

What Leaders Do Best

For 30 years, Jim Kouzes has asked leaders about their peak performances for "Leadership Challenge"--the book he and Barry Posner coauthored which has been called the best ever written on the subject. In a recent Fast Company article, Kouzes talked about five practices the best leaders employ to address challenges in a way that creates meaning and purpose.

Model the way

Leaders have to be clear about what they fundamentally believe in and then they have to make sure, because people believe actions more than words, that they set an example by aligning their actions with their values. When individuals are clear about their values and the organization's values, their level of commitment is at the highest.

Inspire a shared vision

Leaders must be able to see beyond the horizon. Being forward-looking is a quality that differentiates leaders from other credible people. For people to want to follow any leader, they need to know something about that person beyond the résumé. It's more about who the person is and what the person cares about. Leaders need to sit down and have conversations with people about what they value and what they believe in. It's about appreciating all of your constituents and building consensus.

Challenge the status quo

Challenge often gets misinterpreted, because many people think leaders are just being disagreeable. It's really about stretching ourselves to excel. It's knowing that we're only going to be great if we continue to search for new and different ways to do things. Anything new is risky, so leaders have to create a culture that doesn't punish people for taking risks and making mistakes, but treats them as learning opportunities.

Enable others to act

A culture gets built over time as behaviors get repeated. If a leader is going to create a culture in which people feel as if they're working collectively as a team, they must foster collaboration, rather than creating one where people value the importance of individual competition internally and are constantly at war with each other. Trust is the single most important cultural attribute that needs to be present for people to feel enabled to act and to feel like they can collaborate and work together.

Change must come from the heart.

Encouraging the heart is the practice that is least frequently mentioned when discussing internal competency models, but it is absolutely essential to getting extraordinary things done. When you're challenging the process and dealing with all the things that businesses have to deal with, it's arduous, it's difficult and the work is hard. People need to know that their efforts are being recognized. It has to come from the heart, it has to be genuine.

Kouzes boils it all down to one simple principle – Leadership is a relationship. If you are going to build a great company, you have to be exemplary at building relationships with other people. People have to want to follow you.