The Student Leadership Challenge: Five Practices for Exemplary Leaders

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James M. Kouzes and Barry Z. Posner; The Student Leadership Challenge: Five Practices for Exemplary Leaders.
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As student development professionals, I believe it is safe to assert that we desire to passionately, knowledgably, and effectively lead the student groups and organizations for which we are responsible. We spend hours training and mentoring the student leaders with whom many of us work so closely. As semesters stretch into years, an observant eye gathers a few tips and tricks to offer these student leaders, best practices from what has worked well and what has failed miserably in the past. For many of us, it is often difficult to find sufficient time for the professional development that could help provide more than this anecdotal information to help our student leaders increase their leadership skills. If we are able to create this time for some scholarly reading, we often lack the freedom within our schedules to translate this literature into a form relevant to our student leaders. While the heart of such theories may not foundationally change when applied to student populations, the communication styles and points of application for the current generation of college students can be wholly different than those directed to professionals.

James Kouzes and Barry Posner's *The Student Leadership Challenge* helps to fill the gap of relating a tried-and-true model of leadership to today's generation of college students. *The Student Leadership Challenge* is written to student leaders—students who lead students—with the goal of providing the same model of leadership found in Kouzes and Posner's *The Leadership Challenge* in a more college student-friendly package.

As with their model originally developed throughout the 1980s, *The Student Leadership Challenge* contains five practices correlated to exemplary leadership and is based on "personal-best leadership experiences." For this student version, Kouzes and Posner refocus their original research at student leaders with the help of the *Student Leadership Practices Inventory* (*SLPI*). The authors illustrate the five practices by weaving their narrative around many stories of real-life student testimonials that demonstrate the five practices in action. Kouzes and Posner's *Five Practices for Exemplary Leaders*, which were identified through their original research and confirmed with use of the SLPI, are: "Model the Way," "Inspire a Shared Vision," "Challenge the Process," "Enable Others to Act," and "Encourage the Heart."

First, "Model the Way" speaks to the process of determining and defining personal values and beliefs in order to set a direction for others to follow. As personal values shape the organizational values, leaders set the example by holding to these core values in both word and deed. A leader's example is seen in how and where resources, time, and attention are spent. Paying careful attention to signals sent to constituents further communicates what is important and thereby allows a leader to more effectively hold constituents responsible for the shared values of the organization.

As the second practice, an exemplary leader "Inspire[s] a Shared Vision" that is based on organizational values. This vision, which should be rooted in relationship with the other members of the organization, encapsulates the possibilities of where the

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organization could be in the future. It is also important that this be a shared vision, developed as something that others desire to be associated with, and that helps members of the constituency reach personal goals. Such buy-in will ease the process of enlisting others to the cause. Specifically, communication of purpose, especially with full use of emotions, is critical to enlisting others.

The third practice deals with the change inherent in leadership. Exemplary leaders challenge the status quo while searching for opportunities. While "Challeng[ing] the Process," ideas for innovation are often found from looking outside of the group. New ideas are appropriately encouraged, and innovation leads to experimentation as mistakes and failures are used to promote learning. As a group or organization grows and changes, it is important for a leader to create a series of smaller, more manageable goals, dividing the larger organizational vision into a series of obtainable, yet challenging, victories for the constituents.

Exemplary leaders use the fourth practice, "Enable Others to Act," by establishing trust, listening to others, fostering collaboration, and strengthening others. A leader recognizes that a title or position does not make him or her more important than anyone else within the organization; trust leads to action. Providing others with the opportunity to use their discretion within a structure of accountability creates ownership. Similarly, sharing knowledge, information, skills, and resources stimulates confidence.

The final practice of exemplary leaders is to "Encourage the Heart." Kouzes and Posner are quick to distinguish that this is not the last step of a process, but rather a practice that should be ongoing throughout the day-to-day operations of the organization. With expectations set high to bring out the best from the organizational members, a leader should regularly recognize contributions. Encouraging positive feedback communicates to a constituency that the leader cares about the group members and values their effort. This furthers the trust relationship and spurs members to give their all. Beyond personal encouragement, it is important to also celebrate as a group. Group ceremonies and celebrations are opportunities to renew commitments and reinforce specific behaviors that enhance group values.

Kouzes and Posner's model is written in light of several basic assumptions. Primarily the authors approach the subject from the viewpoint that leadership is learned. This assumption implies that leadership is a behavior that anyone can do, and upon which can be improved. This leads into the second assumption that leadership development is primarily self development. The authors assert that as leaders discover and define what they care about and value, they strengthen their ability to lead others. Finally, Kouzes and Posner emphasize that leadership is not about a position or title; leadership is the responsibility of everyone. Exemplary leadership is foundationally rooted in relationships, and not exclusively within a top-down structure. The authors assert that a leader establishes credibility through such relationships by means of his or her actions.

As this text is essentially a rewrite of their original work, Kouzes and Posner provide students with a more palatable version of their established leadership model. At less than half of the length of the original work, *The Student Leadership Challenge* is one that students should find as an easily manageable read with to-the-point payoffs. While this composition is not a revolutionary way to look at leadership, the packaging is such to create a valuable tool for our student leaders. With sections for reflection following the explanation of each practice, student leaders will be on their way to discovering and defining personal values, leadership aspirations, and leadership styles.

The one item of disappointment that I have with Kouzes and Posner's work is within their assumptions. The authors stress the importance of a leader's credibility that is derived from his or her actions, but Kouzes and Posner fail to mention personal motivation or character. If the Love within us makes a difference, then our actions should be a manifestation of that Love. In this case actions may be the tangible measurement of the soul. However, for followers of Christ, the driving factor of credibility should not point back to self, but in the end, should point to the Love that really makes a difference.

In general, I would recommend this book to student leaders. As a book for personal study, I would hope for more in-depth exploration of several topics within the text, but in fairness, this book is aimed at student leaders, not professional staff who lead students. With the interactive sections in the book, this could be a good tool for use as a part of student leadership training or as part of a leadership development course or seminar.

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