

Book review: The Leadership Challenge - how to make extraordinary things happen in organisations

Published by Jossey-Bass/Wiley; ISBN 978-0-470-65172-8

Overview:

This is the fifth edition of the 25 year old 'The Leadership Challenge', which has sold over 2 million copies in over 20 languages, and so has become globally a trusted source of leadership material – some have called it the 'leadership bible'. This edition has been updated to reflect the changes in the modern workplace and contains over 100 new case studies and anecdotes from the people involved, more international and business examples than the original work, all based on their 5 practices of exemplary leadership model:

- Model the way
- Inspire a shared vision
- Challenge the process
- Enable others to act
- Encourage the heart

The authors are Jim Kouzes, executive fellow of leadership at Santa Clara University and Chairman and CEO of TPG/Learning Systems, and Barry Posner, ex-professor of leadership and former Dean of Santa Clara University. Both are frequent keynote speakers at leadership conferences, and run leadership development programmes for many leading organisations.

The book follows the well-tried format of leadership models, case research, anecdotal comments from key players, and relevant additional models and research. However, it skillfully avoids becoming an academic tome full of weighty references, and I found the case stories surprisingly engaging and noted down several quotes for further reference.

Review:

The book is organised around five practices, what Kouzes and Posner call "five leadership practices common to successful leaders", and they then suggest ten "behavioral commitments" among those leaders studied. So the full model is:

1. **Model the Way:** Leaders clarify values by finding their voice and affirming shared values, and they set the example by aligning actions with shared values

2. **Inspire a Shared Vision:** Leaders envision the future by imagining exciting possibilities that empower others, enlisted through a common vision by appealing to shared aspirations

3. **Challenge the Process:** Leaders search for opportunities by seizing the initiative and looking outward for innovative ways to improve. They experiment and take risks by constantly generating small wins and learning from experience.

4. **Enable Others to Act:** Leaders foster collaboration by building trust and facilitating relationships. They strengthen others by enhancing self-determination and developing competence.

5. **Encourage the heart:** Leaders recognize contributions by showing appreciation for individual excellence. They celebrate values and victories by creating a spirit of community.

The central theme of the book is that leaders are at their best when they participate at a heart level in the five key areas. Each chapter deals with these areas on a philosophical level and proceeds to give practical suggestions on how to implement these principles. Embedded in the five fundamental practices of effective leadership are the Ten Commitments (or behaviors) above that serve as the basis for leading.

Kouzes and Posner provide a mindset to lead well and participatively, however, leadership is not for the faint hearted! Bravery and courage, based on a solid understanding of your core values, and a compelling vision are required. Several of the chapters help you to identify and refine yours.

Leadership is defined at the outset as “the art of mobilizing others to want to struggle for shared aspirations.”

Whenever I have presented young, aspirational leaders with this 5 stage model, I often encounter some resistance to some of these definitions - that these practices are the function of a manager. Whilst a manager that led this way would be ideal, they miss the key difference - that leaders don't follow the status quo or seek compliance - they are continually dissatisfied with the present and focus on the future.

This was well captured in a quote within the Model the Way practice when a leader said: “I just can't live on the present – I've always got to be thinking about the next thing we should be working on, and where we're headed”.

Reviewer's rating

For me, by far the most interesting aspects of this book were the numerous quotes and anecdotes from named individual leaders and their organisations. I especially liked “Titles don't make you a leader, it's how you behave that makes a difference”. In this age of cynicism towards corporate leaders and politicians, it would be wonderful if they could all start living decent values, setting a positive example to others, fostering collaboration, finding common purpose, and in celebrating community victories rather than their bonuses!

A few criticisms include that, whilst this may not be a life-changing read, absolutely every leader (and aspiring leader) does have something to learn from the principles cited by Kouzes and Posner. A smaller gripe is that there does seem to be an endless re-cycling of the source material (spin-off volumes, workbooks, posters, 'values cards', e-learning modules, videos, mobile app, etc.), proving that a little does go a long way.

The Leadership Challenge illustrates through inspiring stories what the research continues to reveal: when leaders understand that leadership is a relationship and they engage in the five practices described, they are significantly better able to achieve their own personal best and turn followers into leaders. The authors end with a statement that ‘leadership is not an affair of the head, it's an affair of the heart’.

This is a good addition to the bookshelf for those aspiring to lead and those who are currently leaders. It provides many practical frameworks and models to plan and implement the key steps needed to become the leader you could be.

This book will appeal particularly to champions of leadership development who wish to take the organisation forward as part of an overall people development strategy.

Value for money? I'd say "yes" with a 4/5 star rating.

Reviewer:

Peter of Peter Welch Coaching www.peterwelchcoaching.co.uk is an executive coach, coaching supervisor, and facilitator. He is also a co-founder of the Association Of Coaching Supervisors, who provide a network of qualified supervisors in the UK and abroad to support coaches and organisations who employ coaching: www.associationofcoachingsupervisors.com

This review was published online in HR Zone in December, 2012