

Kouzes, J. M., & Posner, B. Z. (2010). *The truth about leadership: The no-fads, heart-of-the-matter facts you need to know*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Reviewed by Anna Lehnen

## Introduction

James M. Kouzes and Barry Z. Posner are most widely known for their work *The Leadership Challenge*, but they have introduced a new set of leadership guidelines, based upon more than thirty years of research, in their new book, *The Truth About Leadership*. In their new volume, Kouzes and Posner set out to provide 10 universal truths of leadership. The book is written in the second-person and targeted to emerging leaders but useful for and accessible to all leaders. The authors posit that while the context of leadership has changed since their research began, those behaviors and habits that are successful have not. After getting repeated questions and feedback about the changing context of leadership as millennial students enter the work force, they set out to research and write a book about just that. Ultimately, they found that the topics the new generation discussed were the same as those of previous generations. From these similarities, they created "...a collection of fundamental principles that inform and support the practices of leadership" (p. xix). The authors also promise readers that this book is different from their previous works for three reasons: this is a bolder book, making claims about leadership practices based upon all of their research; this research and data is all newer than when they wrote their original book; and these truths are universal because they are global and cross-generational. Kouzes and Posner have achieved their goal of writing an accessible book with ten solid truths about leadership; however, this comes at the expense of creating a book that is appealing to all audiences and inclusive of all leadership experiences.

## Theoretical Frame

Kouzes and Posner are not new to the field of literature on leadership, but this recent contribution is a slight departure from their past writings. Their previous works stem from *The Leadership Challenge*, a set of five best practices of leadership based upon their research and interviews with various leaders. From this work, they developed an edition for college students, as well as other books about specific practices and editions for coaches and administrators. Much other leadership writing is based upon anecdotal evidence and author opinion, but Kouzes and Posner have combined the stories of those they interview with data from their years of research for a case study approach. This book does share similarities with Maxwell's *21 Irrefutable Laws of Leadership*. One major difference between this book and other leadership writings is that this is not a "how to" guide for leadership. Instead, the authors write basic tenants of leadership in the form of 10 truths about leadership. They do not provide tools or exercises to improve upon one's skills in each area. They simply put forth a framework for good leadership.

## Chapter One

The first truth presented is *you make a difference*. Kouzes and Posner assert, "you have to believe that what you do counts for something" (p.1). They assert that the reader already has

the capability to be a leader and make a difference, no matter his or her age or experience. In a survey, respondents chose the most influential leader to them from a variety of options and across the board, *family member* ranked the highest. The next ranked leaders were other close community members, with the lowest ranked being the people that got the most media attention such as celebrities and athletes. Continuing this idea, the most important person at work is a direct supervisor; in this position you have the greatest influence over the happiness, and therefore the productivity, of your direct reports. All of this culminates in a call to action for the reader to recognize the power he or she possesses to be a leader.

## Chapter Two

The second truth put forth is *credibility is the foundation of leadership*. Credibility is linked with a leader's believability; if constituents cannot find the reader credible, they will not trust him or her. Credibility is also important because without the trust created by being credible, the reader cannot have relationships with his or her followers, and leadership does not exist without relationships. Constituents have expectations of the characteristics of their leaders; the four most important characteristics are: honesty, being forward-looking, inspirational, and competent. These characteristics have remained important throughout Kouzes and Posner's 30 years of research and all contribute to a leader's credibility. The importance of credibility is supported by the authors' *Laws of Leadership*: if you don't believe the messenger, you won't believe the message, and do what you say you will do. As leaders exhibit higher levels of credibility, their followers are more productive, increasing the effectiveness of the leader.

## Chapter Three

*Values drive commitment* is Kouzes and Posner's third truth about leadership. This commitment refers to both the leader's commitment to a cause and the followers' commitment to the leader and the cause. The authors outline that leaders must know their own values and beliefs to truly understand their motivation. Those values must be in line with the organization they are working for, or they cannot truly commit to the work they are doing. However, the focus on understanding of values must move outside of the leader to the constituents as well. The authors assert that leaders must work to help their groups develop values and ensure that the work they are doing aligns with those values. As a leader, the reader cannot create values in isolation and expect followers to commit to him or her just because they are supposed to do so. Kouzes and Posner close the chapter by reminding the reader that leadership is a relationship, and clarity of values is key to mutual understanding in that relationship.

## Chapter Four

In the next chapter, the authors introduce the fourth leadership truth: *focusing on the future sets leaders apart*. According to the author's research, when faced with the scenario of a new leader entering their organization, the second most common question followers asked was: "What's your vision". This question is not one that followers ask of their teammates or peers, but only of their leaders, emphasizing the importance of a leader's vision. To have a vision, leaders must be able to "imagine and articulate exciting future possibilities" (p. 46). Kouzes and Posner suggest that to improve the reader's ability to focus on the future, he or she needs to *think*

*about spending time* in the future more often; this is particularly difficult for emerging leaders. The reader is also responsible for helping his or her followers focus on the future and maintain an optimistic view, because thinking of the future can be daunting.

## Chapter Five

The truth of the fifth chapter is that *you can't do it alone*. Kouzes and Posner take a moment to acknowledge that the previous chapters may have given the impression that leadership is all about the leader. To clarify this perception, the authors remind the reader that as a leader, he or she is here to serve others, not the inverse. They offer the common adage: to see if someone is a leader, look to see if they have followers. Followers are integral to the process, because leadership is about the relationship a leader has with constituents. In order to maintain healthy and productive relationships with followers, the authors purport that the reader needs to have emotional intelligence. In addition to emotional intelligence, listening can help make a connection and create intimacy, familiarity, and empathy between the leader and followers. The chapter is closed by emphasizing that it is "...your job as a leader to increase people's sense of self-determination, self-confidence, and personal effectiveness" (p. 73).

## Chapter Six

For truth number six, *trust rules*, Kouzes and Posner return to the importance of credibility when practicing good leadership. Trust is an important part of good leadership because increased trust in a leader leads to followers having an increased willingness to be influenced by that leader. This heightened level of trust also motivates followers to work harder for the leader. The authors explain that this is the case because when people trust their leader they feel more secure and can focus their energy on higher-level problems at work, instead of on creating a level of security for themselves. To earn employees trust, the reader must first risk himself or herself by placing trust in them. Kouzes and Posner remind the reader that it is also critical to trust that followers can and will improve, even when they are having difficulties. The authors outline four actions to help a leader build trust: behave predictably and consistently, communicate clearly, treat promises seriously, and be forthright and candid. Followers will also trust the leader more if he or she shares information appropriately; instead of a need to know attitude about information, the reader should have a need to share position.

## Chapter Seven

In chapter seven, Kouzes and Posner present the seventh truth: *challenge is the crucible for greatness*. The most admired historical leaders are distinguished by their ability to lead through major challenges. When asked about their personal best leadership situations, most of the leaders interviewed by the authors over 30 years have spoken about a scenario that involved overcoming significant challenge. Using these pieces of evidence, the authors purport that leadership is all about how a leader leads others through challenges and change. These challenges provide the opportunity for the reader to shine and demonstrate skills to followers by taking initiative to move the group forward. According to Kouzes and Posner, the key to leading through this challenge is *grit*, the ability to keep pushing and be resilient throughout the stress of

change. Finally, good leaders understand that when the challenge wins over grit, it is important to learn from that failure.

## Chapter Eight

Truth number eight, *either lead by example or don't lead at all*, connects once again to the importance of credibility for a leader. Kouzes and Posner write that it is not about what the reader says or directs others to do as a leader; instead, good leadership is about acting as the reader wants others to, communicating values through behaviors. This is crucial because people believe what the reader does as a leader over what he or she says. If the leader wants his or her followers to change their actions, it is crucial to change his or her own first. Leading by example is especially important when admitting mistakes. If the reader does not admit mistakes, followers will be afraid to admit their own mistakes, which can harm the organization. This is difficult for leaders because they often believe they have, or should have, all the right answers. To help enable this process, leaders need to ask for feedback from their followers and earnestly reflect upon their actions at the end of each day.

## Chapter Nine

The ninth truth Kouzes and Posner present is *the best leaders are the best learners*. An important aspect of this truth is that one *can* learn to be a leader; it is not an innate trait with which only certain people are born and it can be learned in multiple ways. The key to learning to be a leader is having a passion for learning. In order to learn effectively, the reader also needs to be open to new experiences and getting feedback from those around him or her. Without feedback about how one leads, it is difficult to improve. Kouzes and Posner also insist that to be a good leader, one must adopt a *growth mindset*; the reader must be focused on growing and improving himself or herself on a regular basis, not just when it is convenient to do so or time for evaluations. To enact an attitude of consistent improvement, practice is required. There are five elements of deliberate practice for consistent improvement: it is designed specifically to improve performance, it has to be repeated a lot, feedback on results must be continuously available, it is highly demanding mentally, and it is not that much fun. Leading while constantly trying to learn can be challenging, but having supportive relationships within an organization helps make it easier and ultimately, the reader must believe that he or she has the capacity to learn more.

## Chapter Ten

The tenth and final truth rounds out Kouzes and Posner's list: *leadership is an affair of the heart*. The general opinion of managers in organizations is that they do and should detach their emotions from their work. However, research indicates that the highest performing managers *are* connected to their emotions. These great leaders excel because they pay attention to their heart when leading, creating a much deeper connection and helping the leaders and their followers be more engaged in their work. Utilizing love helps exemplary leaders place their constituents at the center of what they do, as opposed to focusing on themselves. The authors assert that while followers may be dependent upon the leader at first, "...[the leader's] end objective is to make them independent..." (p. 139). The leader wants to serve others and help them grow to be the best. It is critical to show followers that the leader cares about them, and the

best ways to do this include: to be out there working with them, share positive reinforcement, and tell stories. Great leaders fall in love with their work, allowing them to remain positive and energetic.

## Epilogue

In the epilogue, Kouzes and Posner do not add another truth, but propose that until the reader says *yes* as a leader, nothing great will happen. *Leaders say yes*. By saying yes, leaders demonstrate that they believe in themselves. No one will believe in a leader if he or she does not first believe in himself or herself. As a part of saying *yes*, great leaders take on responsibility for fixing problems and overcoming challenges. They do not tell someone else to fix a problem; they take action to fix it. The authors close the book by reminding the reader that once he or she says *yes*, great things can happen and the leader will find his or her own truth about leadership.

## Best Target Audience

Kouzes and Posner state that the book is written for emerging leaders, particularly of the millennial generation, but that the truths contained in it are universal and can be utilized by any type of leader. The truths presented in the book are important for all leaders to understand, making the book appropriate for leaders of all experience levels, not just millennials. However, the vast majority of examples in the book are from business organizations, making the book most accessible to leaders in the business world rather than to college students. While the truths presented and the simplified writing style are accessible to many groups, the best target audience for the book is people currently holding positions of leadership within the business world due to its accessibility limitations.

## Uses of Book in Practice

While the best target audience for *The Truth About Leadership* is leaders within the business world, it could be used as part of a student leadership program. Due to the breadth of the book, it would be best used in conjunction with other readings, discussions, and reflections as part of a program. For example, a student could compare each of the ten truths about leadership with their own behaviors in a reflection paper. Additionally, a leadership professional could structure a semester-long class using the ten chapters, with a week focused on each truth and helping students learn how to enact that truth in their own leadership practices. However, the book alone does not provide enough support, resources, or tools for students to learn each skill just by reading each chapter. Other sources would be needed to help students understand how to enact each of the truths.

Students could also gain important critical thinking skills by engaging in a program already utilizing another student leadership theory and drawing connections between each truth and different components of the theory. If a professional was looking to create a leadership capstone program for students completing their time at college, he or she could ask students to demonstrate their growth throughout college in each of the ten truths about leadership. There are multiple possibilities for incorporating the topics of *The Truth About Leadership* into student

leadership programs, but it would be of the most benefit utilized in conjunction with other leadership readings and theories.

## Critique

The greatest strength of Kouzes and Posner's newest work is the 30 years of foundational research analyzed by the authors to create the ten truths they put forth in the book. They have produced a set of guidelines for successful leadership that are supported by hard facts and data instead of just anecdotal evidence, like some leadership books. In addition to the data, they also provide multiple stories and examples that illustrate each truth. This addition is crucial to making each truth accessible and understandable to a wide audience, one of the authors' main objectives.

While the authors have created an extremely accessible set of leadership guidelines, they have struggled with their goal of making a set of *universal* truths about leadership. All of the examples provided in the book come from North America, Europe, or China, leaving out leadership experiences from other cultures. Additionally, the majority of examples are from the business world. While the ten truths could be applicable to other cultures and opportunities for leadership outside business organizations, it is difficult to know this is the case when the examples only represent business organizations. The book would have been significantly improved with evidence from a wider variety of leadership scenarios.

Young leaders reading this book may come away from it with an inflated sense of self-importance for multiple reasons. In an attempt to make it accessible to a younger audience, the authors use an informal tone throughout the book to address the reader but the tone is so informal that it undermines the importance of the truths presented. The second-person tone of the book also places too much emphasis on the reader as leader. Leaders are discussed only as people in formal positions in each truth, leaving out the option that group members and peers are also leaders. Additionally, only at certain parts of the book do the authors discuss what a leader should be doing to support, work with, and develop his or her constituents and followers. All of these elements can contribute to an emerging leader reading this book and developing an inflated ego. Leaders are certainly important in all work, but an important element of good leadership is humility, which this book only glosses over.

As the book develops, the authors draw minor connections between each truth, but fail to adequately discuss how the truths connect. In reality, many of the truths are intertwined; a leader's capacity in one area can deeply affect his or her performance in another. The complexity of this relationship is not addressed in the book, and readers would benefit from a thorough analysis of the connections between each truth.

Kouzes and Posner fail to acknowledge at any point in the book how different elements of a leader's social identity change or affect the ten truths outlined in the book. As we know, social identity plays an important part in how we perceive ourselves and how we are perceived by others, but this significant aspect of leadership is never discussed. A better understanding of how his or her identity played a role in the ten truths of leadership would provide the reader with additional benefit and help make the book universal to all leaders.

Finally, while the authors support the truths presented with data and anecdotal evidence throughout the book, most of this evidence is satisfaction based instead of outcomes based. This type of data ignores types of leadership behaviors that are good for an organization but disliked by followers or leaders. Kouzes and Posner's focus on leadership as a strictly positional role does not speak to the potential for group development, or to the role of a leader within a group. By failing to address these elements, an extremely accessible book fails to be universal to all people in leadership positions.

### **Reviewer**

Anna Lehnen is a graduate student in the College Student Personnel Master of Arts program at Bowling Green State University and a 2007 graduate of Goucher College. While working at Bard College, she collaborated to create and implement the *Change in Action* leadership program, based upon the Social Change Model of Leadership.

Lehnan, A. (2011). The truth about leadership. [Review of the book *The truth about leadership: The no-fads, heart-of-the-matter facts you need to know*, J. M. Kouzes & B. Z. Posner]. National Clearinghouse for Leadership Programs. Retrieved from <http://www.nclp.umd.edu>