Elaine Biech, Editor

ATD's Leadership Handbook

2nd Edition

Praise for *ATD's Leadership Handbook*

"A modern masterclass in a single volume, *ATD's Leadership Handbook* is an indispensable resource for current leaders and those dedicated to shaping the visionaries of tomorrow."

—Chris Ernst, Chief Learning Officer, Workday

"This book is absolutely stuffed to the gills with essential insights from hall of fame thinkers on leadership."

—Michael Bungay Stanier, Bestselling Author, *The Coaching Habit*

"Elaine Biech knows who the leaders are and has convinced them to share their wisdom. Now, she's put it all together in a book that tells the story of leadership from every angle. This handbook will show you what you need to know to be the leader the world needs right now!"

—Christie Ward, CSP, Owner and Leadership Facilitator, The Impact Institute

"Prepare your organization's leaders for the future with *ATD's Leadership Handbook*. Guided by the experienced editorial hand of Elaine Biech, this handbook offers content that is both practical and empowering. It is a functional blueprint for organizations committed to ensuring stellar leaders."

—Bill Nelson, Vice President, AGI

"*ATD's Leadership Handbook* is the best resource for all leaders—from CEOs to first-time leaders—that I have been privileged to read in 50 years of study. The six sections and dozens of brilliant authors cover everything you need to learn, reflect on, and then use to lift others on their journeys."

—VADM Ret. John R. Ryan, Former CEO, Center for Creative Leadership

"ATD and Elaine Biech have done an exceptional job curating the voices and wisdom of 65 brilliant thought leaders to create a unique combination of comprehensive research and practical frameworks that practitioners and leaders can immediately apply."

—Howard Farfel, CEO, TalentSmartEQ

"If you've ever wished you could get the world's greatest leadership minds in one room for a weekend, here's your chance! This handbook does more than just gather big names. It tackles the real, messy stuff we're all dealing with right now—from leading through AI and constant disruption to the quiet, essential work of building trust and psychological safety."

—Diane Elkins, Co-Founder, Artisan Learning

"This collection of leadership talent, and their keen perspectives on what makes things tick, is a resource worth spending time with. My favorite sections are 'Attributes of Effective Leaders' and 'Developing Effective Leaders,' because leaders must mentor those who will emerge as the next generation of leadership."

—RADM Ret. JB Godwin III, President and CEO, Mercy Medical Angels

"Elaine Biech has assembled an extraordinary group of leadership experts to share what truly works. The result is a practical, insightful handbook that both leaders, and those responsible for developing them, will return to again and again."

—Jeff Hayes, Vistage Chair; Former CEO, The Myers-Briggs Company

"Leadership development professionals are constantly searching for resources that combine credible research with real-world application. With contributions from 65 experts across 43 chapters, *ATD's Leadership Handbook* captures the depth, diversity, and evolution of modern leadership and offers proven frameworks, actionable tools, and fresh perspectives. This is a powerful resource for anyone committed to elevating leadership in their organization."

—Kevin Oakes, Founder and Chief Strategy Officer, Institute for Corporate Productivity

"*ATD's Leadership Handbook* is a must-have for anyone wanting to become a better, more conscious leader. The 43 chapters address competencies, attributes, developing others, and creating a superior workforce to increase overall productivity."

—Joe Trueblood, CEO, Amplify Growth

"Prepare your organization's leaders for the future with *ATD's Leadership Handbook*. The content of this handbook is practical and empowering. It offers a functional blueprint for organizations committed to ensuring the development of stellar leaders."

—Kevin Cope, CEO, Acumen Learning; Bestselling Author, *Seeing the Big Picture*

"Whether you're stepping into a leadership role for the first time or decades in, this is the handbook you'll return to repeatedly. Elaine gathered 65 respected voices in our field to contribute deep expertise, creating an indispensable resource for anyone navigating modern leadership realities. It's a must-have for your bookshelf!"

—Cindy Huggett, CPTD, Author, *The Virtual Training Guidebook*

"*ATD's Leadership Handbook* bridges the gap between leadership theory and real-world practice, offering practical insights from experienced practitioners and thought leaders. It's a valuable, accessible resource for both leaders and the professionals responsible for developing them."

—Karl M. Kapp, EdD, Professor of Instructional Design and Technology, Commonwealth University; Author, *Action-First Learning*

"*ATD's Leadership Handbook* is a comprehensive guide for leaders of today and the years ahead. Two sections will be extremely useful to the leaders I work with. 'Exceptional Leaders Create Superior Workforces' presents a reminder that leadership doesn't happen in a vacuum. 'Contemporary Leadership Challenges' offers forward-thinking insights and guidance to all leaders."

—Mona Gillis Edwards, Executive Coach, LIFT Coaching and Consulting; Member, Board of Governors, Center for Creative Leadership

"*ATD's Leadership Handbook* is an extraordinary resource. With Elaine Biech's deep connections across the leadership development community, it's no surprise that this handbook brings together such an extraordinary group of contributors."

—William J. Rothwell, PhD, CPTD Fellow, President, Rothwell and Associates

"ATD and Elaine Biech have assembled an extraordinary lineup of thinkers who don't just talk about leadership—they've spent careers *building* it. The result is a handbook that's as useful for the leader in the chair as it is for the person designing their development."

—Dean M. Becker, Managing Director, Adaptiv

"This handbook is a modern compass for leaders navigating uncharted terrain—where intention, not instinct, sets the course. Drawing on the wisdom of today's foremost voices, it stands as both a field guide and a north star for leading with purpose in a time that demands nothing less."

—Mary McGlynn, Founder, PowerSpeaking

"Whatever you think you know about leadership, think again. *ATD's Leadership Handbook* delivers comprehensive, inspiring, and pragmatic leadership guidance for today's world, which brazenly challenges leadership—and yet needs it more than ever."

—Michael W. Allen, PhD, Author, *Rethinking eLearning*

Elaine Biech, Editor

ATD's Leadership Handbook

2nd Edition

atd PRESS

ALEXANDRIA, VA

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Foreword

Leadership is often discussed as if it were something to decode after the fact—analyzed through outcomes, titles, or moments of visible success. But leadership, as this handbook clearly demonstrates, is not defined by our position or circumstance. It is defined by our choices. We make these choices daily—sometimes quietly, often under pressure, and almost always in relation to others.

Our choices matter now more than ever. Across industries, sectors, and regions, organizations are navigating profound changes—technological, social, economic, and human. The challenges we face are rarely the result of missing information or insufficient expertise. More often, they stem from how leadership is practiced. Is it intentional or reactive, trust-building or trust-eroding, or developmental or transactional?

At ATD, we hold a clear and ambitious vision: Create a world that works better. We pursue that vision by empowering professionals to develop talent in the workplace. We know how much leadership shapes how people experience work—and how work, in turn, shapes their lives. In other words, leadership affects far more than just performance and productivity; it also influences the pride individuals take in their roles, the opportunities they receive, and the possibilities they can envision and pursue for their future. When leaders are intentional and inclusive in their actions, they empower people, help them feel more valued, give them access to new opportunities, and open their imaginations to greater possibilities for growth and achievement. These actions demonstrate that leadership's true influence extends well beyond traditional measures of success. The new and fully revised edition of *ATD's Leadership Handbook* is grounded in this understanding of leadership's wide-ranging impact.

What will emerge as you read these pages is the understanding that extraordinary leadership is not accidental or reserved for a select few. It is learnable, practical, and within everyone's reach. The difference between run-of-the-mill leadership and leadership that truly elevates people and organizations often comes down to a small set of skills and mindsets applied with consistency, care, and *intention.*

Intentionality is critical. Effective leaders do not lead by default; they lead on purpose. They are deliberate about how they show up, how they make decisions, and how they engage others, especially when the path forward is uncertain. Today, ambiguity is the context in which we all work. Great leaders aren't called to eliminate uncertainty, but to help others move through it with clarity, direction, and confidence.

That movement beyond uncertainty can happen only if leaders have built a foundation of trust. While trust may be expressed differently across cultures and sectors, it is universally important. It determines whether people speak honestly, collaborate willingly, and commit fully. We build trust through consistency, fairness, listening, and presence—all actions that demonstrate reliability, responsiveness, and respect over time.

The 65 contributors to this handbook approach trust as an essential leadership responsibility, not a vague ideal. People pay attention to how leaders handle disagreements, how they respond to failures, and how they treat those whose voices carry less power. Where trust is strong, people take risks, share ideas, and invest in themselves. Where it is weak, even the best plans and people will struggle to gain momentum.

Leadership also requires *investment in people*. However, while organizations across sectors and regions agree that leadership development matters, many still struggle to build systems that consistently turn potential into capability and insight into action. We know leadership development should be ongoing and embedded in daily workflows, but too often it is just a program or an event that remains separate from "real work." This handbook's contributors rightly challenge that conventional wisdom. Developing leaders requires sustained commitment, including time to reflect, opportunities to practice, feedback to grow, and systems that reinforce learning over time. Leaders need to model curiosity, invite challenges, and see development as a core responsibility.

Simply put, leadership does not grow in isolation. It grows through application.

At the heart of this emphasis on intentionality, trust, and investment in people is a simple but transformative truth: *Leadership is about others.* The true measure of success is not what a leader accomplishes personally, but what people become under their leadership. When leaders focus solely on their own achievements, their impact is limited. When they focus on cultivating others, their influence endures. It becomes a legacy.

It's also true that leadership isn't about position. Leadership is influence, which can emanate from any place on an org chart. When we trust people to lead from where they are, they become more capable, more confident, and more committed. This shift—from control

to cultivation—strengthens leadership. Leaders who understand this truth build capacity, which allows the rest of the organization to prepare to lead, adapt, and contribute in their own contexts.

Today, new approaches to leadership are unfolding in a world that refuses to stay still. Rapid innovation, global interconnection, shifting expectations, and ongoing disruption have reshaped what leadership looks like everywhere. In this environment, leadership is no longer about maintaining stability. It is about navigating change with clarity, grit, empathy, and agility—helping people remain grounded while moving forward.

The discussions in this handbook—about purpose, performance, flexibility, technology, and evolving leadership attributes—are not abstract or context-bound. They are essential conversations we need to pursue across industries, sectors, and geographies. While circumstances differ, we all come back again and again to some underlying questions:

- How do we sustain performance without sacrificing well-being?
- How do we remain adaptable without losing focus?
- How do we develop leaders who can meet demands that we can't yet fully anticipate?

These questions were top of mind for Elaine Biech, this book's editor and thoughtful steward, who has been a longtime friend, contributor, and champion of ATD. Her vital leadership role in shaping this work is commendable. Bringing together dozens of distinct voices into a cohesive and compelling narrative requires discernment and a deep understanding of leadership practice and our professional community. Her influence and expertise are evident throughout—in the clarity of the themes, respect for individual perspectives, and the coherence of the whole.

The global talent development community knows that our leadership journey is never finished. We practice daily, refine our vision over time, and strengthen our ideas through shared learning. This book is not intended to provide definitive answers, but to provoke better questions—questions that invite reflection, action, and growth.

My hope is that as you read, your understanding of leadership will be affirmed and expanded. Affirmed in terms of the importance of the work you are doing and expanded as you reimagine what is possible when you lead with intention, build on trust, sustain investment, and focus on others.

Leadership matters because people matter. The everyday choices you make will shape your organization and people's individual experiences, opportunities, and lives beyond the

workplace. *ATD's Leadership Handbook* is an invitation to make those choices thoughtfully, courageously, and with a deep sense of responsibility.

This world does not need perfect leaders. It needs leaders who are committed to learning, willing to invest, and focused on lifting others. Leaders like you.

Thank you for helping create a world that works better through your leadership.

Tony Bingham, ATD President and CEO
September 2026

Introduction
Become an Intentional Leader

In 2023, I was hired to design and deliver an experiential leadership development course for 140 senior-level leaders. The content was aligned to business strategy and included personal coaching and accountability team meetings between sessions. It also incorporated a 360-degree assessment, guided reflection, and corporate scenario problem solving.

The program was delivered to 20-member cohorts in three one-week sessions over a five-month period. I further divided each cohort into cross-functional accountability teams of five. Each week had a different focus—week 1 was leading myself, week 2 was leading my team, and week 3 was leading my company. The sessions were held in different locations, which were chosen to match that week's focus:

- We met in Charlotte for week 1; participants drove a race car around the Charlotte Speedway at more than 150 miles per hour! We discussed how that experience compared to leading themselves.
- Week 2 was held in Colorado Springs, where each accountability team spent a day together whitewater rafting. Their goal was to experience leading a team in a challenging situation.
- During the final week, we visited the battlefields in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, to learn about the successes and failures faced by Civil War generals. They reflected on how these lessons related to their own organization.

Why am I sharing all this? Because this program did more than help leaders develop their skills. It also reminded me of the incredible insights we, as TD professionals, can gain from those who participate in our programs.

What insight did I gain from the participants of this leadership development program? The importance of intentionality. Intentionality cropped up repeatedly in our discussions until it became a rallying cry for each cohort. These leaders discovered how critical intentionality was for what they wanted to improve and how they and their organizations would measure success. They realized that being intentional increases clarity, improves decision making,

builds trust, and accelerates personal and organizational growth. They also determined that being intentional starts with being self-aware and having a clear purpose and priority. It also meant that they needed to clear their calendars to plan and model the behaviors they expected of others. As these leaders built essential intentional habits, they continued to seek feedback from their colleagues, managers, and employees.

How did everyone lead with intentionality? What were they intentional about? After the final week, I asked several of the directors and vice presidents who had participated in the program to share an intentional focus they were now practicing:

- Nichole said she intentionally seeks out the unique strengths in every team member, drawing out the qualities that inspire excellence and exceptional performance.
- David said he is intentional about meeting with his team one-on-one to maintain personal relationships and foster trust and mutual respect.
- Allison is intentional about listening and asking open-ended questions to show the kind of care that encourages candid dialogue.
- Tiffany said she is thoughtful about listening and taking notes when others speak before she provides input or suggestions.
- Kira is intentional about taking time to prepare for conversations with executives, so she can be concise and focused on their needs.
- Jonathan is intentional about bringing the appropriate stakeholders together to review the scope of work and confirm costs, timing, and roles.
- Shelby is intentional about continuous improvement—embracing each day as a chance to be better than yesterday.

If you are a leader or developer of leaders, my best advice is to be intentional. All the wise words in the world won't do a darn bit of good unless you are intentional about the changes you want to make.

In a world marked by increasing complexity, rapid change, and mounting expectations, intentional leadership has never been more vital. From shifting global economies and rising digital disruption to heightened demands for authenticity, ethical behavior, inclusion, and purpose, leaders are navigating more complex dynamics than ever before. In this handbook, you will find insights from many of the world's foremost thinkers on leadership. They each share their unique perspectives, research, and stories to help you understand, develop, and practice leadership in its many dimensions with intention.

The purpose of this new edition of *ATD's Leadership Handbook* is simple but ambitious: to provide a resource that is broad, deep, and practical—one that spans the views of global thought leaders, research evidence, and real-world practice for those who lead, aspire to lead, and develop leaders.

Want to see a difference in leadership development? Be intentional. You can download an Intentionality Guide on this handbook's website at TD.org/leadershiphandbook. It will help you and those you develop understand why intentionality is critical and how to focus on becoming more intentional.

What's the ROI?

Good leadership is a critical success factor in every industry and sector. Organizations with strong leaders are more resilient, more innovative, and more trusted. They can adapt to disruption, retain talent in a tight labor market, galvanize teams toward a shared purpose, and maintain coherence across remote and hybrid workplaces. Unsurprisingly, well-led organizations are more profitable too. This is why it's essential to invest in effective leaders who can face the demands of today's rapidly changing world—and deal with the next wave of changes tomorrow. Two data points can help us understand the return on investment (ROI) of leadership development:

- **Investment in leadership development is significant globally but varies depending on the organization.** Credible estimates put annual global spending on leadership training and development at about $60 billion (Yemiscigil et al. 2023). But in individual organizations, surveys show wide variation, with many spending less than $4,000 per employee on leadership training. Only a small fraction invest more than $10,000 per person, which means most organizations have room to improve.
- **The return on investment in leadership development is solid.** A study by BetterManager found that for every $1 spent on leadership development, companies receive an average of $7 in return through increased revenue, reduced turnover, promotions, and other tangible benefits (New Level Work 2023). Organizations that invest well in their leaders often report higher revenue growth, better cost control, and superior market performance.

These numbers demonstrate the real financial opportunities of investing in leadership development. But an organization's leadership quality also contributes to its success in many other ways that affect the bottom line:

- **Employee engagement and retention.** Employees who work with inspiring, supportive, and well-developed leaders are more likely to feel valued, more likely to stay, and more likely to contribute discretionary effort. Engagement drives creativity, collaboration, and long-term loyalty.
- **Organizational performance.** Excellent leaders make better decisions, align their teams with the company's vision and strategy, and accelerate the adaptation of change. These all lead to better overall organizational outcomes.
- **Talent pipeline and succession.** A robust pipeline of leaders across levels (not just in the senior ranks) helps organizations anticipate change, scale, and respond to crises. When leadership abilities are spread throughout a company, the risks associated with vacancies decrease and continuity of culture and corporate values is ensured.
- **Culture, values, and trust.** Leaders shape culture through what they do, what they tolerate, and what they reinforce. In times of uncertainty, leaders' ethics, transparency, empathy, and trustworthiness are key to a business's survival. Good leadership is one of the ways to shape an organizational culture that can sustain high performance under pressure.

In other words, good leadership makes good things happen.

The Purpose of This Handbook

The stakes around developing better leaders are high. This handbook does not settle for a superficial treatment of the topic—it delivers breadth and depth. Here you will find intellectual discussions, practical tools, proven frameworks, and everyday wisdom to help you lead yourself, your team, and your company more effectively.

When I started working on this new edition, I wanted to focus on a few simple truths to make this handbook exceptional:

- **A book is only as good as its authors.** This handbook includes content from 65 expert and experienced people, including many globally recognized thought leaders. You'll find familiar names—Blanchard, Byham, Godin, Goldsmith, Kaye,

Kouzes, Masie, Phillips, Zenger, and others—but you'll also meet many new voices and innovators in the field. Their contributions provide a rich variety of leadership philosophies, empirical research, case studies, and practical tools, which reflect their leadership expertise in diverse sectors, organizational cultures, and levels of practice.

- **It should inspire.** We launch this new edition of *ATD's Leadership Handbook* with an opening chapter by Ben Keating, someone who operates outside our normal talent development circles and models superior leadership qualities daily. Keating exemplifies the kind of leadership that turns bold vision into sustained excellence. Whether he is growing the largest privately held auto group in Texas or conquering the world's most demanding endurance races, he leads with grit, humility, and a relentless pursuit of improvement. His track record—nationally recognized with a 2024 *Time* magazine cover feature—reflects a leader who encourages others to push boundaries, rise to challenges, and deliver extraordinary performance. His story will inspire you to define your own greatness.
- **It should include actionable advice.** We deliver on this promise in a big way. The authors speak about more than leadership theory; they bring stories, frameworks, and lessons learned, as well as reflection questions and toolkits. Each chapter ends with actions you can take now, which are practical ideas to apply immediately.
- **It should take a broad and varied approach to the topic.** In these pages, you'll find insights drawn from many industries, sectors, and workplace cultures—the authors have experience in nonprofits, government, education, and established businesses and startups. This handbook covers leadership of the self, leadership of teams, and leadership of organizations in a variety of contexts, including periods of change, crisis, and innovation. Although the chapters can stand on their own, they also reinforce, challenge, and extend one another.
- **It must be dedicated to the readers' development.** This handbook is written for leaders and talent development professionals who develop leaders. We want to reach people like you—people who want to learn, adapt, and apply new thinking and best practices. We've included a section at the end of each chapter called "Continue Your Development," which suggests resources for going deeper into the topic when you're ready.

How to Use This Handbook

ATD's Leadership Handbook contains 43 chapters divided into six sections. You will find more than 50 tools on the accompanying website at TD.org/leadershiphandbook. To get the fullest value from the book and its tools, first consider what your organization and its leaders need:

- How can you share what you learn to make the organization better?
- What does your team need to become more effective, and how will you communicate the relevant ideas?
- What do you need to level up your own leadership toolkit?
- How can you overcome the challenges revealed by your most recent 360-degree feedback?

Use this book to synthesize your insights as you create a personal plan for your leadership future. I suggest doing the following:

- **Read selectively and iteratively.** Choose a chapter that interests you. You may read some chapters start-to-finish, while saving others for times you're facing specific challenges (such as leading remote teams or navigating ethical dilemmas). Or, you might focus on one of the book's six sections. For example, section III, Developing Effective Leaders, will be helpful if you facilitate leadership development sessions. And you may find section VI, Essential Discussions, intriguing if you're looking for stimulating discussions on contemporary leadership issues.
- **Reflect and apply.** As you read each chapter, pause to reflect on three questions: What does this information mean for me? What might I do differently? How can I use this with my organization's leaders? Many chapters also include reflection prompts or questions. Use them! Journaling creates a private space for reflection in which to process thoughts and emotions. It encourages self-awareness, mental well-being, personal growth, and clarity. In practical terms, journaling can also help you track progress toward your goals.
- **Compare perspectives.** Don't expect to find full alignment within these chapters—the authors offer different and even contrasting views. That divergence is intentional, not an error to confuse you. Assimilating a variety of content is part

of your growth. Use these chapters to stimulate questions and debate (for example, you could lead discussion groups at your company's annual retreat).

- **Use the handbook in development settings.** TD professionals, trainers, coaches, and designers need lots of content. Share the knowledge you gain with others. Assign chapters or curate smaller selections, organize discussions or workshops, implement a lunch & learn, coach an up-and-coming leader, or present your own views at a conference. The authors in this book can inspire your creativity and make your work easier in many ways.
- **Take action!** Implement an idea from the "Actions You Can Take Now" sections. Complete a self-assessment and set a goal. Download and start using one of the tools or share a chapter with a colleague and form an accountability partnership. We created these opportunities to ensure you continue this rich journey of personal development.

A Call to Leadership in Times of Change

I've been observing and participating in dramatic changes in talent development for four decades. Leadership challenges never remain static—they keep evolving, and usually faster than the classic leadership development models can keep up. This new edition of *ATD's Leadership Handbook* is designed to help you meet these ever-evolving challenges. The authors' insights and tools will help you sharpen your skills, deepen your awareness, expand your influence, and support others in your organization to do the same.

Now, more than ever, what every leader does at every level matters. My hope is that, by reading, reflecting, and acting intentionally, you and those around you will make leadership development a force for positive, creative, and lasting change.

It's time for you to lead with intention.

CHAPTER 1

Driving to Win

A CEO's Perspective on Leadership

BEN KEATING

Howdy! I was excited and honored when Elaine asked me to be a contributor to this book and share my leadership wisdom—most of which I learned the hard way. Over the last couple of decades, I have built a network of more than 30 car dealerships and a bunch of affiliated companies to go along with them. With more than 3,000 people working together to achieve our goals, we are the largest auto group in Texas—and we are still growing.

In addition to leading more than 35 automotive-related companies, I am also an endurance sports-car racer. I have won the Rolex 24 at Daytona and the 12 Hours of Sebring multiple times. I have also won at 24 Hours of Le Mans several times, and I was the GT class World Champion in the FIA World Endurance Championship in 2022 and 2023. I don't bring these things up to brag, but to say that the leadership principles I follow are the same in both of my major life pursuits.

Building a winning team is not easy, whether you're in business or in racing. There are hundreds of factors at play, most of which depend on other people and unpredictable circumstances. There are so many ways a big win can slip through your fingers; some are within your control, but others are not. Great leadership is all about putting yourself in a position to win. In business and in racing, I have a track record of putting myself and my teams in a position to win.

Starting from nothing and expanding into the company we have become has been incredibly rewarding, but it has also been challenging. I believe it is through these challenges that we all gain wisdom. In this chapter, I hope to shorten your learning curve by sharing a little of what I've learned.

Independence Defines You as a Leader

One of the most interesting things about being a leader is that it requires *independence*. Typically, this independence comes from the confidence you have built out of your life experiences, including your biggest struggles. I always tell people that "confidence comes from competence," and it cannot be faked. You either have it, or you don't.

I love to share the example of students in a second-grade classroom. The teacher can give all the kids a pep talk about how well they know the information and how well they will do on the test. When the teacher asks if they're ready, most of the students will say, "Yes!" But once the teacher asks the first question, you'll often see some indicators about who thinks they know the answer and who doesn't. The kids who know may raise their hands higher than everyone else, almost jumping out of their seats. And the kids who don't know the answer might slink down as low as possible, trying to disappear. Yet others might be super confident but have the wrong answer.

As a business leader, you might have some swagger and tell people you have all the confidence in the world, but if you don't have it, everyone will know that pretty quickly. You can't fake it, and you can't hide under your desk like a second grader. You don't have to know all the answers all the time, but you need to be confident in your independence as a leader, and typically, independence is a result of competence.

In high school, I was a good student, but I liked to take risks and push limits. I ended up going through drug and alcohol rehab twice before I turned 18. These years were incredibly difficult for my family and for me. After I left my second halfway house, we decided I shouldn't go back home to Houston, Texas. I got an apartment and lived on my own during my senior year of high school. I credit this struggle and the resulting independence I experienced early in life with making me comfortable and confident in the independent thinking I have to do in my current life as a business owner.

The independence you need as a leader can be lonely and difficult. Sometimes, I might hang out with the people I work with and ask for their opinions before making a decision. At other times, it is most appropriate to create the vision myself, making the tough decisions and pushing forward. Because I'm now so comfortable with independence, I can figure out the difference between a problem that requires other people's ideas and one that I have to solve myself.

People often ask me how I could take so many risks at the beginning of my career, and my answer is always that I had nothing to lose. I had been to the bottom already, and it was OK.

I survived. That life experience gave me the courage and confidence to take bold steps and move toward my goals.

Of course, you don't have to go through a big life change like drug treatment to be a good leader. Any life experience that truly challenges you will sharpen your tools and your thinking and is a plus for your development as a leader.

Being Real Is the Best Strategy

After graduating from Texas A&M University with an industrial engineering degree, I knew I wanted to get into the car business somewhere, somehow. When my wife landed a job at Dell in Austin, Texas, I got a job selling cars at Covert Ford. Believe it or not, selling cars did not come naturally for me, but I had a great work ethic and was a good student of the game.

One of the things I learned quickly and still believe is that being genuine and sincere are the most important characteristics of a successful salesperson. Customers can read right through whatever facade a salesperson is putting up. They get a feeling of uneasiness and know that something isn't quite right. We have all felt that at one point or another, haven't we? If a salesperson is truly genuine, customers will typically give them much more grace and understanding. I don't believe there are any sales training or process improvement programs that can overcome a salesperson who is not genuine.

Being a great leader of people is the toughest sales position on the planet. Just like great salespeople, great leaders have to be genuine, believe in what they are doing, and open their hearts to the people they are leading. The people you lead are your customers, and I guarantee that they can see through any BS. If you are going to reach the highest levels of success, people need to believe in you.

This is *not* an area in which you can "fake it 'til you make it." You've got to be real, for better or worse.

The 80/20 Rule of Marriage and Leadership

My wife Kathleen and I got married a week after we graduated from Texas A&M University. In the weeks leading up to the wedding, a good friend and mentor of mine, Tom Pace, gave me some great advice. He said, "If you want a successful marriage, don't buy into the

myth that relationships are 50-50." His theory was that if you go into marriage thinking that it is a 50-50 deal, you are going to be disappointed and less likely to succeed. His advice was to go in expecting to give 80 percent of the effort and to receive 20 percent in return, and then you'll be more likely to find success and happiness.

I've found this to be true in my marriage of 30 years, and have also found it to be true in leadership. I have come to the conclusion that in every worthwhile effort, you'll get out of it what you put into it.

I have also found that we can choose our response to adversity. Many times, we make that choice based on preconceived notions about ourselves and everyone else. As a leader, if I am going into a situation expecting to give 80 percent and receive 20, then I set a good example for everyone else, demonstrating my work ethic and commitment to the vision, showing that I am investing in my people. This is not about refusing to delegate and doing everything myself. I'm revealing to my team who I am and what I am about.

One of my favorite parenting quotes is from John Rosemond: "Consumption without contribution always leads to an attitude of entitlement." This is another version of giving 80 percent and expecting 20 in return. As the leader of any organization, it is important to make sure people are aware of their contributions. No matter the role, from the top to the bottom, making a real contribution creates gratitude and appreciation in everyone, which completely shifts the whole company culture. When we all contribute, we have no time for entitlement.

Yet even when the majority of people on my team are contributing and sparking gratitude, some people will still come to me with big expectations, talking about what they "deserve," what they have "earned," and other phrases that show they feel entitled to something. If I allow them to start our relationship in that way, then I know they will be disappointed. Therefore, it is my responsibility as the leader to be real with them and tell them about the 80/20 rule. If both sides in a relationship have the same mindset of giving 80 percent and receiving 20, then that relationship has a shot at something ending up close to 50/50 and will exceed expectations on both sides.

Parenting Advice for Leaders

For the past 20 years, Keating Auto Group has held an annual retreat that is voluntary but available to the more than 2,700 people on our team. We alternate the subjects of the retreat between marriage and parenting. Our people tell me this has been an incredible gift for them and their families, but the retreats are a gift for me too. I've learned so much in

those workshops about being a leader. I see the relationships I have with my partners and our senior leadership team as a lot like marriage. On our team, we have to deal with conflict and show appreciation in ways that are similar to our interactions with our spouses.

In the parenting retreats, I've learned that you need to parent a toddler differently than a child in middle school or high school or college, and I've used those lessons as a leader. I might be discussing someone on our team with my chief operating officer, and say, "Remember, he is a toddler in this situation," meaning that he doesn't have the same experience or maturity in the job as someone who has been around longer. You can't give an eight-year-old the same independence as an 18-year-old. I've also learned that we need to design natural consequences based on where kids—and employees—are in their life cycles.

However, in business, we can't judge people only based only on their time or "age" in the company. I have seen people who have worked with us for only a few years reach the level of independent, trustworthy "college kids," while others who have worked with us for 20 years still fit into the "toddler" category.

In my struggle to be a better leader, I lean on marriage and parenting advice because I think it fits real-life situations. Sometimes I wear a marriage counselor hat and sometimes a parent hat, but I know these lessons and skills make me a better leader.

Temple Grandin's Lessons in Business Design

Twenty years ago, after I had run my first couple of dealerships for a few years, I had a breakthrough moment while watching a movie based on the life of animal scientist Temple Grandin.

Grandin grew up in the 1950s and was diagnosed with autism at age three. Her single mother couldn't care for her, so she sent her to live with relatives in Amarillo, Texas, where cattle and stockyards are big business. As a teenager, Grandin discovered she was able to see the world through the eyes of the cattle. Frustrated by the stockyard cowboys who used cattle prods and other painful methods to get the livestock to move through the system of pens and fencing, Grandin used her new perspective to think differently about the physical design of the spaces. She knew it needed to change.

Grandin went on to redesign the entire stockyard so the cattle naturally moved exactly where they needed to go based on the pattern of the boundaries, not the pain of an electric shock.

The movie about Grandin's life was not really meant to be a leadership lesson, but it led me to ask myself, "What boundaries have I created in my business that are causing conflict in the system?" Then I looked at the conflicts one by one, and I could trace each one back to the way the boundaries were designed. Like Grandin, I quickly started redesigning the system.

I changed our pay plans to make sure we were all pulling in the same direction, with the same goals. I changed schedules, work groups, and process steps. I started looking for any fences that caused conflict and pain points—and then began rebuilding them.

Now, when issues or challenges come up, I am quick to say, "Check the fences. How are the boundaries designed? Is this a system problem or an isolated incident?" This approach has become revolutionary for my company. I sometimes wonder if the story of Temple Grandin made sense to me because of my engineering background. I tend to look at the world as a problem to solve, and I believe that one of the most important roles a leader has is as the designer of a business's systems and boundaries. We have to design in a way that makes everyone involved do the right thing. When you can get that right, tremendous results will follow.

Adamant Adaptation

I occasionally get wrapped up in what my family calls a "boring business book," and typically, the ideas in these books dominate my leadership style for a little while. I was heavily influenced in the late 1990s by Peter Senge's book, *The Fifth Discipline*. That book recently came back into my life and has been weighing heavily on me.

The subtitle of Senge's book is *The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization*. I believe there is at least as much art as there is practice in creating a learning organization. Leading a group of people into the fluid and uncharted territory of continuous learning is a special talent. You have to be a well-rounded leader and live in the space of leadership without knowing all the answers.

As the title suggests, Senge's book says there are five disciplines in a learning organization, and the transformational Fifth Discipline is *systems thinking*. What does that mean? Most people look at a result, whether it's a key performance indicator (KPI) metric or an event, and react to that. Systems thinking is the ability to ask, like Temple Grandin, "What is the system that allowed the behavior that created the result, event, or metric?" As leaders, it is our job to put everyone into a system that creates the behaviors that create the results we want.

We all know the goal posts in our businesses are being moved all the time, and that means we have to constantly adapt our systems. Therefore, if I am going to be a successful leader, I need to be *adamant about adaptation.*

Because I lead one of the largest car dealerships in the United States, people often ask me what I think about electric cars or buying cars over the internet, because they see these things as threats to the current system. My response is that I want all of my company's stores to be omni-channel retailers. What I mean by that is that I care about what cars my customers want to drive and how they want to buy them. I want to be the one to please those customers and sell them cars they want. That's all that matters—electric cars, flying cars, or whatever comes next, I will sell whatever the customer wants, and I will sell to them however they want to buy. This approach requires a lot of adaptation, as well as an organization that can learn. It also requires an open-minded, well-rounded leader who is comfortable with change and adaptation, not relying on what worked in the past.

What Uncomfortable Means for Leaders

When I was a brand-new Ford dealer at the age of 30, I was leading a team of people in rural south Texas who were used to a different culture and environment than the one I wanted to build. Many of them were much older than I was and had more experience in the market. They thought I was bringing in a bunch of "big city ideas" from Houston, which at the time seemed as far away as New York City or Tokyo. Folks rolled their eyes at me, and some were even bold enough to tell me I would never be successful in their market. Even though I had gained a ton of confidence while working at Tomball Ford, I didn't want to upset the human capital apple cart and, to be honest, their response was a little intimidating. As a leader, I wanted everyone to be one big happy family.

One Saturday morning, I came to the dealership early, as usual, to prepare for our busiest day of the week. When I walked into the showroom, one of our top salespeople was standing there with his shirt untucked. He looked like he'd had a rough Friday night and his appearance made me uncomfortable—he was representing the team to our customers and it wasn't a good look. But I didn't want to confront him, lose our top salesperson, or create a lot of drama on a Saturday morning. Unsure what to do, I went back to my office and decided to write about what I saw and how I was dealing with it. Maybe it's another product of my engineering background, but I like to write out my challenges clearly in a flow chart, showing cause and effect,

actions and outcomes. As I was looking at what I wrote, I had a leadership epiphany: *When I discover I am uncomfortable with something, that means it's an area in need of my leadership.*

This simple telltale sign that I need to step up and lead now dominates the way I make decisions. Typically, the challenges are much bigger than an untucked shirt, but I always know that when I'm uncomfortable with something or it doesn't align with my vision, that's exactly where I need to focus my attention and leadership. I remind myself: I am the leader. I am in charge of this system. If there is a problem, it is my responsibility to interject.

My business partners and I all study John C. Maxwell's book, *Leadership 101*, and it turns out that Maxwell believes in uncomfortableness too. Time after time, I've focused on page 72, which features an illustration of the five levels of leadership. He says that if we can bring in the right people, give them the right vision, and make sure they get involved anytime they are uncomfortable, we will usually end up moving into higher levels of leadership.

If you ignore a problem, it just gets bigger. And the bigger it gets, the more it slips outside your leadership and influence. In other words, remember: If it is to be, it's up to me.

I pass on this way of leading to all my general managers. I talk about what it means to be uncomfortable, and they immediately understand. Instead of telling them they need to go do something—to show some leadership—I say I am uncomfortable with a situation, and they know what I mean.

Leadership ≠ Management

We often talk about striving to become leaders that others follow based on what we do for them. Occasionally we reach the rare air of the top level of leadership where people follow us because of who we are and what we represent. This is an idea that I personally struggle with. I like to look at a report; put circles, checks, and X's all over it; and then send it out to the parties involved. I would call this management, maybe even micromanagement. But honestly, people don't need me to tell them whether or not they've done a good job. They know where they stand. They don't need me to manage them; they need me to lead them.

The most valuable thing I can do for the people I lead is to listen to their challenges, give them my opinions about a direction or solution they could try, clear out the noise and distractions, and motivate them to tackle the challenge again. This is leadership.

As I said, this approach is not easy for me. I am constantly trying to shift myself out of a management mindset and into a leadership mindset. Most of the time, leadership means

seeing a bigger picture or sharing my experience in different situations. Building a shared vision and providing people with the motivation to tackle the issues at hand with some passion and perseverance is how I can best leverage my time, my position, and my knowledge.

When I get into management mode, it turns into a drain on morale, even though I am just trying to help.

No Place for Timidity

One of my all-time favorite verses in the Bible is 2 Timothy 1:7, which reads, "For God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power, of love, and of self-discipline."

When I was part of a discipleship group, we studied this verse, including precise definitions of the original Greek words, to better understand all that it meant. The Greek word for *timidity* was defined as a "lack of courage or fear of self-rejection." The Greek word for *power* was defined as "the ability and strength to do God's will." The particular word used for *love* in this text means "to seek the highest good for another person." And finally, the Greek word for *self-discipline* means "wisdom and correct thinking." So, using those definitions, I believe we have the ability and strength to seek the highest good for another person, wisdom, discipline, and correct thinking.

I like to use this idea in my life when my team or I need to make a big decision or if I am making a big transition. As a leader, if I know that I have the ability and strength to do something, that I am seeking the highest good for others, and I believe I have wisdom and correct thinking on my side, I can move forward with confidence.

I believe these are great metrics with which to measure big decisions. Leadership requires courage, and much of my willingness to take risks is rooted in the fact that these truths have never steered me wrong.

Leadership has no place for timidity.

Train Your Brain(s)

I recently read *Grow a New Brain* by Alberto Villoldo. This book describes the work of American neuroscientist Paul D. MacLean, who studied the human brain in the 1950s and proposed a model of three different brains that evolved throughout human history. The R-Brain, or what he calls the reptilian brain, is the most primitive and controls our

autonomic functions like heart rate, digestion, temperature, and breathing. The M-brain is what he calls the mammalian brain, which controls our fight-or-flight reflexes. It is the brain of instincts and emotion and is what helped us survive the Ice Age, saber-toothed tigers, and warring tribes. And finally, the N-Brain, or the neocortex brain, is where we experience passion, joy, and love. It is the brain of logic and reasoning, and it developed over 10,000 years or so.

MacLean said that it is not possible for someone to develop and nurture the M-brain and the N-brain at the same time; thus, the part that you stimulate and develop will become larger and more powerful. The undeveloped and unstimulated parts of the brain will shrink, become less powerful, and be harder to access.

This way of describing our brains rings true for me. When I was in college without much stress other than studying for tests, I remember being very creative, spontaneous, curious, and full of gratitude and love. As I started to climb the corporate ladder, the competitive side of my brain began to take over. I started my own business and had to deal with all of the pressures of the economy, banking regulations, and manufacturing issues, and I can remember times when I was fully in fight-or-flight mode. I was living in my M-brain. I knew that if I was going to make it in the ultra-competitive auto industry, I needed to be successful by standing on the backs of all the other competitors on the field of battle. I repeatedly backed myself into a corner so I had to come out swinging. Basically, I lived in a world that required me to have an enemy to engage my M-Brain.

Eventually, 10 years into running several businesses, I found that I could no longer relax. I struggled to experience the same level of peace and joy I remembered feeling in college. I had changed and I no longer knew how to find balance.

Even though it sounds counterintuitive, this lack of peace and joy is one of the main reasons I was drawn to racing cars. I used to call the feeling I had when I was racing an adrenaline rush, because I got so amped up on the track that I would shake with excitement during a 20-minute session in the car. When I came in to wait for the next session on the track, I experienced the most relaxing state I had felt in years. I really think I overstimulated my M-brain so much for the 20 minutes of each race that it finally had to give up—similar to the way we use electronic stimulation to get a muscle to relax.

I have now found new ways of developing my N-brain. I have nurtured my feelings of gratitude, love, joy, and curiosity, which has led me to a new understanding about young leaders.

When we first start out in any business, it is all about fight or flight. This instinct gets us rewarded—and sometimes it does feel like surviving an Ice Age or escaping a saber-toothed tiger. This is where we have to live at first if we are going to be successful. However, I see many leaders who never escape this way of life. Their M-brain takes over completely, their N-brain shrinks, and they can't find their way back to a place of balance.

We can't sustain that lack of balance and be good leaders. I believe the very best leaders today practice relational leadership. Things are changing so rapidly today that leaders not only have to be open to new things but also able to apply logic and reason to determine the good stuff from the crap. Logic, reasoning, and judgment are all N-brain functions; therefore, the best leaders are those who can transition from the early stages of M-brain dominated leadership to a more N-brain- dominated way of life.

Developing your N-brain takes work. It does not come easily to those of us whose work has been dominated by fear and competition. However, it can be done, and the rewards are significant. My advice to all young leaders is to develop your N-brain. Work on your creativity, gratitude, relationships, and living in love.

The last book I'll mention is one my father read more than 25 years ago—a book with a memorable title: *The Leadership Secrets of Atilla the Hun.* I am pretty confident about the message my father took out of that book: Fear is the best motivator for achieving the results you want. He always thought that being a leader required him to be a fear monger. It was his responsibility to dish out fear regardless of how it affected people around him. He became much more confident and comfortable by being hard on people and inspiring fear in them. I believe his M-brain was so focused on its fight-or-flight response that it literally drove him crazy and eventually led to his suicide.

As a young man, I worked in the environment my father created and it had a big influence on my leadership style when I became a fledgling business owner out on my own. I knew that I wanted to be less focused on fear and more relational. I was much more interested in making sure everyone in my organization bought in to what we were working toward than in making them afraid.

Because of my experience working with my dad, and how I interacted with people, I inadvertently ended up leading in a way that enabled me to move up the levels Maxwell talks about in *Leadership 101.* And because I developed my N-brain, where higher levels of leadership are possible, I became someone people follow because of the person I am and what I represent.

You can do the same.

Find Your Passion in Work

When I try to talk to people about their passions, I ask a few questions: What do you think about when you are taking a shower? What gives you energy? What fills your mind when you are driving alone in your car? Your answers to these questions can help describe your passion.

When college students ask me if I have any advice for them, my number one answer is: "You and everyone else deserve to be passionate about your work."

I am not saying that you have to jump out of bed excited to go to work every single day. That would be ridiculous. When speaking to students, I also acknowledge that every job is hard work. Every job has good days and bad days and challenges. No job lets you avoid these things.

But passion for your work makes all the challenges worth it. Passion will motivate you to put in the hours and do the hard work. It will make you successful.

A part of leadership we sometimes forget is helping people find something in their jobs that gives them energy. If a job can somehow feed your soul and give you energy, that power is irreplaceable.

Actions You Can Take Now

My goal is to be a leader that people follow because of who I am and what I represent. I don't want people to follow me just because I'm the boss. To achieve this higher level of leadership, you have to work on yourself first. Here are some steps you can take:

- **Think about where you have competence and therefore confidence.** Then, think about when you can afford to take calculated risks and when it is better to rely on others.
- **Spend your time on things that give you energy.** And then, eliminate the things that suck up your energy. At the same time, try to be genuine. Be a giver.
- **Consider what makes you uncomfortable and why this needs your leadership.** Then, try to design systems that create desired outcomes without resorting to a cattle prod.
- **Develop your brain to experience more love, gratitude, creativity, and joy.** Avoid living in fear. Not only is this good for you and your long-term health and happiness, but all the people you lead will appreciate you all the more for it.

About the Author

Ben Keating is passionate about the competitive environments of selling and racing cars. His vocation is running Keating Auto Group, which has become the largest privately held auto group in Texas, with more than 30 dealerships. Ben's other passion is endurance sports car racing. He is a multiple-time winner in the GT class at 24 Hours of Le Mans and won the World Endurance Championship title in 2022 and 2023. Ben has won the Michelin North American Endurance Cup five times in the last 10 years and was nominated by the Texas Auto Dealers Association for the Time Dealer of the Year award in 2024. He is an engineering graduate of Texas A&M University, where he also met his wife, Kathleen. He has two kids, Carter and Kate.

SECTION I

Key Leadership Competencies

What if the difference between an average leader and an extraordinary one came down to a handful of skills that are learnable, practical, and entirely within reach? In an era defined by complexity, disruption, and accelerating expectations, leaders are no longer measured solely by their titles or tenure. They are measured by their ability to navigate ambiguity, rally people toward a shared future, and cultivate cultures in which individuals and ideas can thrive. Section I of this handbook explores the essential competencies that anchor those capabilities.

We begin with the foundational practices of exemplary leadership, drawn from decades of research by James M. Kouzes and Barry Z. Posner. Their work reminds us that leadership is not an abstract concept but a daily practice—one built on modeling the way, inspiring a shared vision, challenging processes, enabling others to act, and encouraging the heart. These timeless behaviors form the backbone of effective leadership across industries and generations.

Yet, strong leadership also demands the ability to design and execute strategy amid constant change. In his chapter on strategy, Seth Godin challenges leaders to think differently about planning in an increasingly unpredictable world. He says that rather than relying on rigid plans, leaders should deploy curiosity, experimentation, and intentional design. He invites leaders to create better plans—not perfect plans—that incorporate complexity rather than certainty.

Complementing Godin's strategic lens, John Coné's chapter explores the leader as a catalyst—one who thrives through adaptability, flexibility, and agility. He underscores a powerful truth: Lasting impact is rarely about holding fast to what we know—it's about being curious, evolving quickly, embracing change, thinking in systems, and leading with openness.

When the path forward is unclear, leaders need more than a plan—they need a compass. Katie Sheketoff introduces this compass in her chapter on leading change without a map. Her insights illuminate how clarity of purpose, resilience, and a focus on psychological safety help leaders guide teams through unfamiliar terrain with confidence and calm.

Leadership competencies extend beyond the tactical and strategic—they are profoundly human. Maggie Sass and Ross Blankenship center emotional intelligence as a leadership imperative, demonstrating how self-awareness, empathy, and relationship skills have become nonnegotiables for leading today's workforce. Their work reinforces why emotional intelligence is critical for all leaders.

Another critical competency is creating a culture in which people feel safe, included, and valued. Sy Islam and Michael Chetta unpack what it means to build psychological safety and belonging, conditions that are proven to unlock innovation, engagement, and collective potential. Their guidance offers leaders actionable ways to make inclusion a lived, daily experience.

Finally, leaders must be skilled negotiators—not just across contracts or conflicts, but across ideas, priorities, and relationships. Linda Byars Swindling provides a practical framework represented by the acronym DEAL. She shows how good negotiation skills empower leaders to influence effectively, create alignment, and drive mutually beneficial outcomes.

Together, these chapters illuminate the competencies leaders need most today: the ability to inspire, strategize, adapt, navigate change, connect emotionally, build inclusive cultures, and negotiate wisely. These are not innate gifts but purposeful practices. When leaders commit to strengthening these competencies, they elevate not only their own effectiveness, but the performance, culture, and future of their organizations.

CHAPTER 2

Practices of Exemplary Leadership

JAMES M. KOUZES AND BARRY Z. POSNER

IN THIS CHAPTER

- Discuss research on what people expect of leaders.
- Reveal the foundation of leadership.
- Describe The Five Practices of Exemplary Leadership®.
- Provide examples of how to apply these practices.

When you hear the word "leader," who immediately comes to mind? Perhaps you think of someone with a title, such as CEO, president, prime minister, or admiral. Maybe you think of a famous public figure, such as a celebrated actor or singer, a startup founder, or a pro athlete. Possibly you think of someone from the history books who led a revolution, a conquest, or a world-changing movement. Or you think of someone who created a breakthrough invention, won a Nobel or Pulitzer Prize, wrote a bestselling novel, or composed a Grammy-winning song.

These common responses are reinforced every time we read a "50 Greatest Leaders of the Year" list. In fact, you'll see that 100 percent of the so-called "greatest leaders" in the most well-known lists fall into these categories (Fortune 2019). Younger leaders fall into these categories too. In the World Economic Forum's 2020 list of global leaders under 40, 85 percent of the people named held senior executive titles, were founders, or were government officials (Levin 2020). Most "leaders" who make these lists and are featured in the popular press are people with impressive titles who are at the apex of their organizations.

We won't argue that these individuals aren't leaders. However, they're not the only leaders on the planet. In fact, they aren't even *most* of the leaders. We've collected data from millions of people worldwide, and we can report, without a doubt, that there are leaders everywhere one looks. There are leaders in every profession, discipline, and field, in every type of organization and industry, every religion, and every country. You find them from young to old, and across every ethnic and cultural category. Leaders are not just found at the top of organizations; they abound at all levels. There are leaders outside formal organizations in neighborhoods, community associations, clubs, sports teams, schools, and families.

Titles are granted, and often easily so, but being a leader must be earned. You earn it not by your place in the organization but by your behavior. Through your behavior and the quality of your relationships with others, you gain recognition as a leader in the eyes of those around you.

Let's get something straight right from the start. Leadership is not a level in a hierarchy. It is not a title or a rank. It is not a position of power or a place of privilege. When you look up the word *leadership* in the dictionary, it does not start with an uppercase L.

What People Expect From Leaders

How, then, do you know if someone is a leader? The answer is relatively simple from a behavioral perspective: Is anyone following them? It's hard to imagine that anyone can be a leader without followers. Leadership is a relationship between those who aspire to lead and those who choose to follow. People choose, day in and day out, whether to follow and fully commit their talents, time, and energy. Leaders don't decide who leads. Followers do.

To better understand the dynamics of this relationship, we asked thousands of business and government executives: "What are the personal traits you look for and admire in a person you would willingly follow?" (Kouzes and Posner 2011). The keyword in this question is *willingly*. We wanted to know what people expected from an individual they would follow, not because they had to, but because they wanted to. In other words, what does it take to be the kind of leader others enthusiastically and voluntarily follow? Their answers generated hundreds of different values, traits, and characteristics (Posner and Schmidt 1984, 1986). Subsequent content analysis by independent judges, followed by further empirical analyses, reduced these items to a list of 20 expected characteristics.

We've now used this list to survey more than 150,000 people around the globe, asking them to indicate their top seven characteristics. The results, as shown in Table 2-1, have been

remarkable in their consistency over the years. More importantly, the data shows that someone must pass an essential "character test" before people are willing to grant them the designation of *leader*.

Table 2-1. Characteristics of Admired Leaders: Percentage of Respondents Selecting Each Characteristic

Characteristic	1987	1995	2002	2007	2012	2017	2023
Honest	83	88	88	89	89	84	87
Competent	67	63	66	68	69	66	68
Inspiring	58	68	65	69	69	66	54
Forward-looking	62	75	71	71	71	62	53
Dependable	33	32	33	34	35	39	46
Supportive	32	41	35	35	35	37	45
Intelligent	43	40	47	48	45	47	41
Broad-minded	37	40	40	35	38	40	38
Cooperative	25	28	28	25	27	31	36
Fair-minded	40	49	42	39	37	35	36
Ambitious	21	13	17	16	21	28	33
Straightforward	34	33	34	36	32	32	30
Caring	26	23	20	22	21	23	29
Loyal	11	11	14	18	19	18	21
Determined	17	17	23	25	26	22	19
Mature	23	13	21	5	14	17	17
Imaginative	34	28	23	17	16	17	14
Courageous	27	29	20	25	22	22	13
Self-controlled	13	5	8	10	11	10	12
Independent	10	5	6	4	5	5	6

Note: Because we asked people to select seven characteristics, the totals add up to more than 100 percent.

Source: Kouzes and Posner (2025). Contact John Wiley & Sons for permission to reproduce for educational purposes.

The Top Four Leadership Characteristics

While each of the top 20 characteristics listed in Table 2-1 has received votes, what is most evident and striking is that for more than four decades, only four qualities have consistently

received more than 50 percent of the votes. Despite all the dramatic changes in the world, what people look for most in a leader has been amazingly stable: We want our leaders to be honest, competent, inspiring, and forward-looking. Our studies also find that the ranking doesn't significantly vary across nationalities, cultures, ethnicities, organizational functions and hierarchies, genders, levels of education, or generations.

These characteristics—honest, competent, inspiring, and forward-looking—are embedded in what Melinda Jackson, corporate recruiter for a multinational technology company, told us about a leader she admired: "I immediately remember her deep knowledge of the work, clear vision for the future, incredible support and care for those around her, and her stark authenticity. She believed wholeheartedly in what we were doing and led fervently, encouraging even my most pessimistic co-workers to follow."

Let's examine why each of these characteristics is essential for creating a sustainable relationship between those willing to follow and those who aspire to lead others.

Honest

In every survey we've conducted, honesty is selected more often than any other leadership characteristic; overall, it emerges as the most critical factor in the leader-constituent relationship. The percentages vary, but the final ranking does not. First and foremost, people want to believe their leader is telling the truth.

It's clear that for people to follow someone willingly—whether in the boardroom, front office, production floor, or community—they first want to be sure that individual is worthy of their trust. They want to know they are truthful, ethical, and principled. No matter what the setting, people want to be fully confident in their leaders and believe that they are individuals of authentic character and solid integrity. This is a realization every leader must take to heart. "After all," Jennifer McRae, an engineer working for a major metropolitan city, told us, "Why would you want to follow someone if you suspect that they were lying or trying to trick you? Honesty is the basis of trust, and you must believe that what the leader says or knows is true."

Of all the qualities that people look for and admire in a leader, honesty is by far the most personal. Being truthful is the quality that can most enhance or damage personal reputations. Another reason that people want their leaders to be honest is because of how it reflects on them. If you follow someone universally viewed as having impeccable character and strong integrity, you will likely be viewed in the same way. By contrast, willingly following someone considered dishonest and unethical will tarnish your image.

"A failure of honesty poisons the team, damages the trust between people, and breaks down team cohesion," explained Anand Reddy, senior engineering manager with a global technology company. "Besides, no one wants to follow a leader who is not honest."

Competent

To enlist in a common cause, people must believe that their leader has the competence to guide them along the path to the future successfully. They must see the leader as capable and effective. We heard over and over again that "competence is important." Kevin Schultz, an assurance associate with a Big Five accounting firm, explained that "it is difficult to wholeheartedly follow someone who does not know what they are doing." If people doubt the leader's abilities, they will not readily enlist. Studies point out that when people perceive their leader as incompetent, they reject the individual and that person's position (Wang et al. 2005; Artz et al. 2016).

Leadership competence refers to the leader's track record and ability to get results. This kind of competence inspires confidence that the leader can guide the organization in the direction it needs to go. Another benefit, as Rebecca Sanchez, a local government budget analyst, pointed out, "I become a better follower because I have confidence that my leader knows what she is talking about and asking us to do."

However, we agree with Brian Dalton, a finance manager with a global payments company, who observes: "A leader isn't expected to be an expert in everything, because if they were, then why would they even need followers? Rather, a leader is expected to have a competent understanding of the organization and be able to recruit and ask instructive and insightful questions to those who are experts in their fields."

The type of competence demanded also varies with the leader's position and the organization's condition. For example, expect abilities in strategic planning and policymaking for those who hold officer-level positions. A leader on the frontline, or at the point of customer or client contact, typically must be more product competent than someone less engaged in directly providing services or making products.

Inspiring

People expect their leaders to be positive and optimistic about the future. Being enthusiastic and passionate about future possibilities gives others a stronger belief in those possibilities than someone who shows little or no emotion. People are more likely to believe

what you are saying if they sense that you genuinely believe it. "The worst kind of 'leader' from my experience," says Amber Willits, a marketing specialist at an integrated circuit design and manufacturing firm, "is someone who stands in front of a group and gives zero life and energy into their dream. Hopelessness and negativity follow from those kinds of messages. How can anyone feel motivated to perform their best if their leader does not provide words of encouragement, optimism, and excitement?"

It's not enough for a leader to have a dream. They must communicate that vision to encourage others to sign on for the duration. People long to find greater purpose and worth in their day-to-day working lives. Although the leader's enthusiasm, energy, and positive attitude may not change the content of the work, they certainly can make the context more fulfilling. Whatever the circumstances, when leaders breathe life into dreams and aspirations, people are much more willing to enlist in a common cause. Inspiring leadership speaks to people's need for meaning and purpose in life.

Leaders must uplift their constituents' spirits and give them hope before they will voluntarily do things they have never done before. Enthusiasm and excitement are essential, signaling the leader's commitment to pursuing a dream. Furthermore, being upbeat, positive, and optimistic offers people hope that the future can be brighter. This is crucial at any time, but leading with positive emotions is essential to moving people upward and forward in times of great uncertainty.

We echo the thoughts of Kathryn Trapani, an administrative coordinator for a university healthcare organization, who says that working to achieve a shared vision "necessitates that leaders get people to feel at the deepest level that by joining in the cause, their lives and those of others can be uplifted." Emotions are infectious, and positive emotions resonate throughout an organization and into relationships with other constituents.

Forward-Looking

People expect leaders to have a sense of direction and a concern for the organization's future. From marketing director Travis Cook's experience: "If a leader wants to rely on others to follow them, the leader needs to tell them where they are going and get everyone heading in the same direction." Whether that future is referred to as a vision, dream, calling, goal, mission, or personal agenda, the message is clear: Leaders must know where they're going if they expect others to willingly join them on the journey. They must have

a point of view about the future they envision for their organizations, and they need to be able to connect that point of view to the hopes and dreams of their constituents.

Gloria Leung, a banking loan officer, told us that because her most-admired leader was forward-looking, "this provided us the capacity to walk a path toward the future with great confidence and fostered shared values because we all knew where we were heading."

Credibility Is the Foundation

Honest, competent, inspiring, and forward-looking are the essential characteristics people expect and want in a leader—someone whose direction they willingly follow. This finding has remained constant for more than four decades of economic growth and recession; the birth of the internet; globalization of the economy; the explosion of mobile accessibility; the rise in terrorism, migration, and refugee crises; the expansion of AI; and an ever-changing political environment. Whether you believe today's leaders are true to these ideal qualities is another matter, but what people would like from their leaders has remained constant.

This list of four qualities is helpful in and of itself for anyone who aspires to lead others, but the research reveals an even more profound implication. These key characteristics make up what communication experts call "source credibility." In assessing the believability of sources of information—whether those sources are newscasters, salespeople, physicians, priests, business executives, military officers, politicians, or civic leaders—researchers typically use three criteria: perceived trustworthiness, expertise, and dynamism. The more highly people are rated on these criteria, the more credible they're perceived as sources of information (Hovland et al.1953; McCroskey1966; Berlo et al. 1969; and Cialdini 2007).

Notice how remarkably similar trustworthiness, expertise, and dynamism are to the essential qualities of leadership we have already discussed. When we link theory to the data, the striking conclusion is that people want to follow leaders who, more than anything, are *credible*. In short, credibility is the foundation of leadership. People must be able to believe in their leaders. To follow a leader willingly, people must believe that the leader's word can be trusted, that they are passionate and enthusiastic about their work, and that they have the knowledge and skill to lead.

The consistency and pervasiveness of these findings resulted in the development of the Kouzes-Posner First Law of Leadership: If you don't believe in the messenger, you won't believe the message.

Leaders must be diligent in guarding their credibility. Their capacity to take strong stands, challenge the status quo, and point in new directions depends on their credibility. Regardless of the era in which they lead or the positions they hold, leaders must never take their credibility for granted. If you ask others to follow you toward an uncertain future—a future that may not be realized in their lifetime—and if the journey requires sacrifice, then people must believe in you. All the programs to develop leaders, all the courses and classes, and all the books, blogs, AI coaching apps, and websites offering tips and techniques are meaningless unless the people who are supposed to follow believe in the person who's supposed to lead.

Why Credibility Matters

You might be thinking, "I know people in positions of power, and I know enormously wealthy people, yet I don't find them particularly credible. Does credibility matter? Does it *really* matter?" These are valid questions.

When we surveyed the direct reports of people in leadership positions, we used a behavioral measure of credibility and asked them to think about the extent to which their immediate manager exhibited credibility-enhancing behaviors (Kouzes and Posner 2011). The data shows that when people perceive their immediate manager to have high credibility, they're significantly likely to:

- Be proud to tell others they're part of the organization.
- Feel a strong sense of team spirit.
- See their values as consistent with those of the organization.
- Feel attached and committed to the organization.
- Have a sense of ownership of the organization.

What happens when people perceive their manager to have low credibility? They are significantly more likely to indicate that they:

- Work hard only if carefully watched.
- Are motivated primarily by money.
- Say good things about the organization publicly but criticize it privately.
- Look for another job when the organization experiences problems.
- Feel unsupported and unappreciated.

These findings about the significant influence of the leader's credibility on employee attitudes and behavior provide clear mandates for organizational leaders. Credibility makes a

difference, and leaders must take this to heart. An employee's loyalty, commitment, energy, and productivity depend on whether they perceive their leader as credible. To underscore that point, consider for a moment what researchers studying soldiers serving in hot combat zones discovered about what it takes to influence people to risk injury and even death to achieve the organization's objectives. Soldiers' perceptions of their leader's credibility determined the extent of influence the leader could exercise (Sweeney et al. 2009). And this was in a traditionally hierarchical, command-and-control environment. Consider what that means for your organization: Leadership credibility comes first, and followers come second.

Having established that credibility is the foundation of leadership, let's examine the actions leaders take to develop and sustain credible relationships with those they aspire to guide and motivate. What do leaders do when they want to mobilize others to struggle for shared aspirations? What behaviors are essential to making extraordinary things happen in organizations?

Being at Your Personal Best as a Leader

As with most things in life, experience is often the best teacher when it comes to learning how to lead. People learn what to do by trying it themselves and watching others. The problem is that not all of what's done or observed is effective or appropriate behavior. When recommending what leaders should and should not do, it's imperative to base leadership practices on the best of what people do and observe—the actions that represent the highest standards of excellence.

That was the objective when we first began our leadership research more than four decades ago. We wanted answers to a straightforward question: "What do people do when they are at their personal best as leaders?" (Kouzes and Posner 2023). To get at this understanding, we initially collected more than 500 case studies through the development of the personal-best leadership experience questionnaire, which asked about experiences when people perceived they had set their own standard of excellence. The respondents could select a recent experience or one from their past. They could have been the official person in charge or emerged as an informal leader. They could have held a paid position or volunteered in a workplace or a nonwork setting. The experience could have occurred when they were part of a corporation, agency, community group, professional association, sports team, school, or working from home. The timing and context were up to the individuals answering the questionnaire. Their responses just needed to be something they thought was a time when they were operating at their best as a leader.

From the beginning of our research until now (having collected more than 5,000 case studies), we have found exemplary leadership everywhere we look. We've seen it in for-profit firms and nonprofits, agriculture and mining, manufacturing and utilities, technology and financial services, education and healthcare, government and military, and arts and community services. The leaders have been employees and volunteers, young and old, and women and men who reside in every city, dozens of countries, and serve in a variety of functions and organizations. Leadership knows no racial or religious bounds, no ethnic or cultural borders. One of the greatest myths about leadership is that some people have it, while some don't have what it takes. A corollary myth is that if you don't have it, then you can't learn it. Neither could be further from empirical truth.

The inescapable conclusions from analyzing thousands of personal-best leadership experiences are that everyone has a story to tell and leadership is an identifiable set of skills and abilities that's available to anyone. This data challenges the myths that you'll find leadership only at the highest levels of organizations and society, and that it's reserved for a handful of charismatic individuals. The notion that only a few great people can lead others to greatness is just plain wrong.

A pattern of leadership behavior has emerged from the examples we gathered in interviews and written cases. We saw common themes in what people did when performing at their best as leaders, which led us to formulate a behavioral framework of exemplary leadership. We subsequently subjected our qualitative findings to a series of quantitative studies, with the creation and development of the Leadership Practices Inventory, amassing an empirical database that currently includes nearly 5 million people from more than 120 countries.

The Five Practices of Exemplary Leadership

People's actions to make extraordinary things happen are much more similar than different, regardless of context. We find that individuals who guide others along pioneering journeys follow similar paths regardless of the times or settings. Although each experience in our data was unique in its expression, several identifiable behaviors and actions made a marked difference. When making extraordinary things happen in organizations, leaders engage in what we refer to as The Five Practices of Exemplary Leadership:

- Model the Way
- Inspire a Shared Vision

- Challenge the Process
- Enable Others to Act
- Encourage the Heart

These practices are not the private property of the people we studied, nor do they belong to a few select shining stars. They are available to anyone who accepts the leadership challenge of guiding people and organizations to places they have never been.

The Five Practices framework has passed the test of time. While the context of leadership has changed dramatically over the years, the content of leadership has mostly stayed the same. Leaders' fundamental behaviors and actions are as relevant today as they were when we began our study of exemplary leadership.

This sentiment from Erica Larson, an IT manager with a global technology company, is echoed by many of the people we've interviewed. Reflecting on her leadership journey, she said, "This framework taught me to think about leadership opportunities as boundless and boundaryless to the point that I no longer think of leadership in the traditional sense of the word but as an art and a love story shaped by and based on who I am as a person and what I stand for, aside from any position or title I may have."

Model the Way

When we asked people in our study to tell us how they knew leaders were credible—how they would define credibility behaviorally—they responded with phrases such as, "They practice what they preach," "They walk the talk," and "Their actions are consistent with their words." The most common response was, "They do what they say they will do."

There's a consistent message here. When deciding whether someone is credible, people first listen to the words they say and then watch their actions. Leaders must be role models for the behaviors they expect of others if they want to sustain their credibility. We refer to this practice as Model the Way, and it consists of two central commitments:

- Leaders must be clear about the values and enduring principles that guide their decisions and actions.
- Leaders must set an example for others of how to behave in ways that are consistent with those values.

The initial step in becoming an exemplary leader, then, is understanding who you are and what you stand for. Realizing this, Darryl Collins, a deputy with a public defender's office, told us you must "take a hard look at who you are as a person, warts and all, and how you want to

lead your constituents." Leadership is personal, and no technique, title, or position can inspire anyone to willingly follow you if you are unclear about your guiding principles and how to voice those values. In our surveys, we find that being in touch with who you are is central to being assessed as an effective leader by constituents. Seventy-eight percent of constituents who report their leader as being very clear about their values and leadership philosophy also strongly agree that this leader is effective, versus less than 1 percent who indicate that their leader is seldom clear about what they stand for.

That said, the leader's values aren't the only values that matter. Leaders don't speak just for themselves. They also speak for the team and organization; in every team, organization, and community, others feel strongly about matters of principle.

As a leader, it is your responsibility to honor and appreciate the diversity of your constituents and understand their values, to build shared values that act as the foundation of genuine, long-lasting relationships. Initiating a dialogue about values with your direct reports and colleagues is essential in finding consensus around a team contract that defines shared values, principles, and standards. This contract clarifies what standards you have as a unit and how they will be measured, while also opening a dialogue on how to be accountable to maintain these agreed-upon shared values.

Once team members are clear about and agree on their shared values, the "talk" that you must "walk" becomes evident. Eloquent speeches about shared values aren't nearly enough. Your deeds are far more important when determining how serious you are about what you say. Your words and deeds must be consistent, and as the leader, you must go first through daily actions that demonstrate your commitment.

Seeking feedback about how your behaviors affect other people's performance is also essential for sustaining alignment between your words and deeds. Obtaining frequent input from others and then listening and applying what people say will give you a more balanced perspective on your leadership. Plus, setting the example of seeking feedback and being receptive to it increases your constituents' ability to be receptive to your honest feedback.

Ninety-nine percent of direct reports who always observe their leader Model the Way would favorably recommend that individual to their colleagues as a good leader. Just being above the frequency average on this leadership practice gives someone a 28 percent bump in being recommended by direct reports as a good leader over those below the mean. There's only a one in 25 likelihood of being assessed as an effective leader by direct reports for those leaders seen as seldom Modeling the Way.

Inspire a Shared Vision

People describe their personal-best leadership experiences as times when they imagine exciting and meaningful futures for their organizations. They reported actions such as, "I told the team that we need everyone's commitment to make our vision a reality, to reach our dreams, and to make them happen."

One respondent said, "The more I imagined what was possible, the more clearly I could describe what the future might hold in store for all of us." Another said, "We had to be aligned so that we could find a common purpose as a team going forward." They wanted to create something that no one else had ever made before. They had visions and dreams of what could be, absolute faith in their dreams, and confidence in their abilities to make those extraordinary things happen. Every organization, every social movement, begins with a vision; it is the force that energizes the creation of the future. Leaders envision the future by imagining exciting and ennobling possibilities.

As with your values, you must articulate a vision of the future before enlisting others to pursue a course of action. You must be passionate about your convictions and the direction you want to pursue. At the same time, just as with values, it's not only your vision that matters. A shared vision of the future energizes collective action, as acknowledged by Manoocheer Bala, a customer service manager with a large online retailer: "A mistake that I have repeatedly made as a leader is that I think I have to come up with the vision for the team when, in reality, my job as a leader is to liberate the vision of my constituents in a way where shared values about our future are identified by reflecting on the learning from the past and where we are now at present."

Put your constituents front and center in the dialogue of how a shared vision of the future is shaped. Doing so taps into people's inner desire to make a difference and strengthens their intrinsic motivation. Our data shows that constituents strongly believe they are making a difference in direct proportion to how frequently their leaders show them how long-term interests can be realized by enlisting in a shared vision. The experience of Helena Brown, the HR director of a public utility company, echoes this finding: "I organized a forum where our program's milestones and their execution were defined by the team, knowing that when my constituents are part of creating the bigger picture, they feel like their work is impactful and worth doing for a larger purpose." She went on to explain that this "created for the team a sense of accountability that can only be achieved when your constituents are part of developing the shared vision."

When you truly understand and take to heart the hopes and dreams of those you are working with, you can breathe life into the aspirations of others. You can forge a unity of purpose by explaining and showing how and why the dream is for the common good. You ignite passion in others by expressing contagious enthusiasm for the compelling vision of the group, communicating zeal through vivid language and an expressive style.

The evidence for this is clear. Less than 3 percent of direct reports—whose observations about the frequency with which their leaders inspire a Shared Vision place them in the bottom quintile—strongly believe that this leader is effective. In contrast, more than 50 percent of leaders in the top quintile of the Inspire a Shared Vision distribution are evaluated as effective leaders by their direct reports.

Challenge the Process

Every single personal-best leadership case we collected involved some change from the status quo. No one claimed to achieve a personal best by keeping things the same or doing what had always been done. They said, "I needed to change the business-as-usual climate by finding ways to experiment and learn." "We began by brainstorming what we would change if anything were possible." "We found that big things are done by doing lots of small things." This is why leaders Challenge the Process.

Challenge is the crucible for greatness. It provides the context in which adversity and vision interact to create something new. When at their best, leaders are pioneers. They are willing to step out into the unknown and continuously search for opportunities by seizing the initiative and looking outward for innovative ways to improve.

In our research, the more frequently leaders were reported to be taking initiative and responding to change, the more intensely their constituents agreed they would recommend that person to their colleagues as an effective leader. When leaders were seen engaging in this leadership behavior only once in a while or even less, less than one in 10 respondents indicated they would provide such a recommendation.

But leaders aren't the only creators or originators of new products, services, or processes. In fact, it's more likely that they're not. Innovation comes more from listening than telling. Product and service innovations come from customers, clients, vendors, people in the labs, and people on the frontlines; process innovations come from people doing the work. Sometimes a dramatic external event thrusts an organization into a radically new condition. Leaders must

constantly look outside themselves and their organizations for new and innovative products, processes, and services.

Be mindful that doing something new requires methodical experimentation and will result in many setbacks, even failures, before achieving success. An exemplary leader needs to appreciate and accept failures as learning experiences—and as progress. Demonstrating a learning mindset builds competence and promotes the same attitude among your constituents. "In my experience, the most meaningful and successful innovative changes have been initiated and made possible from the bottom up," Rachel McCormick, a product development manager, told us. "As a matter of fact, the whole financial and administrative structure of my organization was made possible thanks to my constituents' ideas and our ability to celebrate failures in parallel to wins."

Another way you can deal with potential risks and failures is to approach change through incremental steps. When piled on top of one another, little victories build the confidence that people can meet even the most significant challenges. Making those victories possible strengthens everyone's commitment to the long-term future.

You and your team need to be looking for opportunities to grow and develop. Create a judgment-free environment that encourages thinking outside the box and considers positive and negative experiences to be stepping-stones to success.

Enable Others to Act

Exemplary leaders know they can't do it alone. Grand dreams don't become significant realities through the actions of a single person. Achieving greatness requires a team effort, solid trust, enduring relationships, group collaboration, and individual accountability. Leaders must Enable Others to Act to get extraordinary things done in organizations.

When reviewing his personal-best experience, Sushma Bhope, program manager of a pioneering supplier of supplement products, concluded that "no one could have done this alone. It was essential to be open to all ideas and give everyone a voice in the decision-making process. The one guiding principle on the project was that the team was larger than any individual on the team."

Leaders foster collaboration. They build teams that go far beyond a few direct reports or close confidants. You must engage everyone who makes the project work, and, in some way, all who must live with the results. As the need for more interorganizational cooperation

grows and work-from-anywhere becomes more common, exemplary leaders find creative ways to connect with more diverse constituents.

Trust is essential for collaboration and extraordinary achievements. To obtain the highest level of performance and collaboration from your constituents, you must create a two-way stream of trust. As a leader, you must trust your constituents if you want them to trust you. However, building trust is not simple; you must believe in your team's skills and create an environment of empathy and respect. You must let go and empower others to enact the shared vision.

Consider the insightful reflection of Maria Morena, a retail store manager: "In my professional career, there have been many times when all I want to do is control and have my team do things my way, thinking that it is the correct way, but in every instance that I have pulled back, I have learned that my way is not necessarily the best way. When you trust your team and give them the autonomy to accomplish the shared vision, wonderful things happen."

Leaders make it possible for others to do good work. They know that those who are expected to produce results must feel a sense of personal power and ownership. Leaders work to make people feel strong, capable, and committed. They enable others to act not by hoarding their power but by giving it away. Exemplary leaders strengthen everyone's capacity to deliver on the promises they make.

The data shows that a feeling of camaraderie and team spirit is strongly related to how leaders ensure people grow and develop in their jobs. Less than 8 percent of constituents report a sense of team spirit when they indicate that their leaders only sometimes, at best, take these actions.

Strengthening the people around you, building their competence, and fostering their confidence shows that you trust them. As their coach, you must openly express your belief that they can accomplish whatever they set their minds to and support them with the necessary resources, training, and development. When delegating responsibility, let others know you've got their backs and provide the resources and authority they need to make things happen.

Encourage the Heart

The climb to the top of any new and challenging endeavor is arduous and steep, and it's not hard to become exhausted, frustrated, and disenchanted. People indicated in their personal-best leadership experiences that they had to Encourage the Heart of those they were working with to carry on, especially when they might have been tempted to give up.

They said things such as: "You have to show people that you care about them as people and how they are capable of doing a lot more than they think," "Praise and encouragement are the best gifts because people need to have their hard work and efforts acknowledged, to know that they are making a difference," and "We were generous with compliments and this allowed us to feel good about ourselves, and when you feel good, you are more productive." An essential part of a leader's job is recognizing contributions by showing appreciation for individual excellence.

Genuine acts of caring, whether in dramatic gestures or simple actions, uplift people's spirits and renew commitment. These acts can be one-to-one or involve many people. Caring can come through informal channels or through the formal hierarchy. Over the years, we've seen thousands of examples of individual recognition and group celebration, from handwritten thank-you notes to marching bands and biopic video ceremonies. Anne Moser, senior vice president of a corporate dining company, learned how effective those actions are during her personal-best leadership experience: "Celebrate and give the team and the individual members proper recognition. Acknowledging an accomplishment is a great way to demonstrate the value of their contributions. It builds their confidence, and they will want to help out even more on the next project."

Demonstrating your confidence in others through recognition and celebrations should not look like a one-size-fits-all gesture, but rather an experience that speaks to the heart and uniqueness of your constituent. Josh Evans, a fire battalion chief, expressed it this way: "Many times in my life, I made the mistake of rewarding people the same way, missing the fact that we are all moved by a different compass. Your duty as an exemplary leader is to know the compass and be creative with the incentive you provide your constituents."

Keep in mind that recognition and celebration aren't about fun and games, although both abound when leaders encourage the hearts of their constituents. They are about creating a spirit of community and celebrating your values and victories. Public displays of encouragement are valuable because this is how you visibly reinforce what's important and show appreciation for actions that support the shared values. Whether striving to raise quality standards, stressing the importance of customer care, strengthening resilience in recovering from setbacks, or experimenting with groundbreaking innovations, people must see the benefit of aligning behavior with cherished values.

Sharing stories about how the actions of a team member contribute to meaningful outcomes reinforces how everyone can make a difference. When celebrations and rituals authentically

support shared values and come from the heart, you build a strong sense of collective identity and spirit, which can carry your group through challenging times. The data also shows that when leaders publicly recognize people who exemplify a commitment to shared values, everyone feels appreciated and valued by the organization.

Maintaining strong morale and enthusiasm for reaching the highest heights requires a psychologically safe environment where risk-taking and leadership are encouraged. Be generous in recognizing and celebrating your constituents' contributions with personalized gestures that inspire behaviors aligned with shared values and vision. Our data shows that few people (less than 6 percent) trust leaders who fail to express confidence in the abilities of those with whom they are working. Nearly 80 percent of constituents strongly agree they trust their leader when they very frequently experience that leader expressing their confidence in others.

The New Normal

In reflecting on the legacy of the COVID-19 pandemic and today's continuing international turmoil, Peter Anderson, a director within the European Union, noted, "The Five Practices of Exemplary Leadership are not meant just for good times. The practices strengthen our abilities to be stronger, bolder leaders during times of uncertainty, unpredictability, and precariousness."

These days, little is normal if *normal* means you can predict what will happen tomorrow based on what happened yesterday. Normal now encompasses ambiguity, uncertainty, and disruption. Normal means having to act before knowing all the facts or options and being willing and able to adapt quickly to changing circumstances.

Leadership has played an essential part in dealing with the uncertainties and discontinuities associated with public health crises, economic turbulence, social and political unrest, and global conflicts. Examples of strong and weak leadership abound, but leaders have been an influential part of every story. History tells the same tale.

Leadership is not a fad that will go out of fashion next season—and neither will our challenges. There are new adversities just over the horizon. Times change, problems change, and technologies change. However, one thing remains certain: The need for leadership during challenging times will endure. It is the work of leaders to inspire people to do things differently, to struggle against uncertain odds, and to persevere toward a misty image of a better

future. Today, we have only faint clues about the future, but without leadership, we will not be able to envision or attain the best possibilities.

Peak Performance for Leaders

The stories and the actions people describe in their personal-best leadership experiences reinforce the importance of the qualities people expect from their leaders. These stories and actions are complementary perspectives on the same subject. When performing at their peak, leaders are doing more than just getting results. They're also living up to their constituents' behavioral expectations, underscoring that the relationship is one of service to a purpose and to people.

Honesty is essential if a leader is to Model the Way. The leadership practice of Inspire a Shared Vision requires being forward-looking and, of course, inspiring others. When leaders Challenge the Process, they also enhance the perception that they're dynamic. Trustworthiness, often a synonym for honesty, plays a significant role in how leaders Enable Others to Act, as does a leader's competency. Likewise, leaders who recognize and celebrate significant contributions and accomplishments—who Encourage the Heart—increase their constituents' understanding of and commitment to their organization's vision and values. When leaders demonstrate capacity in all Five Practices, they show others they have the competence and character to make extraordinary things happen.

While we can demonstrate that leadership is something you and others can do, becoming an exemplary leader begins with the belief that everyone is capable of leadership and that you can be a better leader than you are right now because you can improve and strengthen your skills and abilities. You must also believe that your actions matter and that leadership makes a difference.

Learning about leadership, however, is not the same as leading. Deciding to be an exemplary leader is not the same as becoming one. Leading is doing, and you must do leadership to be a leader.

Where do you start to become an even better leader? Make leadership development a daily habit. Make a plan for where and when you will practice leadership—then, put it on your calendar and track your progress. Do something every day to learn more about leading and put those lessons into practice.

Leadership is in the moment. Many moments offer an opportunity for you to choose to lead and make a difference. Each one serves up the prospect of contributing to a lasting legacy. We urge you to make the most of these moments. At this handbook's website

(TD.org/leadershiphandbook), you will find a downloadable document with questions you can use to engage in conversations about leadership.

Actions You Can Take Now

Consider a few practical ways in which you, ideally with the coaching and support of talent development professionals, can apply the key messages of sustaining credibility and demonstrating The Five Practices of Exemplary Leadership:

- **Create your personal credo.** Review the values or principles you believe should guide your team's decisions and actions. Remember what we said about the importance of clarity of personal values, and take the time to express them in your voice; don't just copy the organization's values.
- **Ask three questions.** At the end of each day, ask yourself:
  - What have I done today that demonstrated my personal commitment to shared values?
  - What have I done today that might have shown a lack of commitment?
  - What can I do tomorrow to make sure I set a good example?
- **Discuss your future vision.** Set aside time every week to discuss the future with your colleagues. Share your vision of the future in a staff meeting, a Zoom call, a working lunch, a keynote speech, or a conversation over coffee. Explore how this resonates with the hopes, dreams, and aspirations of others.
- **Continue to learn.** Identify successful people inside and outside your organization who excel at Challenging the Process. Interview them about what they do to promote innovation, experimentation, and learning.
- **Encourage others.** Treat every interaction as an opportunity to build someone's capacity. Ask yourself: What can I do in this encounter so the other person leaves feeling more capable by the end of our interaction? Then, do it.
- **Share good news stories.** Regularly tell positive stories in public about people in your organization who exemplify the vision and values in action. Positive storytelling is a very effective way of showing appreciation and communicating positive examples of the behaviors you're looking for.
- **Create additional ideas.** Add at least three other ways to apply the lessons in this chapter and keep making extraordinary things happen!

Continue Your Development

Many great books can help you continue your development as an exemplary leader. For additional ideas consider reading:

- *Grit: The Power of Passion and Perseverance* by Angela Duckworth
- *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success* by Carol S. Dweck
- *Think Again: The Power of Knowing What You Don't Know* by Adam Grant
- *The Leadership Challenge: How to Make Extraordinary Things Happen in Organizations* by James M. Kouzes and Barry Z. Posner

About the Authors

James M. Kouzes and **Barry Z. Posner, PhD,** have been working together for more than 40 years, studying leaders, researching leadership, conducting leadership development seminars, and serving in leadership roles in various organizations. They are co-authors of the bestselling book, *The Leadership Challenge*, which has sold more than 3 million copies worldwide and is available in more than 22 languages. The book has won numerous awards, including the Critics' Choice Award from the nation's book review editors and book-of-the-year awards from the American Council of Healthcare Executives and *Fast Company*. *The Leadership Challenge* is listed in The Top 100 Business Books of All Time as one of the top 10 books on leadership. Jim and Barry have also co-authored more than a dozen other award-winning leadership books.

Jim's career in talent development spans more than 50 years and has included serving as president, CEO, and chair of the Tom Peters Company; director of the Executive Development Center, Leavey School of Business at Santa Clara University; and executive director of the Joint Center for Human Services Development at San Jose State University. He's also held appointments as a Fellow of the Doerr Institute for New Leaders, Rice University, and the Dean's Executive Fellow of Leadership, Leavey School of Business. *The Wall Street Journal* hailed Jim as one of the 12 best executive educators in the US. Jim has also received the Thought Leadership Award from the ISA-Association of Learning Providers and the Golden Gavel, the highest honor awarded by Toastmasters International. He can be reached at jim@kouzes.com.

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About the Editor



Elaine Biech, CPTD fellow, believes excellence isn't optional. Her passion is helping others achieve their passion. She specializes in maximizing individual, team, and organizational effectiveness using her expertise in organization development, training, and consulting. Elaine has designed and delivered thousands of training courses and apps. Highlights of her career include designing and implementing the first process improvement programs for The Newport News Shipbuilding Company and McDonald's, the first creativity program for Hershey Chocolate, and, in 1985, one of the world's first virtual training sessions for NASA.

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Elaine has been an active member of the Association for Talent Development since 1982, during which time she's served on the national board of directors and designed the association's first training certificate program. She is ATD's inaugural CPTD Fellow designee and served as the principal author of the first and second editions of ATD's *TDBoK Guide*. A talent development thought leader, Elaine is the recipient of ATD's 1992 Torch Award, 2004 Volunteer-Staff Partnership Award, 2006 Bliss Memorial Award, and the 2020 Distinguished Contribution to Talent Development Award. She also received ISA's 2001 Spirit Award, 2012 Outstanding Contributor Award, and 2022 Thought Leader Award, as well as Wisconsin's Women's Mentor Award. She also sponsors several scholarship funds. Elaine currently serves on the board of Governors for the Center for Creative Leadership.

She stays busy mentoring new leaders and deciding what book to write next.

About ATD

The Association for Talent Development (ATD) is the world's largest association dedicated to those who develop talent in organizations. Serving a global community of members, customers, and international business partners in more than 100 countries, ATD champions the importance of learning and training by setting standards for the talent development profession.

Our customers and members work in public and private organizations in every industry sector. Since ATD was founded in 1943, the talent development field has expanded significantly to meet the needs of global businesses and emerging industries. Through the Talent Development Capability Model, education courses, certifications and credentials, memberships, industry-leading events, research, and publications, we help talent development professionals build their personal, professional, and organizational capabilities to meet new business demands with maximum impact and effectiveness.

One of the cornerstones of ATD's intellectual foundation, ATD Press offers insightful and practical information on talent development, training, and professional growth. ATD Press publications are written by industry thought leaders and offer anyone who works with adult learners the best practices, academic theory, and guidance necessary to move the profession forward.

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