

## Kouzes and Posner on Leadership – A Critique

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The *Leadership Challenge*\* by James Kouzes and Barry Posner is a very inspiring book that has understandably motivated a lot of people to rise to significant challenges in their organizations and other areas of their lives. While Kouzes and Posner provide a very thorough portrayal of a certain kind of leadership, their theory excludes a type of leadership that is increasingly vital in our knowledge driven world: *Thought Leadership*. The focus of Kouzes and Posner might be called *Values Leadership*. The former refers to how new ideas are generated and assimilated while the latter pertains to how we should live. Thought leadership has a factual basis while values leadership is normative. It is essential to develop a theory of thought leadership if we are to understand the impact of innovation on organizational success and progress in life generally. It is not just that thought leadership is important in its own right, but that a one-sided concern with values leadership creates a distorted picture of leadership in general. The result is that Kouzes and Posner's theory is at best a special case of leadership but, in fact, I believe it can be shown to be inaccurate in some very important respects if we want a general theory of leadership.

Thought leadership refers to any instance of influencing others to accept a different idea or new way of looking at things. Whenever you are in a meeting with colleagues, whether they report to you or not, and you convince them to adopt your idea of how to proceed on any topic, you are demonstrating thought leadership. Such leadership is not a position; it can shift continuously around the table. The impact of thought leadership is immediate, unlike values leadership which launches followers on a journey. Kouzes and Posner are very clear that their version of leadership entails a journey: "In this book, and in all our discussions of leadership, we use the journey metaphor to express our understanding of leadership." P. 156 Most of their examples of leadership involve changing an organization's culture – making it more customer focused or better at fostering creativity, for example. Changing a culture is a large challenge and clearly a journey with a defined destination. I refer to Kouzes and Posner's theory as values leadership, because asking people to undertake a risky journey with you depends on your credibility, as they rightly argue, which in turn depends on what you stand for as a person – your values. Moreover, the changes advocated by such leaders generally entail a shift in cultural or personal values.

### **Key differences between Thought Leadership and Values Leadership**

Thought leadership depends on innovation though they are not identical. For any leadership to occur there must be an impact on a group's direction. Some innovations have no such impact or are simply admired for their own sake as in some forms of art. Moreover, those who show leadership might not be personally innovative. They might instead champion the innovations of others. Thought leadership can be shown upwards and sideways as well as down. It has nothing to do with managing people. It involves challenging the status quo and its object is to change the way people think. Thought leadership comes to an end once the novel idea has been accepted. Implementation is a separate phase if indeed anything needs to be implemented beyond the immediate change in outlook.

Kouzes and Posner state that it is a "myth that leadership is associated with position." P 386 But they must mean *senior* positions or *formal* positions of authority, because values leadership necessarily involves occupying the top position in a

hierarchy. They must therefore be saying that lower level managers can show leadership in addition to senior managers. Regardless of the size or informality of a group, if you are the person inviting a group to undertake a journey and you are promising to get them to the destination safely, then you are at the head of affairs, hence in a position of sorts. Conversely, any knowledge worker with no subordinates can show thought leadership. Such leadership does not involve a journey. The thought leader might not have any power to take anyone on a journey. If the leadership impact is on senior management, for example, then the leadership initiative has been successful if senior management decides to implement the thought leader's idea. In this case, there is a clear separation between the leadership impact and the decision to change the organization's direction. Hence, thought leadership, in itself, does not automatically entail a journey. Moreover, some changes in a team's practices can be implemented immediately, unlike large scale change which is normally a project extending over a lengthy period of time.

"Credibility is the foundation of leadership" p32 for Kouzes and Posner. By this they mean *personal* credibility as opposed to technical credibility or competence. The values leader must demonstrate values that prospective followers admire and which motivate them to trust the leader. Because they are being asked to undertake a difficult journey, followers need to believe that the leader is the sort of person who consistently delivers on promises. Conversely, with thought leadership, credibility attaches to the idea or innovation, not to the person. For example, a thought leader could be otherwise lazy, dishonest and difficult to get along with – much like the stereotypical creative person. But if he or she can *demonstrate* the value of a novel idea – perhaps by a trial product launch, then followers will buy the idea regardless of what they think of the person – especially if they are opportunists or early adopters of new ideas. For thought leadership to be effective, therefore, a demonstration, business case or other factual argument could be all that is required, not a passionate appeal to fundamental human values or needs as in Kouzes and Posner's theory. Thought leaders, therefore, do not necessarily need to be personally inspiring.

Thought leadership does not have to be visionary either. Clearly vision or some other sense of direction is essential in values leadership for the simple reason that you cannot expect people to join you on a difficult journey if you have no destination in mind. So, vision is by definition a necessary component in values leadership. But for thought leadership, new directions can emerge through trial and error action in a market or through brainstorming with colleagues or customers. Because the leadership impact is immediate, no destination is involved, hence no vision is required.

For Kouzes and Posner, leadership is also necessarily *intentional* – you have to explicitly plan your journey. But thought leadership need not be intentional. A clever knowledge worker might not even care if others follow. He or she might simply adopt a better way of doing something which others notice and copy. Clearly no vision or journey here. Again, the leadership impact either does not occur or it is immediate – not necessarily in the sense of instantaneous but rather all-or-nothing as opposed to being merely the start of a journey. It is a sudden insight like a gestalt shift rather than a rational plan to travel to a destination.

In Kouzes and Posner's world "leadership is a relationship between those who aspire to lead and those who choose to follow." P 20. This is obviously correct when you are talking about a group undertaking a journey together where those who follow need to trust the leader to get them to the destination. But thought leadership can be an impact on people you do not even know – including competitors in different

organizations or amongst your colleagues. Thought leadership does not entail a joint effort by a group, only that people with similar interests (often very loosely knit groups), change direction as a result. Even in the case of traditional top-down leadership, such as that shown by Martin Luther King or Winston Churchill, there will be a leadership impact on people the leader has not even met let alone have a relationship with them. So leadership is at best only a relationship in certain circumstances rather than a necessary condition of all leadership as Kouzes and Posner argue. Actually, it is more correct to say that leadership should not be defined as a relationship at all. Conversely, management does entail a relationship because it involves undertaking a journey together.

Most of the examples of leadership cited by Kouzes and Posner are normative in the sense of pertaining to how we ought to live whether in work or life generally. Some of their examples relate to concern for the environment – a values domain if there ever was one. Others have to do with making an organizational culture more customer focused. It is because the leader is advocating a better way to live that an appeal to values is a necessary part of what it means to lead in this context. Organizational cultures are clearly value sets. For this reason, Kouzes and Posner advocate that prospective leaders begin to develop their leadership capability by looking inside themselves to clarify their own values. This advice would be unhelpful for budding thought leaders. Instead, they need to immerse themselves in a particular field of interest whether it be search engine software, the biochemistry of cancer drugs or one of a million other technologies. The values leader needs to be very self-aware. The thought leader might have quite poor emotional intelligence. Like artists they might be rather oblivious to their surroundings including people. In their leadership development programs, Kouzes and Posner play audiotapes of Martin Luther King's *I have a dream* speech. If you are a software programmer and you have a brilliant idea for new virus protection software and you can demonstrate its superiority, you would be rightly incredulous if you were told to listen to a tape of Martin Luther King before trying to persuade your superiors to take a look at the beta version of your software. Clearly, listening to stirring emotional speeches is poor advice for thought leaders.

### **So what?**

So there are two separate leadership domains. So what? First of all, thought leadership is important in its own right because we are increasingly competing on the basis of ideas. A theory of leadership that talks only of dealing with major cultural change was appropriate in the 1980's when Kouzes and Posner wrote the first edition to their book. Certainly, there is still a lot of room for major change in hundreds of organizations, but many have moved on to implement cultures of continuous improvement and constant innovation. Business today has become like guerrilla warfare in the sense that new directions emerge organically at the front lines rather than being passed down exclusively from above. To be competitive in a world of rampant innovation, organizations need a balance of broad top down direction and front line organizational learning – trial and error initiatives that allow new directions (leadership) to emerge at the coal face.

The second reason that an exploration of thought leadership is valuable is that it sheds light on traditional top down leadership, thereby enabling us to develop a general theory of leadership that accounts for both types. A good place to start on this task is to question whether any leadership needs to be seen as a journey. If the impact of thought leadership is immediate, perhaps this is true of all leadership. There is no question that a major change project is a journey, but why do we need to see the total journey as requiring a leadership involvement? For thought leadership, there is a clear separation between the leadership impact and implementation. It

makes more sense to regard the implementation phase as a managerial activity. Thought leadership also can involve a journey. Large projects like developing a new computer operating system to challenge the domination of Windows, for example, or to build a supersonic passenger jet are obviously lengthy journeys – but projects that do not necessarily involve culture change. If there is no need to challenge fundamental values or entrenched working practices when carrying out such large projects, then successfully completing the journey calls for good project management skills – effective execution, not ongoing leadership. The only reason we might want to see the entire journey as a leadership initiative is if we are inexorably wedded to the idea that being a leader entails being a person in a role. When you explore thought leadership, it becomes apparent that leadership is an action, a type of initiative that creates an impact. For this reason, in addition to the ephemeral nature of such leadership, we should talk only of leadership, not of leaders at all. Similarly, leadership is not a process, contrary to Kouzes and Posner. A process is a repeatable, organized set of steps – management being a good example. But leadership actions are one-off events like creative insights, not a process.

Here it is worth noting that Kouzes and Posner make virtually no mention of management. They seem to have dispensed with this concept altogether. In the first edition of their book, Tom Peters wrote the preface in which he seems to imply that we should abandon all talk of management. This was in the 1980's when US businesses were still in the throes of coping with the Japanese threat to their competitiveness. At this time, management got the blame for being too bureaucratic and controlling. This was a mistake, one of confusing ends and means. While prevailing management styles (means) may have been controlling, it does not follow that management as a function (ends) cannot be revised to be more empowering and motivating. It is a sign that Kouzes and Posner are still influenced by the 1980's that they talk only of leadership. Because leaders, for them, are running the ship (a corollary of the journey metaphor) they are responsible for both deciding where to go and seeing that the ship gets there. But if leadership is an episodic intervention, a periodic act rather than a role, then even challenging journeys can be seen as needing only periodic injections of leadership. If you apply the 80-20 rule, most of change management requires effective project management skills with only occasional leadership injections to keep followers from losing interest.

On this view, two of Kouzes and Posner's other leadership practices – encouraging the heart and enabling others to act are better seen as managerial actions, not leadership practices. The same person might initiate a change in direction (leadership) and then, wearing a managerial hat, manage the journey to implement the change however. All journeys need to be both sold and implemented – consistent with the fact that all organizations have two tasks – to deliver today's results and create tomorrow's future. Two separate tasks call for two separate functions, management and leadership. It helps to see them as functions rather than as people or positions.

Why is this important? By freeing leadership from hierarchical position totally, we have a theory of how people can show leadership at the bottom of the hierarchy. You don't have to wait until you are promoted to running a team, nor do you have to enlist a team informally to show leadership. But if leadership is increasingly bottom up as well as top down, then we need also to make sense of just what it is that executives are doing if they are not the only ones showing leadership. The answer, it seems to me, is management. Again the 80-20 rule is helpful. Much of what executives do is execute existing directions, management. The percentages will vary, however, depending on the amount of change an organization is undergoing at a specific time.

Leadership has always had something to do with providing direction. Appropriately, Kouzes and Posner maintain that leaders must have a vision, a sense of direction. Another key leadership practice for them is what they call “challenging the process”. On their view, leaders are pioneers, (p 17) they challenge the status quo. Challenging the process is a way of indicating *new* directions so Kouzes and Posner endorse the basic insight that leadership provides direction in two of their five leadership practices. But they equivocate here, saying that leaders are pioneers but they don’t actually originate new directions. They stimulate others to be innovative instead. This way of looking at leadership has rightly been called paradoxical – leading by not leading. This view is at best messy, at worst simply wrong. It may be less paradoxical to categorize anything to do with facilitating leadership or innovation in others as a managerial function, not one of leadership.

Stimulating creativity in others is a vital managerial function, especially in those industries that most depend on innovation to prosper. Calling this leadership is simply a failure to see that the world is changing, that just as in the case of guerrilla warfare, leadership is increasingly a front line activity that has nothing essentially to do with managing people. We need to get back to the fundamental insight that leadership provides direction and is, therefore, essentially a one-way impact or impression. Leadership is always an impact by one person on a group. Where influence on a decision is equal or fully shared, there is no leadership. To say that leadership is a one-way impact does not entail that the style of influence used has to be force or imposition. Your style of influence can be example, logical persuasion, practical demonstration or inspirational speech – even unintentional, hence hardly imposed. No matter how much listening you do in advance of showing leadership, when you do take a stand, the impact is necessarily one-way. This view is compatible with others in the group showing you leadership as well, but again their instance of leadership is also a one-way impact on you. Leadership is always a matter of doing something new first or proposing to do something new. A proposal is essentially a one-way communication in the instant it is being made regardless of how much two-way dialogue goes into formulating it beforehand.

Kouzes and Posner place a lot of emphasis on what followers want in leaders. But this is evidence only for what they want in people who manage them. It is not evidence for what it takes to be a leader unless you already assume that leaders can only be people in charge of others. More importantly, what people admire in leaders is a poor indicator of what it means to lead in any case. We are all biologically and psychologically programmed to look up to people above us in a hierarchy (or to want to at least). But we are inexorably moving away from the power of position and the force of personality to the power of knowledge creation as the basis of leadership in an innovation driven business context. So, admiring leadership heroes of the past says more about us and our needs than it does about what it means to lead.

Another way in which Kouzes and Posner’s theory of leadership is limited is simply that it does not countenance any form of quiet leadership. Their leaders must be inspiring because they need to get groups to change their values, their way of life at work or out of work. Developing a new theory of leadership, one based on thought leadership, explains how there can be many situations when the logical presentation of a business case can be sufficient to move people to buy a new idea. In such situations, no change in values is advocated and, if there is no resistance among prospective followers, then there is no need to be particularly inspiring. There is a lot of leadership like this that is simply off the radar screen for Kouzes and Posner.

Kouzes and Posner argue that it is a myth that leaders are born rather than developed. P386. For them, leadership is a learned set of practices. But even without

looking at thought leadership, it is hard to believe that being a pioneer is simply a learned skill set. Surely some people are naturally pioneering while others are very conservative and risk averse. If leadership is fundamentally based on a willingness to challenge the status quo, such willingness is a type of motivation anyway, not a skill or practice. Some people simply have a drive to rebel that they either are born with or acquire very early in life. Leadership is based on this drive plus an ability to either be creative or to spot good ideas early enough to champion them. Leadership is sufficiently like creativity that it is likely not a learned drive or ability. Chances are that rebelliousness, like other human traits, is distributed across the population on a normal curve. Those who are too far towards the rebellious end of the spectrum are generally seen as deviants or eccentrics. Leaders are most likely on the rebellious side of the middle of the normal curve but close enough to the conservative side to care about taking people with them hence avoiding group rejection.

It is not that leaders are born. Musicians and artists are not born either, but they are born with a certain talent and motivation which can be fostered in the right environment. If you are a budding writer, it might help to take a creative writing course, but you would be wasting your time if you had no talent to be a writer in the first place. In the case of potential leaders, it is a matter of becoming immersed in an interesting discipline and discovering that you have something new to say about it along with having sufficient rebelliousness to be unafraid of group rejection if you take a stand.

In conclusion, exploring thought leadership suggests a general theory of leadership in which leadership is whatever initiates new directions (other than by force) while management executes existing directions. Leadership is no doubt important in the arenas Kouzes and Posner write about, but it needs to be recast so we can see how it is possible to lead without heading up a group. A broader theory of leadership is also essential in an emerging era of knowledge work and innovation. Of equal importance, management needs to be rehabilitated to give it a rightful share of the work in making momentous things happen. It needs to be rescued from the rubbish dump it was thrown on during the 1980's over reaction to the Japanese invasion.

\*All page references are to the third edition of the *Leadership Challenge*, Jossey-Bass, 2003