



THE FIVE PRACTICES OF EXEMPLARY LEADERSHIP

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What is it that leaders do to build and sustain credibility?

What do they do that makes others see them as capable and trustworthy leaders?

What are the behaviors that people exhibit that engage and mobilize others to want to follow? What are people actually *doing* when they are leading and making extraordinary things happen?

To answer these questions, we have been asking people since the early 1980s to tell us what they did when they were at their “personal best” as leaders. We continue to ask this question in our studies and workshops around the world. We have collected thousands of Personal-Best Leadership Experiences—stories about times when individuals report how they excelled at leading, when they were operating at peak performance—from across a wide variety of settings, nationalities, organizations, levels, ages, genders, educational backgrounds, and the like. We’ve interviewed students in universities, individual contributors at work, middle managers in large and small companies, volunteers in the community, and executives in the C-suite about times when they excelled at leading—when they were doing their best as leaders.

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Reflect for a moment on something that you would consider your Personal-Best Leadership Experience. This experience could be a time when you emerged as the informal leader, or it could be a time when you were appointed to take on the lead role in a new project. It could be in any functional area, in any type of organization, in a staff or line role. The experience does not need to be in your current organization. It could be in a prior job, a club, a community volunteer setting, a professional organization, a school, a team, a congregation, or even a family setting. It could be a project to improve a product or service, an initiative to bring about a change in your neighborhood, the turnaround of a poorly performing team, the start-up of a new business, jumping in during a crisis, or any other kind of challenge that required leadership.

When we initially analyzed the themes in the thousands of personal-best stories we had collected, two meta-lessons emerged and continue to be front and center.

The first lesson we learned is that *everyone has a story to tell*. Regardless of whom we ask, people are able to identify a time when they did their best as a leader. The specifics of the personal-best stories varied from person to person because the individuals responding to the Personal-Best Leadership Experience Questionnaire were different from one another along a myriad of factors.

Despite any individual differences, settings, and circumstances, the second lesson we learned is that the actions and behaviors of leaders when at their best are *more similar than they are different*. There is a set of *common behaviors and actions* that people demonstrate when they operate at their personal-best as leaders.

These behaviors are universal, and they have stood the test of time and place. Moreover, hundreds of independent scholars have validated this framework in their own studies investigating the central role leadership plays in personal well-being, organizational productivity, and effectiveness. The evidence is clear: exemplary leadership is found in every corner of the globe, every sector of society, every community, every organization, and every type of individual.

We've grouped these behaviors into a *leadership operating system* that we call The Five Practices of Exemplary Leadership. When making extraordinary things happen, leaders:

- Model the Way
- Inspire a Shared Vision
- Challenge the Process
- Enable Others to Act
- Encourage the Heart

Let's take a brief look now at each of The Five Practices.

MODEL THE WAY | Titles are granted, but it's your behavior that earns you respect. This sentiment was expressed in everyone's personal-best case, as represented by such comments as "I couldn't tell anyone what to do, I had to show them," "I had to be a role model for the behavior I wanted from others," and "I had to be clear about my personal values and then make sure that I walked the talk." Exemplary leaders know that if they want to earn the respect of the people around them and achieve the highest standards, they must be models of the behavior they expect of others. Exemplary leaders *Model the Way*.

To effectively model the way, you first must be clear about your guiding principles. You must *clarify values by finding your voice*. When you understand who you are and the values you hold dear, then you can speak authentically about the beliefs that you want to guide your decisions and actions. But your values aren't the only values that matter. Leaders don't speak just for themselves. They also speak for the group, and in every team, organization, and community, there are others who also feel strongly about matters of principle. As a leader, you also must help identify and *affirm the shared values* of the group you are working with. Without an agreed-on and collective understanding of what is right and what is wrong, then anything goes, and there are neither practical nor ethical standards for people to follow.

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When it comes to determining how serious leaders are about what they say, however, a leader's actions are far more important than their words. People listen to the talk, and then they watch the walk. Words and actions must be consistent for leaders to be believed, so exemplary leaders *set the example by aligning actions with shared values*. The best way that you prove that something is important is by doing it yourself.

Through daily actions, leaders demonstrate their deep commitment to their beliefs and to the shared values of the groups they are part of.

INSPIRE A SHARED VISION | People describe their Personal-Best Leadership Experiences as times when they imagined exciting and meaningful futures for themselves and others. They reported actions such as: “I told the team that we need everyone’s commitment to make our vision a reality, to reach our dreams and make them happen,” “The more I imagined what was possible, the more clearly I could describe what the future might hold in store for all of us,” and “We had to be aligned so that we could find a common purpose as a team going forward.” They had a desire to create something that no one else had ever created before. They had visions of what could be, and they had absolute faith and confidence that those aspirations could become reality. When performing at their best, leaders *Inspire a Shared Vision*.

In many ways, leaders live their lives backward. By building upon experiences, they see pictures in their mind’s eye of what success will look like even before they’ve started their projects, much as architects draw blueprints or engineers build models. Their clear image of the future pulls them forward, and they are able to speak enthusiastically and energetically about the compelling possibilities. They *envision the future by imagining exciting and ennobling possibilities*.

Yet visions seen only by leaders are insufficient to create an organized movement or a significant change. People will not follow until they can embrace a vision as their own. They must be able to see exciting possibilities for themselves. To realize a vision, then, leaders have to be clear not only about why it is important to them, but they must be equally clear about why it is important to those they lead. To perform at their best, leaders *enlist others in a common vision by appealing to shared ideals and aspirations*.

When you truly understand and take to heart the hopes and dreams of those you are involved with, you can breathe life into the aspirations of others. You are able to forge a unity of purpose by explaining and showing how and why the dream is for the common good. The way you ignite passion in others is by expressing contagious enthusiasm for the compelling vision of the group, communicating their zeal through vivid language and an expressive style.

CHALLENGE THE PROCESS | Every single personal-best leadership case involved some change from the status quo. Not one person claimed to achieve a personal best by keeping things the same, doing what had always been done. They said: “I needed to change the business-as-usual climate by finding ways to experiment and learn,” “We began by brainstorming what we would change if anything was possible,” and “We found that big things are done by doing lots of small things.” This is why leaders *Challenge the Process*.

Challenge is the crucible for greatness. It provides the context in which adversity and vision interact to provide for the creation of something new. When at their best leaders are pioneers. They are willing to step out into the unknown and continuously *search for opportunities by seizing the initiative and by looking outward for innovative ways to improve.*

While they are proactive, leaders aren't the only creators or originators of new programs, services, or processes. In fact, it's more likely that they're not. Innovation comes more from listening than from telling—more from asking questions and hearing what others are thinking and have to say. When challenging the process, your primary contributions are often the recognition of good ideas, the support of those ideas, and the willingness to challenge the system to get new products, processes, services, and systems adopted.

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We also found that in the Personal-Best Leadership Experiences, leaders had to *experiment and take risks by continually generating small wins and learning from experience*. Leaders know well that innovation and change all involve trial and error. One way you can deal with these potential risks and failures is to approach change through incremental steps. Little victories, when piled on top of each other, build confidence that people can meet even the most significant challenges. In making those victories possible, you strengthen commitment to the long-term future.

Learning also unlocks the door to progress, and exemplary leaders make a point to ask “What can we learn?” when things don’t go as expected. The best leaders are the best learners, treating every experiment, every innovation, and every mistake as an opportunity to develop and grow.

ENABLE OTHERS TO ACT | Leaders know they can’t do it alone. Grand dreams don’t become significant realities through the actions of a single person. In their personal-best cases, they showed their appreciation of this truth with statements such as: “It was necessary to take into consideration each person’s perspectives and ensure that the decisions were made by the team and not individual decisions,” “The key was building relationships with people who were needed to help us make this happen,” and “Giving them the space and latitude to do their work gave them the confidence to do what hadn’t been done before.”



Leadership is a team effort, not a solo performance, and to make extraordinary things happen in organizations exemplary leaders *Enable Others to Act*.

Leaders proudly discussed how they had to *foster collaboration by building a climate of trust and facilitating relationships*. They engage all those who were necessary to make the project work, and develop collaborative relationships with colleagues. They are considerate of the needs and interests of others. They bring people together, creating an atmosphere where people understand they have a shared fate and that they should treat others as they would like to be treated. They make sure that everyone wins.

This experience underscores how the work of leaders is making people feel strong, capable, and committed. Leaders *strengthen others by increasing self-determination and developing competence and confidence*. People don't stick around for very long or perform at their best if their leader makes them feel weak, dependent, or alienated. People will give their all when you can strengthen their belief that they can do more than they ever thought possible. In fact, it was not unusual for people to indicate that when working with their best leaders, they gave more than 100 percent of themselves to the endeavor because that leader was able to bring out from them more than what they themselves had imagined. When people have confidence in you and your relationship with them is based on trust they are most willing to take risks, make changes, and maintain forward momentum.

ENCOURAGE THE HEART | The climb to the top of any new and challenging endeavor is arduous and steep, and it is not surprising that people can become exhausted, frustrated, and disenchanted. Leaders indicated in their Personal-Best Leadership Experiences that they had to *Encourage the Heart* of those with whom they were working to carry on, especially when they might have been tempted to give up. They said things such as: “You have to show people that you care about them as people and how they are capable of doing a lot more than they think,” “Praise and encouragement are the best gifts because people need to have their hard work and efforts acknowledged, to know that they are making a difference,” and “We were generous with compliments and this allowed us to feel good about ourselves, and when you feel good you are more productive.”

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Genuine acts of caring, whether exhibited in dramatic gestures or simple actions, uplift people's spirits and keep them motivated. It is part of a leader's job to *recognize contributions by showing appreciation for individual excellence*. Over the years, we've seen thousands of examples of individual recognition and group celebration, from handwritten thank-you notes to marching bands and biopic video ceremonies. But recognition and celebration aren't about fun and games—though both abound when leaders encourage the hearts of their constituents.

Encouraging the heart is also not about orchestrating formal awards ceremonies or throwing parties designed to create some artificial sense of camaraderie. It is about *celebrating the values and the victories by creating a spirit of community*. Public encouragement is valuable because it's how you visibly reinforce what's important and show appreciation for actions that support the team's values.

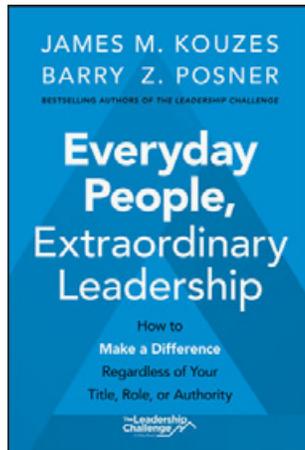
Whether striving to raise quality standards, recover from disaster, or make a dramatic change of any kind, people must see the benefit of aligning behavior with cherished values. When celebrations and rituals are done with authenticity and from the heart, you build a strong sense of collective identity and community spirit that can carry a group through tough times.

These five leadership practices—Model the Way, Inspire a Shared Vision, Challenge the Process, Enable Others to Act, and Encourage the Heart—do not represent an ideology or theory about leadership so much as they provide an operating system for what it means to be practicing leadership and making a difference. Engaging in any of the behaviors associated with The Five Practices does not necessitate any particular personality or require any specific demographic characteristics or advanced educational degrees.

If you don't believe you can exercise leadership and don't see yourself as a leader, there's a very good chance that what you think you can't do, you won't do. There's also a very good chance that you are already leading; you just might not recognize that you are doing it. 📌



Info



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