

JAMES M. KOUZES
BARRY Z. POSNER

Bestselling authors of *The Leadership Challenge*

THE
TRUTH
ABOUT
LEADERSHIP

The **NO-FADS,**
HEART-OF-THE-MATTER
FACTS YOU NEED TO KNOW

More praise for *The Truth About Leadership*

“I love *The Truth About Leadership*. Jim Kouzes and Barry Posner spell out ten fundamental truths about leadership and every one of them is right on. If you want to do a fact check on your leadership expertise, read this book!”

—Ken Blanchard, co-author, *The One Minute Manager® and Leading at a Higher Level*

“*The Truth About Leadership* is a rare and wonderful book that will become an essential guidebook for leaders in every sector at every level, at any point on their journey to leadership. Thank you, Jim and Barry, for sharing The Truth with us. There is no greater gift.”

—Frances Hesselbein, president and CEO,
Leader to Leader Institute

“Kouzes and Posner take a truly bold step in their new book about leadership fundamentals. Its impact comes from its relentless focus on what transcends time and endures globally in the arena of leadership, and in the compelling stories and illustrations that remind us all of what matters most.”

—Jon R. Katzenbach, co-author, *Leading Outside the Lines and The Wisdom of Teams*

“This book is exactly what it purports to be: the ‘truth’ about leadership. It is exactly the right length, it covers

everything it should, and leaves nothing out. Having read scores of books on the subject, I can comfortably say, it is the best one out there.”

—Ken Wilcox, *president and CEO,
SVB Financial Group*

“In our work in government and leadership development, Kouzes and Posner’s *The Leadership Challenge* has been our primary leadership guide. As our daughters begin to immerse themselves in Americorps and the world of work, we’re sharing *The Truth About Leadership* with them. We’re confident that these readable stories of everyday leaders and time-tested and research-tested principles will practically and intellectually arm them to change the world.”

—Jennifer Granholm, *Governor, State of
Michigan, and Dan Mulhern, First
Gentleman, State of Michigan, and
author of Everyday Leadership*

“If Kouzes and Posner have any say in it, disjointed, prize-oriented, and loveless leaders will become a thing of the past. They provide us with a recipe for successful leadership by asking all of us to lead with passion, be an example, and make sure we’re passionate about what we do.”

—John Hope Bryant, *author, Love Leadership and
founder, chairman, and CEO, Operation HOPE*

“The Truth About Leadership focuses not just on what it takes to be a brilliant leader, but on what qualities our leaders must embody to create a better world. Its focus on values, commitment, and trust will help you be the type of leader who succeeds—and the type of leader the world needs most.”

—*Jeffrey Hollender, cofounder, Seventh Generation and co-author, The Responsibility Revolution*

“Upon finishing this book, I could not help but wish that the ten truths had been articulated so clearly throughout my career. I cannot think of any experiences in my career that have not called on some or all of them. As importantly as I reflect on my many mistakes, I can see where I was breaking one or more of these rules. This is a book that I would recommend people read several times throughout their career.”

—*Michael Schriver, president, DFS Group Ltd.*

“No matter where you are in your leadership journey—taking the first step or reflecting on your progress—you will benefit greatly from reading this book. This is an essential guidebook that breaks down exactly what it takes to earn the right to lead others. These fundamental truths are presented in a way that is practical, straightforward, and highly engaging, and will be just as relevant thirty years from now as they are today.”

—*John E. Rooney, president and CEO, U.S. Cellular*

“Reading this book made me feel as if I was in a conversation that I did not want to end. While there are many solid books about leadership, *The Truth About Leadership* is now the first book I will give others on their leadership journey.”

—*Teresa Roche, vice president and
CLO, Agilent Technologies*

“The glory of Kouzes and Posner’s new book, *The Truth About Leadership*, isn’t just in the ideas—you expect this kind of wisdom from the two most influential writers on leadership in our time—but in the voices and the data. You hear from everyday folks, not just the famous, about what it’s like to be a successful leader in real-life settings. As for the numbers, has there ever been a leadership book so firmly grounded in empirical data drawn from literally millions of leaders?”

—*Michael S. Malone, editor-in-chief of Edgelings.com
and author, The Future Arrived Yesterday*

“Leadership matters . . . still. Another classic by Posner and Kouzes on the one topic that has impacted everyone, told in a very compelling and meaningful way. They have identified the most important characteristics of leadership that have withstood the test of time and captured them in this easy-to-read and captivating book.”

—*Sonia Clark, leader of Talent Strategy,
Juniper Network*

“Jim and Barry have written another masterful book to help us mere mortals on the never-ending journey of understanding what it takes to be a leader. I love this book because of its pragmatic approach, and because it seems to explain so simply the stuff that we intuitively know but somehow don’t always keep at the front of our mind.”

—Greg Bourke, director, Human Resources,
Vodafone Hutchison Australia

“*The Truth About Leadership* should be a must-read for leaders and aspiring leaders. It offers timeless advice and insight, and real-world examples that anyone can relate to.”

—Charles Mak, Morgan Stanley’s head of Private
Wealth Management for Asia

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Published by Jossey-Bass

A Wiley Imprint

989 Market Street, San Francisco, CA 94103-1741—www.josseybass.com

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Kouzes, James M., 1945-

The truth about leadership : the no-fads, heart-of-the-matter facts you need to know / James M. Kouzes, Barry Z. Posner.

p. cm.

Includes index.

ISBN 978-0-470-63354-0 (hardback)

1. Leadership. 2. Executive ability. I. Posner, Barry Z. II. Title.

HD57.7.K684 2010

658.4'092—dc22

2010018715

Printed in the United States of America

FIRST EDITION

HB Printing 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

For Amanda and Nick.
Our own next-generation leaders.

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INTRODUCTION

WHAT EVERYONE WANTS TO KNOW ABOUT LEADERSHIP

We've been traveling the world for three decades now, constantly researching the practices of exemplary leadership and the qualities people look for and admire in the leaders they would willingly follow. During and after our seminars and presentations, people ask us a lot of different questions, but there's always one thing that they all want to know: "What's new?"

No matter the age of the audience, the type of organizations they come from, or their nationalities, everyone wants to know what's changed since we first started studying leadership. They want to know how things are different now compared to how they were five, ten, twenty, or thirty years ago. So we tell them.

We tell them how *the context* of leadership has changed dramatically since we first asked people in the early 1980s to tell us about their personal best leadership experiences and about their most admired leaders. For example, we talk about how global terrorism has heightened uncertainty as political landscapes have changed. How global warming and scarcity of natural resources have made regions of the world unstable and created the need for more sustainable products and lifestyles. How the global economy has increased marketplace competition in the neighborhood and around the world and how financial institutions have exploded, imploded, and risen like phoenixes from the ashes. How the always-on, 24/7, click-away new technologies have both connected and isolated people, as their capacity for speed cranks up the world's pace.

We describe how the workforce has also changed from what previous generations knew, becoming increasingly diverse, multicultural, dispersed, horizontal, and distributed—and, consequently, requiring more collaboration than competition. We (and other writers) have explored how nationality and culture matter in ways that require greater sensitivity to interpersonal relationships, how the days of a homogeneous workforce are over, and how the newest generation to enter the workforce (the Millennials) place fresh demands on their organizations (but, of course, so did the Gen-Xers, Boomers, and Traditionalists before them).

Bob Dylan's song "The Times They Are A-Changin'" continues to get airtime.

But we also tell them something else. We tell our audiences that as much as the context of leadership has changed, the *content of leadership* has not changed much at all. The fundamental behaviors, actions, and practices of leaders have remained essentially the same since we first began researching and writing about leadership over three decades ago. Much has changed, but there's a whole lot more that's stayed the same.

EVERYONE WANTS TO KNOW THE *TRUTH* ABOUT LEADERSHIP

Initially we set out to write a new book aimed squarely at emerging leaders in the Millennial generation. Millennials are an influential group and on the cusp of replacing Baby Boomers as a game-changing force due to their size and position. Now that Millennials are entering organizations in increasingly large numbers, many leaders with whom we work are sensing a noticeable shift in their workplaces, forcing them to reconsider their leadership practices. They've grown intensely curious about generational differences, and they've kept asking our advice on how they and their young colleagues should lead in these changing times. Since we've worked with college students and young leaders throughout our careers and

have had a lot of first-hand experience with generational issues, we thought we could make a contribution to the growing literature on the subject. (And we were more than likely influenced by the fact that we're also parents of Millennials.)

So we did what we've done in the past, as all good researchers and academics do: We conducted a study and gathered data. We brought together several focus groups of Millennials and explored their life experiences, their values, their perspectives on the world, and what they wanted to know about leadership that would better prepare them for their place and responsibility in the world. We expanded our research to include a broader sample of Millennials, and we presented them with the following scenario: "Imagine you're sitting in a meeting with a group of your colleagues. The door to the conference room opens. In walks someone you've never met before, and that person says, 'Hi, I'm your new leader.' What questions immediately come to mind that you want to ask this person?"

As we reviewed the questions Millennials wanted to ask a new leader, an important insight emerged. We found that their concerns and issues were not all that different from those we'd heard from their older sisters and brothers, and even their moms and dads when they'd responded to the same question. They wanted to know what every other generation wanted to know. Age made no difference.

This observation was powerfully reinforced when we analyzed the most current data from the *Leadership Practices Inventory*, our 360-degree leadership assessment tool. Looking at data from over a million respondents, we discovered that age makes no difference in explaining why leaders are effective or ineffective. When it comes to generating positive work attitudes, it doesn't matter whether you're a Traditionalist, a Boomer, a Gen-Xer, or a Millennial. Good leadership is good leadership, regardless of age. It became very apparent once again that the context of leading may change a lot, but the content of leading changes very little.

At about this same time we were deeply honored and humbled to learn that the American Society for Training and Development (ASTD) was going to present us with their annual award for Distinguished Contribution to Workplace Learning and Performance. The award is given, they said, "in recognition of an exceptional contribution of sustained impact to the field of learning and performance." It was presented to us at the 2009 Annual ASTD Conference and Expo, and we were asked to conduct an educational session based on our work. In light of the career-spanning nature of the award, we thought it'd be appropriate to craft a presentation around ideas that we'd been developing, talking about, and writing about since the beginning of our collaboration and research. As we culled through our decades of research, interviews,

and data, we found a few kernels of lasting truth, and we entitled our presentation “Enduring Leadership Truths.”

As is customary at these kinds of conferences, participants were asked to complete an evaluation of the session. We were a bit nervous about how folks would receive a “retrospective” on our work. After all, this was a group of experienced and seasoned training and development professionals, and sometimes they can be a critical crowd. But we were pleasantly surprised by the feedback we received, particularly the responses to one item. Everyone (yes, 100 percent of the audience) agreed with the statement: “I learned something from this presentation that was new and I can use.” To us, these truths were foundational, critical, but not necessarily new. But when presented on their own, without fads or fanfare, leaders and trainers alike found them fresh and useful. It caused us to think that perhaps there was a need for a book that would make a few bold statements about what research has shown to be true about leadership over the years. And that perhaps, when presented in this way, this would be a new and refreshing look at the topic.

We’re reminded of a time we shared the platform with renowned leadership educator Ken Blanchard at an association meeting. In the middle of responding to an audience question one of us was saying, “I don’t know what you call something that’s been the same for twenty-five years, but...,” and Ken interrupted, exclaiming, “I’d call it the truth.” It was a moment of

clarity. We began to see that we shouldn't be shy about saying that some things about leadership just don't change that much over time, if at all, and that those things need to be understood for what they are—*the truth*.

After the ASTD experience, it became readily apparent to us that we should write a book that focuses not so much on anything new, but rather speaks directly to what endures and is timeless. While context changes, while global and personal circumstances change, the fundamentals of leadership do not. We thought it was just as important in these changing times to remind people of what endures as it was to talk about what has been disrupted.

We wanted to make certain that the lessons we included not only withstood the test of time but also withstood the scrutiny of statistics. So we sifted through the reams of data that had piled up over three decades and isolated those nuggets that were soundly supported by the numbers. This is a collection of the real thing—no fads, no myths, no trendy responses—just truths that endure.

This book reveals the most important things that we've learned since we began our collaboration. It's a collection of fundamental principles that inform and support the practices of leadership. These are lessons that were true thirty years ago, are true today, and we believe will be true thirty years from now. They speak to what the newest and youngest leaders need to appreciate

and understand, and they speak just as meaningfully to the oldest leaders, who are perhaps re-purposing themselves as they transition from their lengthy careers to other pursuits in volunteer, community, or public sectors. Entrepreneurs need to appreciate what we have learned, just as do people leading established enterprises. These lessons ring true on athletic fields and in the halls of government, and they make as much sense in the United States, China, Brazil, the European Union, India, or any other global address that you can imagine.

This book does not pretend to be an exhaustive list of everything you ever wanted to know about leadership. There are other truths that we are likely to uncover. In the last two years alone we've analyzed over one million responses to our *Leadership Practices Inventory* from over seventy countries. That's a lot of data points. We've just scratched the surface of our own data, let alone the research from others, and the evidence continues to mount.

For those who have read our prior works, some of this may sound familiar. It should. But three things make this book different from our previous ones. First, this is a bolder book. We're taking a stand that our research supports each and every claim. Second, it's based on data we didn't have when we wrote our other books. Over the past few years we've been able to accumulate a lot more information and a lot more cases. Third, it's a more global and a more cross-generational

book. The stories and examples we share come from around the world and encompass three generations of leaders. We know that you'll be the judge, but if you've read our other works we still think you'll find many new and useful insights among these enduring truths.

The truths we've written about in this book are things you can count on. They are realities of leadership that will help you to think, decide, and act more effectively. They provide lessons that will sustain you in your personal and professional development. They are truths that address what is real about leadership.

TEN TRUTHS ABOUT LEADERSHIP

In this book we'll explore ten fundamental truths about leadership and becoming an effective leader. We write with the perspective of an emerging leader—someone new in the role or making the transition to leadership for the first time—but the ideas are just as relevant to those with years of leadership experience. They apply to those who are continuing to hone their skills and to those who've had no prior training. They are also relevant to those who want to be more capable in coaching others to be more effective leaders.

The first truth is that **You Make a Difference**. It is the most fundamental truth of all. Before you can lead,