

Top Ten Leadership Lessons

by Jim Kouzes

Since 1982 Barry Posner and I have been exploring together what leaders do to mobilize others to want to struggle for shared aspirations. We've coauthored over 30 books, workbooks, and assessment instruments based on our research, including our bestseller, *The Leadership Challenge*. Last year we completed one of our most ambitious projects, analyzing 950,000 responses to our Leadership Practices Inventory — 80,000 self-assessments from leaders and 870,000 assessments from observers who know those leaders. Over the recent holidays I took a step back from all this data, and asked myself, “If I had to list the Top Ten Leadership Lessons I've learned over all these years, what would those Top Ten be?” Here is what I came up with. (Caveat: We've learned a lot more than ten things about leadership, so this is not an exhaustive list. And, I might change this list next week after I reflect some more!)

Lesson 1. Leadership is everyone's business.

We keep finding leaders everywhere we look. They come from every type of organization, public and private, government and NGO, high-tech and low-tech, small and large, schools and professional services. They are young and old, male and female, gay and straight, and are present in every ethnic group. They come from every imaginable vocation and avocation. Leadership, in other words, is not the private reserve of a few charismatic men and women who are genetically endowed with some special power. Similarly, leadership is not about organizational power or authority. It's also not about celebrity or wealth, the family you are born into, being a CEO, president, general, or prime minister. And it's definitely not about being a hero. Leadership is a set of skills and abilities that are accessible and learnable by anyone who has the motivation and desire to learn it.

Lesson 2. Credibility is the foundation.

Over these last 26 years we've asked people around the world to answer the question, “What do you look for and admire in a leader, someone whose direction you would willingly follow?” (The key word in this question is willingly!) What we've found in our investigation of admired leader qualities is that, more than anything, people want leaders who are credible. Quite simply, people need to believe in their leaders. Because our findings have been so pervasive and consistent, we've come to identify it as “The First Law of Leadership”: If you don't believe in the messenger, you won't believe the message.

And, what is credibility behaviorally? How do you know it when you see it? When we ask these questions, the responses we get are essentially the same, regardless of how they are phrased. Credible leaders walk the talk, practice what they preach, are consistent in word and deed, put their money where their mouth is, and follow through on promises. This has led us to the Second Law of Leadership: To become a credible leader you must Do What You Say You Will Do, or DWYSYWD for short.

Lesson 3: Personal values drive commitment.

DWYSYWD has two fundamental parts to it—the say part and the do part. People expect their leaders to stand up for their beliefs. But to stand up for your beliefs, you have to know what you stand for. To walk the talk, you have to have a talk to walk. To do what you say, you have to know what you want to say. To earn and sustain personal credibility, you must first be able to clearly articulate deeply held beliefs. And we know from our research that those leaders who are the clearest about their own values, and who see the fit between their own values and the values of the organizations they serve, are the most committed leaders. Personal values clarity is essential to commitment...and to integrity and authenticity.

Lesson 4. You either lead by example, or you don't lead at all.

The second part of earning credibility—or, DWYSYWD—is the “do” part. The only way people know we value something is when they see it in action. When leaders practice what they preach they become role models for their constituents, and leaders who are seen as exemplary role models have higher performing units. In fact, in our most recent analysis of over 950,000 responses to our Leadership Practices Inventory, we found that Model the Way is the leadership practice that has more impact on constituents' performance than any of the other Five Practices in our model. If you could only do one thing as a leader to energize the performance of others, it would be, based on our data, to be set an example based on a set of shared values.

Lesson 5. Looking forward is a leadership prerequisite.

In our most recent surveys, 72 percent of respondents selected the “forward-looking” as one of their most sought-after leadership characteristics. Among the most senior executives, the percentage expecting this quality is 88 percent. People expect leaders to have a sense of direction and a concern for the future of the organization. Exemplary leaders are able to envision the future, to gaze across the horizon of time and imagine the greater opportunities to come. They are able to develop a unique image of the future. This ability, more than any of the other leadership skills, differentiates leaders from individual contributors.

Lesson 6. It's not just the leaders vision.

At some point during all this talk over the years about the importance of being future-oriented, leaders got the sense that they were the ones who had to be the visionaries. Wrong! This is not what constituents expect. Yes, leaders are expected to be forward-looking, but they aren't expected to be prophets. Exemplary leadership is not about uttering divinely inspired revelations. What people really want to hear is not just the leader's vision. They want to hear about their own aspirations. They want to hear how their dreams will come true and their hopes will be fulfilled. The very best leaders understand that they are supposed to Inspire a Shared Vision, not sell their idiosyncratic view of the world.

Lesson 7. Challenge provides the opportunity for greatness.

When we ask people to tell us about their personal best leadership experiences, they talk about times of crisis, adversity, change, and great difficulty. We don't do our best as leaders

when we are maintaining the status quo or when we feel comfortable. The situations that bring out our best are those that challenge us. The study of leadership, then, is the study of how men and women guide people through adversity, uncertainty, hardship, disruption, transformation, transition, recovery, new beginnings, and other significant challenges. It's also the study of how men and women, in times of constancy and complacency, actively seek to disturb the status quo and awaken new possibilities. Leadership and challenge are simply inseparable.

Lesson 8. Leaders are team players.

Leaders can't do it alone. No leader in history ever got anything extraordinary done by himself or herself. When it comes to superior performance collaboration out produces both competition and individualistic efforts. And, at the heart of collaboration is trust. Without trust you cannot lead. As one leader put it to us: "I have a strong willingness to be a part of what is going on, rather than apart from. I don't think people enjoy working for long stretches for someone who won't be part of what's happening."

Lesson 9. Leadership is a relationship.

Leadership is a relationship between those who choose to lead and those who choose to follow. Any discussion of leadership must attend to the dynamics of this relationship. Exemplary leaders are devoted to building relationships based on mutual respect and caring, because they know that the quality of the relationship will determine the quality of the results. The emotional intelligence of a leader has more to do with their effectiveness than their experience and their expertise. One leader told us, "I may not be the most knowledgeable person...but I know how to get other people to think well about themselves." What an awesome ability to have. The very best leaders know that their job is to make others feel powerful and capable, not to acquire power for themselves.

Lesson 10. Caring is at the heart of leadership.

Contrary to a lot of public myth about how managers have to be cold and rational — "it's not personal, it's just business" — research indicates just the opposite. The highest performing managers and leaders are the most open and caring. The best demonstrate more affection toward others and want others to be more open with them. Exemplary leaders excel at improving performance through more attention to the human heart. The climb to the top of the summit is arduous and steep. The challenges are immense and often frightening. Against these odds leaders must sustain hope and offer encouragement. And the research is very clear. High hope leads to high performance.