders for the future. A recent World Economic Forum survey revealed that 86% of respondents believe there to be a world leadership crisis¹. The need for Physician leadership in healthcare has been recognized for several years^{2,3} and has become more apparent during this current pandemic. As the authors postulate, everyone can be a leader, you just have to learn how. This book provides a framework for learning leadership but more importantly provides practical self-coaching tips to guide your personal leadership development journey. I cannot do justice to all of the practical tips in this book, so I will strive

to summarize a few that I think are worth highlighting. If nothing else, I would suggest you read the key takeaways and self-coaching tips at the end of every chapter.

The book is based on three foundations of leadership: everyone can lead, leaders make a difference, and it's about how frequently you lead. Given their foundational nature, I will take a moment to elaborate on each of these. As mentioned earlier, research has shown that **everyone can lead**. There is no magic gene that leaders are born with. Instead, they develop over time much like our clinical skills. In fact all of us, by virtue of being physicians, are leading every day. As the authors comment, "You already have the capacity to lead, but some prevailing myths and assumptions about leadership get in the way of your becoming the best leader you can be." The myths are, in my opinion, self-explanatory and something we all have encountered in our careers but nevertheless are important to recognize. They include: the talent, position, strengths, self-reliance, and it-comes-naturally myths. We need to move past these myths and focus on becoming the best leaders we can be. The authors offer a very simple suggestion to get started, create a leadership journal to chronicle your development and start by writing in it, three aspects of your leadership you want to improve. Then simply, pick one and get to work on it.

Leaders really do make a difference. All of us have likely worked for great leaders and bad leaders, and have seen the difference it makes. It is estimated that a good leader can drive productivity and performance to 2-3 times that of a bad leader. The behavior of a leader goes a long way towards getting the

best out of those you lead. Ask yourself, "what difference do I want to make, are my actions in line with this, and do my actions bring out the best in those around me?" I'm sure most of us can think back on a specific instance when a leader made a difference in our lives. We need to strive to do that for our staff.

Last but certainly not least, **it's about how frequently you lead**. Simply put this foundation reinforces that leadership is a learned and perishable skill. The more we read, take classes, are around leaders, or simply lead, the more experience we gain, which will impact the quality of our leadership for the future. As an exercise, think back to your personal best leadership experience and identify key items that contributed to that success. Reflect on how to incorporate those into your leadership every day. Remember that leadership is a skill that needs to be actively practiced on a regular basis, otherwise it will perish.

Kouzes and Posner organize the remainder of this book towards the five fundamentals of leadership as seen in Figure 1. I do not believe any of these are new concepts for most of us. However, sometimes we need to be reminded of their importance. Let me take a moment to focus on a key concept, that leadership emerges from within. As the authors say, "No one can put leadership into you." This idea is centered on the belief that authentic leadership flows from the inside out, not the outside in. The leader is the key component to leadership, not anyone else. The authors offer advice to discover oneself as a leader through self-development. The self-development periods

continued on page 26

include: looking out, looking in, and finding your true voice.

Looking out is what you are doing right now, reading about leadership. When we look out, we take stock in what others say about leadership. This can be done by books, by observation, by attending classes, or any other form of learning. The goal of looking out is to learn the fundamentals and acquire the necessary tools for leadership. The next step in self-development is **looking in**. One of my favorite interview questions is to ask people to name three things they don't do very well, pick one, and tell me how they are working to improve it. To me, the ability to critically look inside oneself, identify our strengths and weaknesses, and act upon that is essential to success as a leader. It is OK to have anxiety about this and to go through a period of second-guessing yourself. In the end, it will make you a stronger leader. Lastly is **finding your true voice**. This is the turning point in your self-development, when combining what you learned from looking out and looking in, you discover your own words, your own style, and your own philosophy of leadership. This liberating event is the culmination of a journey that will allow you to lead authentically from the inside out. One way to look at this is to create a lifeline in your leadership journal and to pattern out the key moments of your journey. Record the peaks

and valleys, the good and the bad, and reflect upon it. This exercise will help you through the self-development journey and find your true leadership voice.

Here are a few bullets taken from the book that make me think and that I hope will make you think about your leadership journey:

- The best leaders are the best learners and have a growth mindset.
- Take daily stock of what you've learned by asking yourself: "What did I learn in the last 24 hours that will help me become a better leader?"
- Authentic leadership flows from the inside out not the outside in.
- Be clear about the values and beliefs that guide your leadership and model them in all settings.
- Leadership is about helping others achieve their values and vision.
- Challenge yourself and face challenges head on. Don't shy away from challenges as facing them allows you to grow as a leader.
- Try new things, be curious, and ask a lot of questions.

- Have courage, seek a mentor, ask for feedback, connect with other leaders, and practice.

In conclusion, as Kouzes and Posner say, "Leadership... is not a talent but an observable, learnable set of skills and abilities." I encourage you, as I do every day, to strive to be at your best and continue learning leadership. Remember that "learning leadership is a lifelong endeavor." I hope you can take some downtime while in this pandemic to reflect on your leadership journey and plan your own development. Stay safe! I look forward to when we might be able to meet again in person. As always, feel free to contact me at tim.switaj@gmail.com or 201-819-2326 if you have any questions or are interested in writing a leadership book series article.

REFERENCES:

1. Shahid, S. (2014). Outlook on the global agenda 2015: A lack of leadership.
2. Peter Angood, M. D., & Birk, S. (2014). The value of physician leadership. *Physician executive*, 40(3), 6
3. Rotenstein, L.S., Sadun, R., & Jena, A.B. (2018). Why Doctors Need Leadership Training. *Harvard Business Review*, accessed at <https://hbr.org/2018/10/why-doctors-need-leadership-training>.

Figure 1 – Developing the 5 Leadership Fundamentals

DEVELOPING THE 5 LEADERSHIP FUNDAMENTALS

Believe you Can
Leadership ≠ Talent
Leadership is trainable and learnable. Start by believing you can be a better leader.

Aspire to Excel
Leadership ≠ Title
It's about your visions, values and how you use them to guide what you do. Aspire to be great.

Challenge Yourself
Leadership > Strength
To become the best leader you can be, push yourself to build strengths and conquer your weaknesses.

Engage Support
Leadership ≠ Solo Effort
The best leaders have coaches and work with others. Seek support in your learning & growth.

Practice Deliberately
Leadership = Effort
Great leadership comes from regular practice and improvement. Make time to practice intentionally.

READINGGRAPHICS
ACTIONABLE INSIGHTS IN ONE PAGE

Accessed at <https://readinggraphics.com/book-summary-learning-leadership/>