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T H E

LEADERSHIP
CHALLENGE

4th Edition

THE MOST TRUSTED SOURCE ON BECOMING A BETTER LEADER

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Table of Contents

Praise

Title Page

Copyright Page

Dedication

PREFACE

THE PURPOSE OF THIS BOOK

A FIELD GUIDE FOR LEADERS

THE FUTURE OF LEADERSHIP

PART 1 - WHAT LEADERS DO AND WHAT CONSTITUENTS EXPECT

Chapter 1 - THE FIVE PRACTICES OF EXEMPLARY LEADERSHIP

LEADERSHIP OPPORTUNITIES ARE EVERYWHERE

THE FIVE PRACTICES OF EXEMPLARY LEADERSHIP

LEADERSHIP IS A RELATIONSHIP

THE TEN COMMITMENTS OF LEADERSHIP

Chapter 2 - CREDIBILITY IS THE FOUNDATION OF LEADERSHIP

WHAT PEOPLE LOOK FOR AND ADMIRE IN LEADERS

PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER: CREDIBILITY IS THE

FOUNDATION

PART 2 - MODEL THE WAY

Chapter 3 - CLARIFY VALUES

FIND YOUR VOICE

AFFIRM SHARED VALUES

REFLECTION AND ACTION: CLARIFYING VALUES

Chapter 4 - SET THE EXAMPLE

PERSONIFY THE SHARED VALUES

TEACH OTHERS TO MODEL THE VALUES

REFLECTION AND ACTION: SETTING THE EXAMPLE

PART 3 - INSPIRE A SHARED VISION

Chapter 5 - ENVISION THE FUTURE

IMAGINE THE POSSIBILITIES

FIND A COMMON PURPOSE

REFLECTION AND ACTION: ENVISIONING THE FUTURE

Chapter 6 - ENLIST OTHERS

APPEAL TO COMMON IDEALS

ANIMATE THE VISION

REFLECTION AND ACTION: ENLISTING OTHERS

PART 4 - CHALLENGE THE PROCESS

Chapter 7 - SEARCH FOR OPPORTUNITIES

SEIZE THE INITIATIVE
EXERCISE OUTSIGHT
REFLECTION AND ACTION: SEARCHING FOR
OPPORTUNITIES

Chapter 8 - EXPERIMENT AND TAKE RISKS

GENERATE SMALL WINS
LEARN FROM EXPERIENCE
REFLECTION AND ACTION: EXPERIMENTING AND TAKING
RISKS

PART 5 - ENABLE OTHERS TO ACT

Chapter 9 - FOSTER COLLABORATION

CREATE A CLIMATE OF TRUST
FACILITATE RELATIONSHIPS
REFLECTION AND ACTION: FOSTERING COLLABORATION

Chapter 10 - STRENGTHEN OTHERS

ENHANCE SELF-DETERMINATION
DEVELOP COMPETENCE AND CONFIDENCE
REFLECTION AND ACTION: STRENGTHENING OTHERS

PART 6 - ENCOURAGE THE HEART

Chapter 11 - RECOGNIZE CONTRIBUTIONS

EXPECT THE BEST

PERSONALIZE RECOGNITION
REFLECTION AND ACTION: RECOGNIZING
CONTRIBUTIONS

Chapter 12 - CELEBRATE THE VALUES AND VICTORIES

CREATE A SPIRIT OF COMMUNITY
BE PERSONALLY INVOLVED
REFLECTION AND ACTION: CELEBRATING VALUES AND
VICTORIES

PART 7 - LEADERSHIP FOR EVERYONE

Chapter 13 - LEADERSHIP IS EVERYONE'S BUSINESS

YOU ARE THE MOST IMPORTANT LEADER IN YOUR
ORGANIZATION
LEADERSHIP IS LEARNED
LEADERS MAKE A DIFFERENCE
FIRST LEAD YOURSELF
MORAL LEADERSHIP CALLS US TO HIGHER PURPOSES
HUMILITY IS THE ANTIDOTE TO HUBRIS
LEADERSHIP IS IN THE MOMENT
THE SECRET TO SUCCESS IN LIFE

NOTES

Acknowledgments

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

INDEX

Praise for *The Leadership Challenge*

“Kouzes and Posner continue to strengthen and widen our definition of leadership. They make the role of the leader and the process of leadership understandable and accessible to anyone who wants to improve on their own abilities and guide others in significant ways.”

—Beverly Kaye, founder and CEO, Career Systems International and coauthor, *Love 'Em or Lose 'Em: Getting Good People to Stay*

“This new edition of *The Leadership Challenge* shall be mandatory reading for any individual or organization that cares about the future. Evidence-based from the authors' twenty-five years of global research, this fully practical and inspirational book will provide the tools and the motivation both to select and develop the exceptional leaders we need so much all around the world.”

—Claudio Fernández-Aráoz, partner and global executive committee member, Egon Zehnder International; author of *Great People Decisions*

“A timely, practical update of the definitive book on leadership. If you haven't read this work, do it now ... before your competitors get their hands on it. If you've already read the book, the new edition is certainly worth another read. It truly enhances the groundbreaking work of these preeminent leadership thinkers.”

—Adrian Gostick, *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Carrot Principle*

“Leadership is the one central and most important element of successful management teams—be it in a start-up company, a growth phase of an established organization, or as key for a successful turnaround. During their extensive research on leadership, Kouzes and Posner have worked with many successful leaders around the world. Their research results and the many different leadership examples are the basis of this most comprehensive and inspiring book on leadership. *The Leadership Challenge* is the classic, and yet the most updated, publication on leadership—the best I have seen.”

—Chris Muntwyler, CEO, DHL Express UK & Ireland

“*The Leadership Challenge* is a revealing guide to ‘liberating the leader in you.’ Kouzes and Posner prove that effective leadership can be learned and each chapter is a step on the journey to bringing the best from yourself and others. Their book offers practical, research-based lessons that are at the core of our corporate leadership development program.”

—Debra L. Lyons, chief human resources officer, Westfield Group

“Even the most seasoned executive or veteran manager will find much to learn from these two authors. More than any other leadership book in my collection, their work provides an introspective look at the opportunities we all have to improve our skills and cast a more inspirational and influential shadow in our organizations. Take the challenge!”

—Ken Wilcox, president and CEO, SVB Financial Group

"The Leadership Challenge is a profound and inspiring blueprint for building leadership capacity that should be read by all. In this latest edition, Kouzes and Posner once again bring us the insight and wisdom of ordinary people in everyday situations that have produced extraordinary results. These leaders are living examples of the power of leadership. By understanding their stories and the lessons they have learned, you will embrace The Five Practices and the Ten Commitments of Exemplary Leadership to improve your own leadership skills as well as inspire a new generation of future leaders. Take The Leadership Challenge. I guarantee you will not be disappointed!"

—Dan Warmenhoven, CEO, Network Appliance, Inc.

"Kouzes and Posner created a classic book that is essential reading, with a message that has become increasingly poignant for leaders for generations to come."

—Mark C. Thompson, coauthor of the international bestseller *Success Built to Last: Creating a Life that Matters*

"The Leadership Challenge is packed with great stories of leadership and leadership challenges from all walks of life. In today's world, we need leaders with integrity. Kouzes and Posner have laid out a simple plan to help develop those leaders. Reading the book feels like speaking to a mentor on leadership."

—Stephen E. Almassy, global vice chair of technology, Ernst & Young LLP

"This is the most timeless and practical work of modern management thinking on how to be a leader of people. Solid

research, great storytelling, and useful practices—this book has it all. This new edition is packed with leading-edge research and great ways to become a leader.”

—John Izzo, Ph.D., author of *Awakening Corporate Soul*

“Whether you’ve worked in a professional environment for decades or you’re just stepping into the business world for the first time, *The Leadership Challenge* is the book for you. It’s a perfect resource for people looking for information on leadership, personal development, and change. This book is an invaluable tool to find the true leader in each and every one of us.”

—Bob Moles, chairman, Intero Real Estate Services

“The first edition was seminal and totally original. It became a modern classic on leadership practically overnight. With new cases and concepts and action steps that are even riper and more important, Kouzes and Posner go way beyond their earlier work and have made yet another brilliant contribution to leadership studies. This new book, a product of an unusual collaboration, is essential reading for everyone involved or concerned with leading.”

—Warren Bennis, distinguished professor of business administration at the University of Southern California and author of *On Becoming a Leader*

“From the Ten Commitments of Leadership to the emphasis on actions and relationships, this valuable book is full of enduring wisdom and practical insights essential for success in changing times.”

—Rosabeth Moss Kanter, professor, Harvard Business School, and bestselling author of *Confidence: How Winning & Losing Streaks Begin & End*

“For twenty-five years I have written about and taught leadership. *The Leadership Challenge* is one of the five best books I have ever read. I continually recommend it to others.”

—John C. Maxwell, founder, The INJOY Group, and author, *The 21 Irrefutable Laws of Leadership*

“Based upon evidence collected from around the world and over decades, *The Leadership Challenge* provides practical guidance on how to lead and inspiration to make the effort.”

—Jeffrey Pfeffer, professor, Stanford Business School, and author of *The Human Equation: Building Profits by Putting People First*

“This is perhaps the most comprehensive field guide ever written for leaders. The principles are powerful, and have been a key part of my personal journey as a leader for years.”

—Patrick Lencioni, president, The Table Group, and bestselling author of *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team*

“*The Leadership Challenge* answers the greatest challenge leaders face—knowing what to do to deliver value. Kouzes and Posner turn research into practical ideas that leaders at all levels can use. Full of practical tools and wonderful cases, it offers easy access to concepts that will build

personal and organizational leadership depth. When the book first came out, it affected my thinking on leadership, and it continues to do so.”

—Dave Ulrich, professor at the Ross School of Business, University of Michigan, and coauthor of *The HR Value Proposition*

“If you can have only one book on leadership, *The Leadership Challenge* has to be it. Kouzes and Posner reinforce their timeless principles with the stories of people who are actually leading in today’s world.”

—Terry Pearce, founder of Leadership Communication and author of *Leading Out Loud*

“If you read only one book on leadership, this is the one to read. If you read it more than a year ago, you need to read it again. It will stimulate new thoughts and (more important) inspire you to action. A true classic, extraordinarily well written.”

—David H. Maister, author of *Practice What You Preach* and coauthor of *The Trusted Advisor*

“Want to increase your professional and personal ROI? Then read this book, use this book, and give this book to others. The ROI on your leadership will be significant, visible, and bankable.”

—Sharon A. Winston, senior vice president, Lee Hecht Harrison

 JOSSEY-BASS

THE LEADERSHIP CHALLENGE

FOURTH EDITION

JAMES M. KOUZES

BARRY Z. POSNER



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We dedicate this book, with love,
to the two leaders we admire most,
Tae Moon Kouzes and Jackie Schmidt-Posner,
and to the upcoming generation of leaders,
Nicholas Lopez and Amanda Posner.

PREFACE

Getting Extraordinary Things Done in Organizations

The Leadership Challenge is about how leaders mobilize others to want to get extraordinary things done in organizations. It's about the practices leaders use to transform values into actions, visions into realities, obstacles into innovations, separateness into solidarity, and risks into rewards. It's about leadership that creates the climate in which people turn challenging opportunities into remarkable successes.

There are no shortages of challenging opportunities. In these extraordinary times, the challenges seem only to be increasing in number and complexity. All generations confront their own serious threats and receive their own favorable circumstances. The abundance of challenges is not the issue. It's how we respond to them that matters. Through our responses to challenges, we all have the potential to seriously worsen or profoundly improve the world in which we live and work. With the kinds of leadership excellence we've observed in over twenty-five years of research, we're going to bet on the latter.

There are countless opportunities for each of us to make a difference. For instance, there are opportunities to

- Provide direction and support to our teams during uncertain times
- More fully utilize the talents of our colleagues

- Set a positive example of what honesty and ethics mean in daily life
- Find a better balance in our always-on, 24/7/365 lives
- Apply knowledge to products and services, creating extraordinary value for the customer
- Put the innocence and wisdom of different generations into our workplace and into our products and services
- Use the tools of technology to weave a web of human connection
- Tap the wealth of scientific knowledge to create a safer and more sustainable world
- Rebuild a sense of community and increase understanding among diverse peoples
- Turn information into knowledge and improve the collective standard of living
- Bring peace to a world tired of war
- Restore hope and create a deeper sense of meaning in our lives

More than ever there is need for people to seize these opportunities to lead us to greatness. *The Leadership Challenge* is about those who do. It is about how traditional systems of rewards and punishments, control and scrutiny give way to innovation, individual character, and the courage of convictions. It offers a set of leadership practices based on the real-world experiences of thousands of people who have answered the call for leadership.

What we have discovered, and rediscovered, is that leadership is not the private reserve of a few charismatic men and women. It is a process ordinary people use when they are bringing forth the best from themselves and others. When the leader in everyone is liberated extraordinary things happen.

THE PURPOSE OF THIS BOOK

The fundamental purpose of *The Leadership Challenge* is to assist people—managers and individual contributors alike—in furthering their abilities to lead others to get extraordinary things done. Whether you're in the private sector or public, an employee or a 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. We believe that you are capable of developing yourself as a leader far more than tradition has ever assumed possible.

The Leadership Challenge is written both to strengthen your abilities and to uplift your spirits. We intend it to be practical and inspirational. We also make you a promise: everything in this book is *evidence-based*. Everything we write about, everything we advise is solidly based in research—our own and others'. If you engage in the practices we describe in this book, you *will* improve your performance and the performance of your team. There is a catch, of course. You have to do it with commitment and consistency. Excellence in anything—whether it's leadership, music, sports, or engineering—requires disciplined practice.

This book has its origins in a research project we began over twenty-five years ago. We wanted to know what people did when they were at their “personal best” in leading others. The personal bests were experiences in which our respondents, in their own perception, set their individual leadership standards of excellence. We started with an assumption that we didn't have to interview and survey star performers in excellent companies to discover best practices. Instead, we assumed that by asking ordinary

people to describe extraordinary leadership experiences we would find patterns of success. And we did.

When they are doing their best, leaders exhibit certain distinct practices, which vary little from industry to industry, profession to profession, community to community, and country to country. Good leadership is an understandable and universal process. Though each leader is a unique individual, there are shared patterns to the practice of leadership. And these practices can be learned.

This book is about how ordinary people exercise leadership at its best. There are a few CEOs mentioned in *The Leadership Challenge*, but you probably won't recognize their names. This is *not* a book about famous people or about people in positions of high power—as if leadership were based on rank and place. Instead, the stories you will read are those of regular people, from all walks of life—people like you—who get bigger-than-life results. It's a book about people who have the courage and spirit to make a significant difference.

The leaders we've worked with and learned from have asked us many questions about enhancing their leadership capabilities:

- What values should guide my actions as a leader?
- How do I best set an example for others?
- How do I articulate a vision of the future when things are so unpredictable?
- How do I improve my ability to inspire others toward a common purpose?
- How do I create an environment that promotes innovation and risk?
- How do I build a cohesive and spirited team?
- How do I share power and information and still maintain accountability?
- How do I put more joy and celebration into our efforts?

- What is the source of self-confidence required to lead others?
- How do I go about improving my leadership abilities?

In *The Leadership Challenge*, we offer guidance on these questions, and others.

A FIELD GUIDE FOR LEADERS

Think of *The Leadership Challenge* as a field guide to take along on your leadership journey. We begin the expedition with two chapters that introduce you to our point of view about leadership. In Chapter One we describe The Five Practices of Exemplary Leadership revealed in our research.^{[1](#)} But you can't do justice to leadership without also talking about what constituents want, so in Chapter Two we describe the results of our research on the characteristics that people most admire in their leaders.

In Chapters Three through Twelve we explore The Five Practices in depth. We have designed each chapter to describe one of the Ten Commitments of Leadership—the essential behaviors—that leaders employ to get extraordinary things done, and to explain the fundamental principles that support the leadership practices. We offer evidence from our research and that of others to support the principles, provide actual case examples of real people who demonstrate each practice, and prescribe specific recommendations on what you can do to make each practice your own and to continue your development as a leader. Every chapter from Three to Twelve concludes with suggested steps to take, alone or with others, to build specific skills in implementing the practice. Each of our suggestions is a “small win.” Whether the focus is your own learning or the development of your constituents—your

direct reports, team, peers, manager, community members, and the like—you can take immediate action on every one of our recommendations. They require little or no budget, discussion, and consensus among peers, nor approval of top management. They just require your personal commitment and discipline.

In our closing chapter, Chapter Thirteen, we offer a call to action, a call to everyone to accept personal responsibility to be a role model for leadership. Over the past twenty-five years we kept relearning that leadership is everyone's business. The first place to look for leadership is within yourself. We will ask you in our closing chapter to consider the difference you want to make, the legacy you want to leave. And we promise that if you read to the very end of this book, we'll tell you the secret to success in life.

Those familiar with our previous three editions of *The Leadership Challenge* will notice that the practices and the commitments have remained the same over more than a quarter century. Nothing in our continuing research has told us that there is a magical sixth practice that will revolutionize the conduct of leadership, and nothing in our research suggests that any of the Five Practices are now irrelevant. But we did decide we needed to go on a diet. Each succeeding edition tended to put on a little weight—feature creep, as they say in the technology business. We decided that we needed to trim down to our original size, so this edition is more like the first edition in terms of length. There are still lots of stories and lots of research, we just focus more intently on the essentials and keep it simple. The other noticeable change from the previous edition is the inclusion of more cases from outside the United States. *The Leadership Challenge* has been translated into twelve other languages, and we wanted to bring leaders from around the globe more prominently into this new edition.

Short of starting with Chapters One and Two, there is no sacred order to this book. Go wherever your interests are. We wrote this material to support you in your leadership development. Just remember that each practice is essential. Although you might skip around in the book, you can't skip any of the fundamentals of leadership.

Finally, for those who wish to know more about how we conducted our research, detailed information on our methodology, statistical data, and highlights of validation studies by other scholars of our leadership paradigm are available on the Web at www.leadershipchallenge.com.

THE FUTURE OF LEADERSHIP

The domain of leaders is the future. The leader's unique legacy is the creation of valued institutions that survive over time. The most significant contribution leaders make is not simply to today's bottom line; it is to the long-term development of people and institutions so they can adapt, change, prosper, and grow. We hope this book contributes to the revitalization of organizations, to the creation of new enterprises, to the renewal of healthy communities, and to greater respect and understanding in the world. We also fervently hope that it enriches your life and that of your community and your family.

Leadership is important, not just in your career and within your organization, but in every sector, in every community, and in every country. We need more exemplary leaders, and we need them more than ever. There is so much extraordinary work that needs to be done. We need leaders who can unite us and ignite us.

In the end, we realize that leadership development is self-development. Meeting the leadership challenge is a

personal—and a daily—challenge for all of us. We know that if you have the will and the way to lead, you can. You have to supply the will. We'll do our best to supply the way.

June 2007

James M. Kouzes
Orinda, California

Barry Z. Posner
Santa Clara, California



PART 1

WHAT LEADERS DO AND WHAT CONSTITUENTS EXPECT

1

THE FIVE PRACTICES OF EXEMPLARY LEADERSHIP

“Leadership is ultimately about creating a way for people to contribute to making something extraordinary happen.”

Alan Keith, Genentech

“When I walked in the door on my first day,” Dick Nettell told us, “we had four hundred people working really, really hard, but they weren’t winning. We had people who were walking around looking like they ran over their dogs on the way to work. It was very, very sad.” As the new site executive for Bank of America’s Consumer Call Center in Concord, California, Dick found “rep scores” (the key performance measure) 21 percentage points behind the top performing call center and 18 points behind the next lowest performer. Fifty-five percent of employees felt that they were in an environment in which they could not speak their minds, and 50 percent believed that nothing was going to happen even if they did.^{[1](#)}

It’s Dick’s firm belief that “everybody wants to win. Everybody wants to be successful. Everybody comes to work trying to make a difference.” But the call center employees suffered from “management whiplash.” The constant turnover in leadership and changes in priorities had been sending them down the path of poor performance.

Dick said that when he started asking about the comparisons with other centers, “All I heard were the reasons why we couldn’t do this or that. If there were an Olympic excuse-making team, we would be gold medallists. People were very disempowered.” So Dick set out to change all that.

Dick set aside three entire days just for talking and listening to people. He gathered as much data as he could from these interviews and elsewhere. “If you keep your eyes open and periodically actually shut your mouth, and you have the courage to turn the mirror around on yourself,” said Dick, “it’s amazing what you can learn and how you can change things.”

He met with the call center’s senior managers and support staff in a large basement conference room and presented his findings. Then he handed out stacks of Post-it notepads and asked the group to write down five adjectives that described the center at that time. He repeated this process two more times, asking them to write down five adjectives that described how they thought their peers would describe the center and what they thought the associates, or customer service representatives, would say. Each time, their responses were written on an easel. It was a bleak picture. Words such as *demotivated*, *volatile*, *imprecise*, *failing*, *disorganized*, *frustrating*, *not fun*, *constantly changing priorities*, *lack of appreciation*, *too many changes*, and *not enough coaching* appeared on the lists. Even so, there were some positive comments about the people, such as *dedicated*, *energetic*, and *supportive*.

Then Dick asked them to go through the process once more, this time describing how they would *like* the call center to look in the future. “If you could wave a magic wand,” he asked the group, “in three to five years how would you like the center to be described?” The language

they used to express their hopes, dreams, and aspirations painted a dramatically different picture from the one Dick found when he came aboard: *amazing results, world class, a model for others to follow, a unique place to work, partnership, opportunities to learn and grow, true passion for our customers*. Armed with this list of aspirations Dick and the management team began to craft a vision, mission, and set of values (which they called commitments). The resulting vision and mission read as follows:

OUR VISION OF THE FUTURE . . .

- We will be seen as a *World Class Call Center* and the standard against which others are measured—one with true passion for our customers.
- We will be acknowledged across the franchise as a model to follow, where every associate truly feels like a partner, has an equal opportunity to learn and grow, and understands their personal impact on our overall success.
- We will be viewed as a unique place to work, an organization that drives amazing results while having fun along the way.

OUR MISSION IS . . .

- To provide an experience that consistently “delights” our customers every single minute of every single day.

Over the next six weeks Dick held twenty-two forty-five minute state-of-the-center meetings with every team in the call center. “Here’s our vision, here’s what we’re committed to,” Dick would say to begin raising awareness of the issues, and then he’d ask, “Does this make sense to you? Is there something we need to change?” Then Dick told them about his own beginnings in Bank of America. He told them about