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Summary and Reflections On the Truth About Leadership

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May 30, 2018

Abstract

Drawing upon the ideas from James M. Kouzes and Barry Z. Posner's book "The Truth About Leadership," this paper will provide an outline, brief summary of each chapter and, a personal reflection of the authors' ten time-tested truths, the construct of which reveals what every leader must know, the questions they must be prepared to answer, and the real-world issues they will likely face.

Keywords: leadership, facts, fads, truths, credibility, rules, love

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OUTLINE

Introduction

In **The Truth About Leadership**, Kouzes and Posner (2010) describe what research has revealed about leadership that endures over time. This research is used to substantiate each of the book's conclusions. The book describes ten key lessons that help leaders think, decide, and act more effectively both in their personal and professional lives. Although Kouzes and Posner wrote the book for emerging leaders, the concepts are equally relevant to individuals with many years in a leadership role. Using ten truths, the authors postulate the following realities of leadership that will help both emerging and experienced leaders effectively develop their skills:

1. **You Make a Difference:** Before you lead, you have to believe you can have a positive impact on others. You have to believe in yourself.
2. **Credibility is the Foundation of Leadership:** You have to believe in you, but others have to believe in you, too.
3. **Values Drive Commitment:** People want to know what you stand for and believe in.
4. **Focusing on the Future Sets Leaders Apart:** The capacity to imagine and articulate exciting future possibilities is the defining competence in leaders.
5. **You Can't Do It Alone:** No leader ever got anything extraordinary done without the talent and support of others.
6. **Trust Rules:** Trust is the social glue that holds individuals and groups together.
7. **Challenge Is the Crucible of Greatness: Adversity and change** bring you face-to-face with your level of commitment, your grittiness, and your values.
8. **You Either Lead by Example or You Don't Lead at All:** You can't ask others to do something you aren't willing to do yourself.
9. **The Best Leaders are the Best Learners:** You have to believe that you (and others) can learn to lead, and that you can become a better leader tomorrow than they are today.
10. **Leadership is an Affair of the Heart:** Leaders are in love with their constituents, their customers and clients, and the mission that they are serving.

Summaries and Reflections

Truth 1: You Make a Difference.

Kouzes' and Posner's (2010) first truth is that each individual can make a difference. Although many believe that leadership is a quality that is found primarily at the highest levels of organizations, in reality leadership is accessible to anyone who is determined to change the status quo. Leadership can be exhibited at any age, and is not tied to one's position, degree of authority, or power. Before you lead you have to believe that you can have a positive impact on others. When you believe you can make a difference, you position yourself to hear the call to lead. You don't need to be at the highest level of the organization to make a difference. If determined, every individual can challenge and change the status quo regardless of their age and experience. It is interesting to note that based on their research of which leader has the most influence on their lives, participants ranked family members in their lives more than they chose their managers, teacher, community members or religious leaders. 'Leadership is much more broadly distributed in the population, and it's accessible to anyone who has passion and purpose to change the way things are. The Five Practices of Exemplary Leadership (Kouzes & Posner) are:

1. Model the Way
2. Inspire a Shared Vision
3. Challenge the Process
4. Enable Others to Act
5. Encourage the Heart

Truth 2: Credibility Is the Foundation of Leadership.

The second truth is that credibility is the foundation of leadership. When a leader is believable, people are more likely to be committed and to provide their time, energy, intelligence, and support. Kouzes and Posner (2010) investigated which qualities people looked for in leaders. After years of research, they found that four traits consistently received an average of over 60 percent of the votes.

- *Honest*. Honest leaders not only tell the truth, they also live using a set of ethical principles and clear standards.
- *Forward-Looking*. Good leaders have a vision for the organization, but they also connect that vision to others' hopes and aspirations. When people share in a future vision, they are more likely to willingly follow a leader.
- *Inspiring*. Inspiring leaders share their excitement about future possibilities. This excitement is accompanied by a positive attitude.
- *Competent*. Competent individuals have a proven track record for getting things done. This generates confidence in a leader.

Kouzes and Posner (2010) research whether credibility plays a key role in leading others. They find that when a manager is highly credible, his or her direct reports are more likely to tell others that they are a part of the organization. They develop the "Kouzes-Posner First Law of Leadership" which states that "If you don't believe in the messenger, you won't believe the message." Credibility and personal integrity affects more than just employees. It also plays a role in customer and investor loyalty.

Truth 3: Values Drive Commitment.

You need to know what you believe in because you can only fully commit to the organization or cause when there is a good fit between what you value and the organization values. This is true too, for the people you lead. The leader must know his own personal values really well as they will guide his/her decision making and commitment. In addition, he/she must ensure that his/her values are aligned with the organization's values in order to have a mutual relationship. You can only fully commit to organizations and other causes when there is a good fit between what you value and what the organization values. That means that to do your best as a leader you need to know who you are and what you care about. You need a set of values that guide your decisions and actions.

Values will drive your commitment. To drive this point home, Kouzes and Posner (2010) quote Arlene Blum, an experienced mountain climber. She said, "As long as you believe what you're doing is meaningful, you can cut through the fear and exhaustion and take the next step." If people have clarity of organizational values, but low clarity on their own values, their commitment to the organization will be lower than if they had clear personal values, but were unclear of the organizational values! Integrity is maintained when your personal values align with organizational values. Leadership is a relationship, and relationships are built on mutual understanding.

Truth 4:

Focusing on the Future Sets Leaders Apart.

The capacity to imagine and articulate exciting future possibilities is a defining competence of leaders. You have to take the long-term perspective. Gain insight from reviewing your past and develop oversight by looking around

You have to take the long-term perspective. Gain insight from reviewing your past and develop oversight by looking around. Within an organization, leaders must consider themselves as the future component which reminds other employees who are involved in the day to day activities about the bigger picture as well as the future direction of the organization. You have to be; it's The quality that most differentiates leaders from individual contributors is the forward-looking member who focuses on the possibilities that the future holds is for himself and the team.

Kouzes and Posner (2010) note that the quality of being forward-looking came in second only to being honest when they surveyed thousands of people on what they want in their leaders. They suggest that capacity to imagine and articulate exciting future opportunities is the defining competence of leaders. People depend on their leaders to offer the long-term view, providing direction and meaning that transcends the day-to-day details of work and life.

Truth 5: You Can't Do It Alone.

Leadership is a team sport, and you need to engage others in the cause. Good leaders enable others to be even better than they already are. Leaders must focus on building teams that are committed to the direction of the organization and are capable of taking necessary action to get there. They must empower them by investing in their personal development and making them feel the shared responsibility of leading the organization to success.

Kouzes and Posner (2010) begin discussing the importance of emotional intelligence and how good employers seek to employ people who are good at working with others. They quote Egon Zehnder who writes that all the evidence clearly demonstrated that the classic profile organizations look for in hiring a senior executive (relevant experience and outstanding IQ) is much a predictor of failure than success, unless the relevant emotional intelligence competencies are also present. In fact, serious weaknesses in the domain of emotional intelligence predict failure at senior levels with amazing accuracy. One important part of a leader's work is to discover and then reflect the meaning that others are looking for. Inspirational leadership focuses on showing people how the vision can benefit them and meet their needs. Empowering people to act like leaders themselves requires an investment in their personal development. Leadership is a shared responsibility.

Truth 6: Trust Rules.

When leaders do not inspire trust, there is a risk that their organizations will under-perform and lag in innovation. Kouzes and Posner (2010) state that the level of trust people have in leaders is directly related to the amount of influence they will accept willingly. The fifth truth of leadership is that trust rules. Trustworthiness is a component of credibility. Leaders must be the people who take that first step and start the cycle of trust. Research indicates that four behaviors contribute to whether a person is perceived as trustworthy or not:

1. Predictable and consistent behavior. When people know they can count on a leader, then the leader's words and actions are more likely to influence others.
2. Clear communication. When a leader communicates about an intention, it will be viewed as a promise by others. Effective leaders are clear about their meaning and as a result, do not mislead.
3. Promises are treated seriously. When leaders treat commitments seriously, others do also.
4. Forthright and candid behavior. If leaders are forthright and honest, others will have less reason to be angry or try to deceive in retaliation

Leaders earn trust by showing that they have the competence, the system, and the processes necessary to make people feel safe and trusting.

Truth 7: Challenge Is the Crucible of Greatness.

In order for their followers to demonstrate certain behaviors that they are instructed to follow, leaders must implement them first. It takes determination and strength to deal with the adversities of life and leadership and this is what Kouzes and Posner (2010) label as grit. They quote Angela Duckworth who writes that grit is, 'perseverance and passion for long-term goals' The authors assert that learning doesn't take place in the absence of mistakes. I would rather assert that leadership is strengthened when you learn from mistakes. Challenges are the building blocks to great leadership. Kouzes and Posner (2010) summarize this truth by acknowledging that all great leadership achievements involve overcoming adversity, difficulty, change, and challenge. The authors suggest that the study of leadership is the study of how men and women guide people through uncertainty, hardship, disruption, transformation, transition, recovery, new beginnings, and other significant challenges. Facing and meeting challenges helps to clarify one's vision and reinforce one's commitment. At the same time, lessons learned through these experiences can be valuable for the future. Leaders view challenges differently than other people. They tend to see the opportunities that lie inside adversities and they take the action needed to move things forward. This can be stressful work and the authors reiterate that successfully leading change requires strength and resilience. Although it may be impossible to control what is occurring in the larger environment, it is possible to control one's response to the situation. Leaders must believe that they can positively influence the direction of a situation through their own efforts. Even small steps can get an organization moving in the right direction.

Truth 8: You Either Lead by Example or You Don't Lead at All.

Leaders have to keep their promises and become role models for the values and actions they espouse. You have to go first as a leader. You can't ask others to do something you aren't willing to do yourself. Moreover, you have to be willing to admit mistakes and be able to learn from them. Therefore, leaders must be conscious of how they think, what they say, and what they do as well. Followers become cynical when they see that leader's words are inconsistent with their actions.

"Model the Way" is the first of "The Five Exemplary Leadership Practices" identified by Kouzes and Posner (2010) from their leadership research. In *The Truth About Leadership*, they explore further this important aspect of leadership. They write:

"You have to model the way you want others to feel, think, and act. You have to show others that you are going to do exactly what you are asking them to do." Kouzes and Posner (2010) like the phrase, "Do what you say you will do". Other ways of putting it are, practice what you preach, walk the talk, put your money where your mouth is, etc. A big part of leading by example is keeping your promises. Your word is only as good as your actions. You have to realize that others look to you and your actions in order to determine for themselves how serious you are about what you say, as well as understand what it will mean for them to be "walking the talk."

Truth 9: The Best Leaders Are the Best Learners.

Learning is the master skill of leadership. You have to believe that you (and others) can learn to lead, and that you can become a better leader tomorrow than they are today. Kouzes and Posner summarizing on the leader as learner posit that leadership can be learned. It is an observable pattern of practices and behaviors, and a definable set of skills and abilities. The problem? Not everyone learns it; and not all master it.”

Deliberate, measured practice to acquire new skills and the support of others on your leadership development journey also are essential requirements. You have to believe that you (and others) can learn to lead, and that you can become a better leader tomorrow than you are today. Leaders are constant improvement fanatics, and learning is the master skill of leadership. Learning, however, takes time and attention, practice and feedback, along with good coaching. It also takes willingness on your part to ask for support.

Kouzes and Posner (2010) believe that leadership is an observable pattern of practices, behaviors, skills, and abilities that can be learned. This leads to the ninth truth of leadership: the best leaders are the best learners. To become a better leader, individuals must want to excel and devote time to continuous learning and deliberate practice. Unfortunately, there is an enduring myth that leadership cannot be learned. This is a significant deterrent to leadership development. There are many different ways that leadership can be learned, such as active experimentation, observing others, classroom study, reading books, and reflecting on experiences. While no single learning approach is most effective, research shows that leaders who engaged enthusiastically in the style that worked for them learned the most.

Truth 10: Leadership Is an Affair of the Heart.

Effective and servant leaders don't just pay attention to their products and services, they pay significant attention and care to the human heart. In addition, effective leaders show love and appreciation in formal and informal ways. They are available and they engage with their followers in a genuine and sincere manner. All of this enables followers to feel more confident about the leader. "Love" is a word not often heard in the corporate world today, but Kouzes and Posner (2010) use it liberally in their chapter on leadership as "an affair of the heart." "Love enlarges lives. Love creates the desire to serve others and to see them grow and become their best," write Kouzes and Posner (2010).

Leaders put their hearts in their businesses and their businesses in their hearts. They love what they're doing and they stay in love with leading, with the people who do the work, with what their organizations produce, and with those who honor them by using their products and services. They show they care by paying attention to people, sharing success stories, and making people feel important and special. Exemplary leaders are positive and upbeat, generating the emotional energy that enables others to flourish. One style of leadership with heart is called "servant leadership." This occurs when leaders place others at the center, deflect attention to people in the organization, and respond to the needs and interests of their constituents. These behaviors make people feel more confident and elevated to a higher level.

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