

# LEADERSHIP BEGINS WITH AN INNER JOURNEY

*James M. Kouzes and Barry Z. Posner*

Everything you will ever do as a leader is based on one audacious assumption. It's the assumption that you matter. Before you can lead others you have to lead yourself and believe that you can have a positive impact on others. You have to believe that your words can inspire and your actions can move others. You have to believe that what you do counts for something. If you don't, you won't even try. Leadership begins with you.

The quest for leadership, therefore, is first an inner quest to discover who you are and what you care about, and it's through this process of self-examination that you find the awareness needed to lead. Self-confidence is really awareness of and faith in your own powers, and these powers become clear and strong only as you work to identify and develop them. The mastery of the art of leadership comes with the mastery of the self, and so developing leadership is a process of developing the self.

Melissa Poe, a fourth grader in Nashville, Tennessee, became very concerned about the natural environment and the kind of world she and her friends might live

in if people didn't start paying attention to their everyday actions. After seeing a television program about pollution that portrayed a very scary future, Melissa asked the question, "Will the future be a safe place to live in when I get older?" She decided she had to do something about it. That night she wrote a letter to the president, but Melissa knew the pollution problem wouldn't wait. At home she and her family started recycling, turning lights and faucets off when they weren't in use, and planting trees. Melissa wrote more letters to newspapers, television stations, and more politicians. Melissa also started a club, called Kids F.A.C.E. (Kids For a Clean Environment) so that her friends, who'd been asking how they could help, could do projects together like writing letters, planting trees, and picking up litter. "We knew we were doing small things, but we also knew it took a bunch of small things to make a big difference," she told us.

When after several weeks she still hadn't heard back from the president, Melissa, realizing he was a busy man, felt she needed to do more to get him to see her letter. She decided to make her letter bigger so he

couldn't miss it. She called up a billboard company in her home town and asked if they would put up a billboard with her letter to the president. The company donated that billboard and also connected her with other billboard companies, and in a matter of six months, over 250 billboards were put up all over the United States, at least one in each state and one just a mile from the White House.

Almost immediately, Melissa began receiving letters from other kids who were as concerned as she was about the environment. They wanted to help. Just six months after she began her journey to get people's attention about the environment, Melissa appeared on the *Today Show* to tell her story. It is here that Kids F.A.C.E. grew from a local club to a national organization. Starting with just six members at her elementary school, Kids F.A.C.E. grew to more than 2,000 club chapters in 22 countries and more than 350,000 members before Melissa, at age 17, handed over the reins to two 15-year-olds, saying she was too old for the job. (Today there are 500,000 members.)

Is Melissa a leader? Can someone at age 9 or 15 demonstrate the practices of exemplary leadership? Aren't those mainly abilities reserved for people in senior positions in big-time organizations?

Yes, yes, and no. Yes, Melissa is a leader. Yes, you can demonstrate leadership at any age. No, leadership is not about some position in an organization and clearly not just for those in senior positions.

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## A Process of Internal Self-Discovery

Fast-forward to a recent leadership seminar at the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology and Olivia Lai, who told us that she was initially a little taken aback when we asked her to write about her personal best leadership experience: "Here I am, at 25 years of age, with four years of work experience. How could I possibly have a personal best in leadership?" After further reflection, she realized that in actuality,

It wasn't all that hard to figure out what my personal best was and write about it. Even more surprising is that it became clear that leadership is everywhere, it takes place every day, and leadership can come from anyone. It doesn't matter that you don't have the title of "manager," "director," "CEO," to go with it. In the end, that's all they are . . . titles on business cards and company directories. Being a true leader transcends all that.

Becoming a leader is a process of internal self-discovery. In order for me to become a leader and become an even better leader, it's important that I first define my values and principles. If I don't know what my own values are and determine expectations for myself, how can I set expectations for others? How will I convey confidence, strong will, and empathy? Without looking within myself, it's not possible for me to look at others and recognize their potential and help others become leaders.

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*“I know who I was, who I am, and where I want to be.”*

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Through her own process of self-discovery, Olivia, like leaders everywhere, realized that becoming a leader begins when you come to understand who you are, what you care about, and why you do what you do. Developing yourself as a leader begins with knowing your own key convictions; it begins with your value system. Clarifying your own values and aspirations is a highly personal matter, and no one else can do it for you. To exhibit harmonious leadership—leadership in which your words and deeds are consonant—you must be in tune internally.

All leaders must take this inner journey. “I know who I was, who I am, and where I want to be,” says Dan Kaplan, founder of Daniel Kaplan Associates and former president of Hertz Equipment Rental Corporation. “So in other words,” he continues, “I know the level of commitment that I am prepared to make, and why I am personally prepared to make that level of commitment.” In this vein values drive the commitment necessary to create leaders in the first place.

Dan’s words reflect what leadership scholar Warren Bennis reported in his study of how successful people learned to become leaders: “To become a leader, then, you must become yourself; become the maker of your own life.” Warren observes that knowing yourself is “the most difficult task any of us faces. But until you truly know yourself, strengths and weaknesses, know what you want to do and why you want to do it, you cannot succeed in any but the most superficial sense of the word.”

Your ultimate success in business and in life depends on how well you know yourself, what you value, and why you value it. The better you know who you are and what you believe in, the better you are at making sense of the often incomprehensible and conflicting demands you receive daily. Do this, or do that. Buy this, buy that. Decide this, decide that. Support this, support that. You need internal guidance to navigate the turbulent waters in this stormy world. A clear set of personal values and beliefs is the critical controller in that guidance system.

## You Have to Stand for Something

People won’t follow you, or even pay you much attention, if you don’t have strong values. In our studies, we’ve asked thousands of people around the world to list the historical leaders they most admire—leaders, who if they were alive today, they could imagine themselves following willingly. Here are just a few of the names: Susan B. Anthony, Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, Jesus Christ, Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr., Abraham Lincoln, Nelson Mandela, Golda Meir, Mohammed, Eleanor Roosevelt, Franklin D. Roosevelt, Helen Suzman, Mother Teresa, and Margaret Thatcher. The entire list is populated by people with strong beliefs about matters of principle. All were passionate about what was right and just. The message is clear. People are admired because of their unwavering commitment to principles. They stand for something.

People rightfully expect their leaders to have the courage of their convictions. They expect them to stand up for their beliefs. When leaders are clear about what they believe in, they can take strong stands and are much less likely to be swayed by every fad or opinion poll. We’ve all heard the expression “Leaders stand up for their beliefs.” To provide a solid platform on which to stand, your beliefs must be clear to you and clearly communicated to others. When these values are matched by your deeds, then you’ve earned the credibility required for others to put their trust in you,

to willingly climb up and join you on that platform, knowing they'll be supported.

When you're not clear about your personal values it's hard to imagine how you can stand up for your beliefs, isn't it? How can you speak out if you don't know what's important to you? How can you have the courage of your convictions if you have no convictions? Leaders who aren't clear about what they believe are likely to change their position with every shift in public opinion. Without core beliefs and with only shifting positions, would-be leaders are judged as inconsistent and derided for being "political" in their behavior.

After all, who's the very first person you have to lead? Who's the first person who must be willing to follow you? You are, of course. Until you passionately believe in something it's hard to imagine that you could ever convince anyone else to believe. And if you wouldn't follow you, why should anyone else?

## Who Are You?

We've asked thousands of people over the years to imagine a scenario where someone walks into the room and announces to them and their colleagues, "Hi, I'm your new leader!" At that very moment, what do you want to know from this person? What are the questions that immediately pop into your mind? While there are lots of questions someone would want to ask that individual, by far the most frequently asked is: "Who are you?"

People want to know your values and beliefs, what you really care about, and what keeps you awake at night. They want to know who most influenced you, the events that shaped your attitudes, and the experiences that prepare you for the job. They want to know what drives you, what makes you happy, and what ticks you off. They want to know what you're like as a person, and why you want to be their leader. They want to know if you play an instrument, compete in sports, go to the movies, or enjoy the theater. They want to know about your family, what you've done, and where you've traveled. They want to un-

derstand your personal story. They want to know why they ought to be following you.

So if you are the new leader who walks into that room one day, you'd better be prepared to answer the "Who are you?" question. And, to answer that question for others, you first have to answer it for yourself. In one of our leadership workshops, our colleague Spencer Clark explained himself to participants in the following way:

I am the chief learning officer for Cadence Design Systems. I was a division president for Black and Decker, and a manager for General Electric. But these [job titles] are not who I am. If you want to know who I am, you need to understand that I grew up in Kentucky. That I was one of four sons, and we lived on a sharecropper's farm and slept in a home that had no inside plumbing. Who I am is not simply what I do. Knowing who I am has been enormously helpful in guiding me in making decisions about what I would do and how I would do it.

As Spencer makes clear, his job résumé says very little about who he is and why he makes the decisions and takes the actions he does. He knows that there is far more to him than his work history, the titles he's had, and the positions he's held. For Spencer to become the leader that he is, he had to dig beneath the surface and find out more about the events that shaped him, the beliefs that informed him, and the values that guided him. He also knows that it's helpful for others to un-

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derstand those same things before they can commit to his leadership decisions and actions.

During the last few years we've had the opportunity to co-facilitate leadership development programs with Ron Sugar, then chairman and CEO of Northrop Grumman Corporation. At the formal start of every one of these sessions, before he ever uttered a word, Ron would walk to the front of the room, sit down at a piano, and play for a few minutes.

After he'd played his last note, Ron would turn to his senior executive colleagues and ask, "Does anyone know why I began this session with playing the piano?" The point, he'd go on to explain, was that if people are going to follow you they needed to know more about you than the fact that you're their boss. They needed to know something about who you are as a person—your hopes, dreams, talents, expectations, and loves. "Leadership is personal," Ron would proclaim. "Do the people who work for and with you know if you can play the piano?" Ron would ask his colleagues. "Do they know who you are, what you care about, and why they ought to be following you?"

We were sharing this story one day with a group of people from a number of different organizations, and one participant said he could underscore just how important this point was by telling his own story about their new CEO. It seems this new chief executive was making the rounds throughout the company, talking about his vision for the firm and how people needed to execute on it:

The CEO was there supposedly so people could get to know him. So imagine how flabbergasted everyone was when someone asked him, "What do you like to do when you are not working?" and he replied rather curtly, "That's a personal matter and not relevant; next question."

But, that's the point, isn't it! Who is this guy? What does he really care about? Why should we follow—believe and trust—him if we don't know who he is? And he won't tell us!

We could all sense his exasperation. We're all just more reluctant to follow someone if they're unwilling to tell us about themselves. We start to become a little suspicious. We're less willing to trust.

## When to Say Yes and When to Say No

If you are ever to become a leader others will willingly follow, you must be transparent to others and known as someone who stands by your principles. And as every would-be leader has discovered, first you have to listen to your inner self in order to discover who you really are and what you are all about. There is no shortage of different interests out there competing for your time, your attention, and your approval. Before you listen to those voices, you have to listen to that voice inside that tells you what's truly important. Only then will you know when to say yes and when to say no—and mean it.

Developing leadership capacity is not about stuffing in a whole bunch of new information or trying out the latest technique. It's about leading out of what is already in your soul. It's about liberating the leader within you. It's about setting yourself free. It's about putting your ear to your heart and just listening. Clarity of values is essential in knowing which way, for each of us, is north, south, east, or west. The clearer you are, the easier it is to stay on the path you've chosen. In exploring your inner territory and finding your voice you calibrate an inner compass by which to navigate the course of your daily life and

to take the first steps along the journey of making a difference.

Just as sunlight burns away the morning fog, the more light you shine on what you stand for, what you believe

in, and what you care about, the more clearly you'll see those road signs pointing in the direction you want to go. Starting with the inner journey gives you the confidence to take the right turns, to make the tough decisions, to act with determination, and to take charge of your life.



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*Together, Jim and Barry are the best-selling authors of "The Leadership Challenge," "A Leader's Legacy," "Credibility," "Encouraging the Heart," "The Leadership Challenge Workbook," and more than a dozen other books and workbooks on leadership. The ideas in this article are included in their newest book, "The Truth About Leadership: The No-Fads, Heart-of-the-Matter Facts You Need to Know," among other "truths." These concepts are further developed in their books "A Leader's Legacy" and "Credibility: How Leaders Gain and Lose It, Why People Demand It."*