

RESEARCH PAPER

Research Paper

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### **Abstract**

In their book, *The Leadership Challenge*, authors Kouzes and Posner have made a careful study of best leadership practices that apply to leaders in a wide variety of organizations across the spectrum. Their findings indicate that successful leaders regularly engage in five specific behaviors, which they identify as the Five Practices of Exemplary Leaders. This paper focuses on three of the five, specifically Inspire a Shared Vision, Challenge the Process, and Encourage the Heart.

Common elements in defining vision include a vivid image, a focus on the future, and the hope for positive change. At the same time, a Christian definition should remember that God is the source of vision. While inspiring a shared vision remains a priority, this takes into consideration that vision is given by revelation, not born out of consensus. Yet, it results in consensus. Along with this, the ability to communicate vision with impact remains a must for the leader.

Because change is a necessary element of organizational life for which they must take responsibility, leaders also must take intentional steps to break their organizations free from the status quo. This serves to remind that initiating change falls to leadership. At the same time, leaders can foster a culture that welcomes experimentation.

Because encouragement is a necessity, leaders must be aware of the constant need that people have for affirmation. With that, find ways to affirm people by expressing appreciation in unique ways appropriate for the needs of each individual. Also, leaders can create an atmosphere of celebration that recognizes the achievements of others.

In the end, a leader will have success to the degree that he or she applies the five practices of exemplary leadership. This is done with due respect to the value of people. As such,

leaders must remember that leadership is a relationship, and the most enduring element in strengthening that bond is love, in keeping with teachings of Scripture.

## **Introduction**

Kouzes and Posner (2012) in their landmark work on leadership, which conducted research compiled for roughly thirty years, identified a consistent, discernable set of best practices. Having studied leaders in a variety of contexts, they arrived at leadership characteristics that all competent leaders display, regardless of the organization or field of discipline. Based on their study of the methods of extraordinary leaders, Kouzes and Posner have identified Five Practices of Exemplary Leadership: (a) Model the Way, (b) Inspire a Shared Vision, (c) Challenge the Process, (d) Enable Others to Act, and (e) Encourage the Heart (p 15). Furthermore, among those organizations which they identified as having strong leaders, they further observe that leadership permeates the organizational culture (p. 14). In keeping with the needs of the ministry in which I serve as senior pastor and its current organizational dynamics, this paper will place emphasis on the development of the three practices that Kouzes and Posner identify as Inspire a Shared Vision, Challenge the Process, and Encourage the Heart. Because these concepts are all interrelated, some degree of overlap between these various processes exists.

### **Inspire a Shared Vision**

While many sound definitions exist related to vision, a few will provide the essential elements for consideration here. Barna (2009) identifies vision as “a clear mental image of a preferable future imparted by God to His chosen servants and is based upon an accurate understanding of God, self and circumstances” (p. 13). Stanley (1999) offers a similar take on vision, defining it as “a clear mental picture of what could be, fueled by the conviction that it should be. Vision is a preferred future. A destination” (p. 18). Notice their similarities in that they focus on creating a clear image, a focus on the future, and appeal to the hope for positive

change. However, Blackaby and Blackaby (2011) point out a potential flaw with most contemporary definitions of vision in that they fail to take into consideration the source of vision (which the exception of Barna's statement), which is divine revelation (p. 103). They emphasize that Christians are obligated to follow a different lead than secular entities, and as such they do not chart the course for the organization by way of their own ideas, instincts, and/or passions. Instead, they receive their vision from God.

Still, Blackaby and Blackaby (2011) recognize that effective leaders must be visionary figures (p. 86). This is in keeping with Kouzes and Posner's (2012) findings. They state that leaders must be people who have a focus on the future (p. 103-104). Along with that, they recognize the possibilities for positive advancement, projecting that into future developments. Maxwell (1993) also affirms this, observing that leaders see on multiple levels, among them "seeing what can be with the eyes of vision" (pp. 149-150). He writes further that vision fuels the faith of the leader, giving him or her empowerment for the task (p. 158). He ultimately concludes, "Vision is everything for a leader. It is utterly indispensable. Why? Because vision leads the leader. It paints the target. It sparks and fuels the fire within, and draws him forward" (1999, p. 150).

However, vision is not the sole domain of leadership. For it to advance, there must be organizational buy-in. Kouzes and Posner (2012) maintain that the leader must promote a "shared vision," one that the people can see, embrace, and own for themselves as well (p. 104). They write thus, "People don't really want to picture only the leader's vision. They want to see how their own visions and aspirations will come true, how their hopes and dreams will be fulfilled" (p. 116). However, because vision ultimately comes from God, Barna (2009) notes that it does not come by way of human consensus. It is an expression of God's revealed will. Still, he

observes that it will result in consensus as the people embrace it as God's unique direction for the ministry, and as a result, they will find ownership accordingly, as they use their God-given gifts in its implementation (p. 32).

Nevertheless, a key to the unified advancement of the vision lies in clear, forceful communication. As Kouzes and Posner put it, the leader creates an attractive image that comes to life for the people (p. 138). Elmore (2008) takes this further, comparing leaders to poets, who create memorable images that followers can associate with the vision, and in so doing inspire people to work toward its completion (pp. 65-66). Barna (2009) concurs with this, writing that, "A mark of a great leader is the ability not only to capture the vision, but also to articulate it and to cause people to embrace it fully" (p. 37). He further identifies poor communication of the vision as a reason why it sometimes fails to resonate with followers (p. 39). Blackaby and Blackaby (2011) point out that effective leaders communicate vision by way of vivid symbols and stories (p. 111). Rutland (2013) emphasized that communication is a responsibility that the leader must take to heart and not delegate. He observes, "The organization follows the person who articulates the vision. If you let somebody else do that, you're asking for serious disloyalty down the road" (p. 100). Another point he makes relates to the frequency of communication, stating that the leader cannot overcommunicate [*sic*] the organization's vision. It must be repeated regularly so that eventually any person can articulate it and internalize it (p. 94).

In the end, the vision is a statement against business as usual. According to Stanley (1999), "Visions form in the hearts of those who are dissatisfied with the status quo" (p. 17). Barna (2009) agrees, maintaining that, vision represents a break with the status quo by reaching beyond the current state of affairs (p. 14), which leads to the next exemplary practice.

### **Challenge the Process**

According to Kouzes and Posner (2012), change is an organizational necessity in undermining the status quo, which represents an embracing of mediocrity, which is something that effective leaders cannot accept (p. 156). Instead, they seize the initiative to facilitate a disruption of business as usual. After all, the reality for any organization is that change will eventually be imposed upon it from without and within (p. 175). Gangel (1989) sees this as a positive development, in keeping with Scriptural teaching, noting that change and growth should have a regular place in the life of the believer (p. 150). Kouzes and Posner also observe that all exemplary leaders have in common an intentional break with the status quo. Still, Alton Garrison (McCorkle, 2011) points out that effective change is led, not driven.

While most people associate change with discomfort, Gangel (1989) believes that people generally sell themselves short when it comes to coping with it (p. 160). However, he makes a valid point when he offers that when change is handled incorrectly and leadership fails to show due sensitivity to people, it will sometimes give rise to opposition. He puts it this way, “More often than not the process of the leader rather than the resistance of the traditionalist is at fault” (p. 160). This underscores a truth that Kouzes and Posner (2012) make quite clear, specifically that change is the leader’s responsibility, “And all change requires that leaders actively seek ways to make things better— to grow, innovate, and improve. Exemplary leaders make the commitment to Search for Opportunities to get extraordinary things done” (p. 158-159). Finzel (2000) would add that a primary duty of the leader is to be the “tender of the culture,” meaning that he or she has an understanding of the organizational and cultural dynamics at work and can guide followers through change accordingly (p. 152).

Kotter (1996) has developed a widely accepted process for initiating organizational change. The eight stages are as follows: (a) establishing a sense of urgency, (b) creating the

guiding coalition, (c) developing a vision and strategy, (d) communicating the change, (e) empowering employees for broad-based action, (f) generating short-term wins, (g) consolidating gains and producing more change, and (h) anchoring new approaches in the culture. C. Colletti (personal communication, March 28, 2017), District Superintendent of the New Jersey District Council credited Kotter's approach with helping him to facilitate change in our District. Specifically, he followed Kotter's model as described in his book to implement a church planting initiative that raised 3.7 million dollars for church planting. He also utilized this approach in guiding the District office from its former location in Trenton, New Jersey to its current resource center in Burlington, New Jersey.

This illustrates the importance of having an organizational culture that accepts and applies change positively. Kouzes and Posner (2012) maintain that leaders can create an atmosphere in which people embrace change (p. 168). In fact, they make a valuable point when they claim that leaders "make risk safe (p. 188)," while also giving rise to an atmosphere that encourages learning (p. 210). Elmore (2007) takes this further by explaining that leaders foster creative learning by making the workplace "like a science class," which has a "lecture" component for instruction and a "lab" for safe experimentation (p. 44).

### **Encourage the Heart**

Encouragement in an organization is also a necessity. According to Covey (2004), "Next to physical survival, the greatest need of a human being is psychological survival—to be understood, to be affirmed, to be validated, to be appreciated" (p. 241). Elmore (2008) concurs with this, likening this dynamic to that of a hot air balloon (p. 27). The same way that a balloon needs constant filling, people need regular reaffirmation. This is an ongoing need which must be given regular attention (p. 28). This receives further support in the findings of Peters and



Waterman (2004), who insist that people prefer to view themselves as winners and want to be associated with winning (p. 57). Therefore, a successful organization will a culture that makes people feel like winners. They put it this way: “The old adage is ‘Nothing succeeds like success.’ It turns out to have a sound scientific basis. Researchers studying motivation find that the prime factor is simply the self-perception among motivated subjects that they are in fact doing well” (p. 58).

One way to promote this kind of atmosphere comes by way of affirming the value of people. Chapman and White (2012) point out that clearly communicated appreciation strengthens the relational bond between leadership and workers (p. 40). Peters and Waterman (2004) add that those companies that stand out know well the importance of positive reinforcement (p. 70). Likewise, according to Kouzes and Posner (2012), exemplary leaders “express their appreciation far beyond the limits of the organization’s formal systems. They enjoy being spontaneous and creative in saying thank you” (p. 298). Elmore (2008) adds that small gestures of appreciation can yield large rewards (p. 29).

However, because people are different, leaders should take this into account, rather than offer compliments that are one-size-fits-all (p. 30). Chapman and White (2012) add to this that there are generally five languages of appreciation—(a) words of appreciation, (b) quality time, (c) acts of service, (d) tangible gifts, and (e) physical touch—and each person has a primary and secondary language. Appreciation communicated in a mode that differs from one’s primary or secondary language of appreciation may fail to have the desired encouraging effect (p. 25).

Also, Kouzes and Posner (2012) include celebration as another means of affirmation, which calls attention to people’s successes (326-327). This creates a positive community dynamic that regularly makes recognition a part of the organizational culture. They put it like

this: “Leaders set the example by getting personally involved in celebration and recognition, demonstrating that encouraging the heart is something everyone should do” (p. 327).

### **Conclusion**

Kouzes and Posner (2012) observe that exemplary leaders do not have a patent on the qualities that make for successful leadership. They are not the private domain of any one person or group. They have discovered while leading others that specific actions lead to certain outcomes. The person aspiring to success in leading others will find results commensurate with the degree to which he or she applies the five practices of exemplary leadership. While the authors emphasize that effective leaders exercise all five, this paper addresses three.

Still, Kouzes and Posner (2012) would call attention to one valuable point, which is that leadership is a relationship. According to Kouzes and Posner, “A relationship characterized by mutual respect and confidence will overcome the greatest adversities and leave a legacy of significance” (p. 30). This is an important acknowledgement worth remembering: people are valuable. Because of their inherent dignity (as those who are dearly loved by God and are created in his image) this consideration should characterize leadership efforts, especially those involved in ministry. As Kouzes and Posner conclude, “Of all the things that sustain a leader over time, love is the most lasting” (p. 345). This truth aligns with that which is found in Scripture. Paul writes that love never fails (1 Corinthians 13:8a). To summarize, then, the authors put it well when they write, “Leadership is not an affair of the head. Leadership is an affair of the heart” (p. 345).

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