

The Truth About Leadership (James Kouzes and Barry Posner, Jossey-Bass, 2010)

Reviewed by Steve Gladis, Ph.D., December 2010

If you ever decided to put together a dream team of leadership all stars – say, for the US Olympic Leadership Team – you’d be smart to hire Jim Kouzes and Barry Posner to coach that team. These guys truly “get” leadership as well as anyone I know. Their original best seller *The Leadership Challenge*, based on their years of research and teaching, helped us all clarify the five best practices of leadership in a way that took leadership research from voodoo to validation. Reading their new book, *The Truth About Leadership*, is like sitting down with Aristotle and Yoda for a chat about the collective wisdom surrounding leadership. These two modern sages (Kouzes and Posner) tell you the 10 big TRUTHS about leadership, like trust, learning, caring, and a lot more. What’s great about this compact book is that the authors talk about big, important truths in simple terms and then document their assertions with clear-eyed research. Deceptively direct and comprehensible, this book poses a lot of myths and dispels them with reality...or truth. The simple truth is that if you want to read a benchmark book about decades of leadership research, buy this book for every leader in your organization. Then use it, as I will, to teach them the “Truth” about leadership.

This week I’ll be reviewing *The Truth About Leadership* in more detail.

1. **Truth One – You Make a Difference.** Leadership begins and ends with the idea that we all matter and influence each other. The good news is that – like the Scarecrow, Tin Man and Lion in the “Wizard of Oz” – we already have all we need if we choose to use it. Leadership starts at home and close to home. On p. 9, the authors list who influences us the most. Some good stats and key folks: Family, teachers, coaches, community and religious leaders, and business leaders. Curiously, dead last on their list are entertainers. So being a rock star or an academy award winning actor doesn’t get you as much in the leadership world as it might seem. And, in the world of leadership, Jim and Barry are the best. See p. 13 for their ground breaking findings from *The Leadership Challenge*: 1) Model the way; 2) Inspire a shared vision; 3) Challenge the process; 4) Enable others to act; 5) Encourage the heart.
2. **Truth Two – Credibility is the Foundation of Leadership.** Unless people follow you (willingly), you’re a leader in name only – a positional leadership. To be an authentic leader, you must have a relationship with followers. And what

followers want according to the authors' research, are in order of preference: Honesty, Vision (forward thinking), Inspiration, and Competence (for others see p. 18). These four characteristics hold true over many years of research in varying cultures, genders, hierarchies, etc. And, these four make up what researchers (buttressed by Aristotle's thinking) call source credibility. Leader credibility and employee engagement go hand in glove. When leaders do what they say they will, watch engagement, productivity, and loyalty soar.

3. **Truth Three – Values Drive Commitment.** It all starts with what you believe in. People will do whatever is consistent with their true inner values and beliefs. Because emotion rules the day ultimately, if something feels right, aligned with values, people tend to do it. One interesting chart is on p. 36, where the authors look at a 2 by 2 grid where the y axis = Clarity of Organizational Values and x axis = Clarity of personal values. Their data shows that when people are clear about their own values and their company's values, they are more engaged. Bottom line: Help people to get clear about their own values and beliefs first and corporate values and beliefs; to the extent the value and belief sets mesh, watch engagement and productivity head north!
4. **Truth Four – Focusing on the Future Sets Leaders Apart.** Here's a great quote from the book, "Leaders are custodians of the future (p. 46)." Another way to put it is that leaders create reality. Their vision of what's possible can ignite the fire within followers to "see" and work toward the new reality. In a comparative survey, only 27% of undergraduates ranked "forward thinking" critical; however, 90% of business leaders ranked it high on their list. Optimism fuels this visionary instinct of the better leaders. To reach a vision, leaders have to be positive and optimistically realistic. This chapter contains a couple of interesting references about optimism from two leadership heroes of mine, Warren Bennis and Martin Seligman.
5. **Truth Five – You Can't Do it Alone.** We remember when the 1980 US hockey team won the Olympics (the "miracle" team) by beating the Russians; however, in 2004 the Dream Team (all the best pros like LaBron James) flubbed the Olympics? Leadership is ALL about the connection, the relationship, between leaders and followers. No followers and leaders are just out for a walk alone. There exists a primal, emotional connection that the authors refer to as being about intimacy, familiarity, and empathy. Leaders who are in emotional tune with their followers are better able to lead them to a shared vision, a collective discussion about the future, not a monologue by a soothsaying leader. Finally,

leaders bring out the best in others. Like executive coaches, great leaders have more good questions than good answers. Sounds simple, but the urge to give advice, rather than to listen, is like a dog trying to resist marking a hydrant!

6. **Truth Six – Trust Rules.** Talk about an attention getter – the authors lead off this chapter with show stopper: “In a 2009 international study, the majority of people said they trust a stranger more than they trust their boss (p. 75).” Leaders must take the risk to open up first to followers. If you want trust, then start by trusting others. Micromanaging is a HUGE anti-trust move! Leaders must “ante up first.” Great leaders have to prove that they can be trusted – behave consistently, communicate clearly, and be truthful. Above all, candor is central to any relationship, especially for leaders.
7. **Truth Seven – Challenge is the Crucible for Greatness.** Think about any historical leaders you admire, and see if they did or did not face down a crisis – Martin Luther King, Jr., Dwight Eisenhower, John Kennedy. Make your own list. Leaders take on the status quo and are willing to change the way things are done. That’s never easy and always meets resistance. And facing such change resistance takes what the authors call “grit” – or having a vision or goal and sticking it out to meet that goal, not folding when people start whining. Finally, the authors discuss the value and learning that take place whenever leaders fail, at least some time in their careers. And taking those lessons to heart is the heart of leadership.
8. **Truth Eight: You Either Lead by Example or Don’t Lead at All.** The Marine Corps drums this into your head from day one so I was happy to see this among the Kouzes and Posner “truths.” I like the DWYSYWD acronym the authors use. Read the book to find out what it means. A hint: walk the talk! Keep your promises, and if you give people something crappy to do, be the first to bring a shovel and get your hands dirty. Nothing builds credibility faster. On the other hand, nothing loses it quicker than telling others to do something you’d never do. And, should you make a mistake – rather WHEN you make a mistake – admit it, fix it and work at not making the same one again. Leaders aren’t perfect but should be very intentional about improving.
9. **Truth Nine – The Best Leaders are the Best Learners.** In a world changing faster than the speed of light, you’d better be able to learn or get left in the dust of the digital world. The authors quote a study on p. 123, which found that “...the single best predictor of future success in new and different managerial jobs is

learning agility.” There’s an old axiom – If you keep doing what you’re doing, you keep getting what you’re getting. Put another way, “Insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results.” – Einstein. If you change jobs you must “Adopt a Growth Mindset” (p. 125). For that you need “deliberate practice” (see the authors’ list of the 5 ones you need).

10. **Truth Ten – Leadership is an Affair of the Heart.** This is my favorite saying of the authors. Maybe it’s because I’m near their same age, and as I get older, I realize the power of emotions, especially love and matters of the heart. The authors say that love is the “soul of leadership,” and they quote Irwin Federman, former CEO of US Venture Partners: “....And we like them [leaders] in direct proportion to how they make us feel” (p. 137). I’m going to quote a bit from the summary of this chapter on p. 152...just because they say things so well. “Leaders put their hearts in their businesses and their businesses in their hearts....They show they care...are positive and upbeat, generating emotional energy that enables other to flourish.” In short, such leaders are in love with leading others.