

LEADERS
ARE BORN
AND SO ARE YOU:

THE MYTHS THAT INHIBIT
LEARNING TO LEAD

We've been writing and speaking about exemplary leadership for over thirty years, and the one question people ask us more often than any other is some variation of "Are leaders born or made?"

Our answer to that question has always been the same: We have never met a leader who was not born. We've also never met an accountant, artist, athlete, engineer, lawyer, physician, scientist, teacher, writer, or zoologist who was not born.

You might be thinking, "Well that's not fair. That's a trick question. Everyone is born." That's precisely our point. Every one of us is born, and everyone has the basic material to become a leader.

Let's get something straight right from the start. Leadership is not some mystical quality that only a few people have and everyone else doesn't. Leadership is not preordained. Neither is it the private reserve of special class of charismatic men and women. Leadership is not a trait, nor a gene. No hard evidence exists that leadership is imprinted on the DNA of some people and not others.

Now some maintain that not everyone has the potential to lead nor the capacity to learn to lead. That's because there are myths, misconceptions, and false assumptions about leadership that create barriers to developing leaders at all levels. The first

challenge on the path to exemplary leadership is to overcome these folk legends and false assumptions. They foster a model of leadership that is antithetical to the way real-life leaders operate. They create unnecessary barriers to the revitalization of our organizations and communities.

There are five myths that inhibit learning to lead and contribute most to the misunderstandings about what leadership is and isn't.

THE TALENT MYTH

The talent myth has captivated the training and development world for years, and some have come to accept it as the new gospel. If only you search far and wide, and long and hard, you'll be able to identify the best and the brightest people and then place them in all the existing leadership roles. Problem solved. No training required; just find the right person. Well, good luck with that.

To become an exemplary leader you position, you have to aim for some-better, and strive for something

Talent is overrated. Florida State University professor and noted authority on expertise, K. Anders Ericsson, and his colleagues have found, over the 30 years of their research, that raw talent is not all there is to becoming a top performer. It doesn't matter whether it's in sports, music, medicine, computer programming, mathematics, or other fields; talent is not the key that unlocks excellence. In studying what it takes to "succeed" and how people reach their goals, Professor Heidi Grant Halvorson at Columbia's Business School, reaches a similar conclusion arguing that the emphasis on talent, smarts, and innate ability have done more harm than good. As she points out, there's a vast difference between "being good" and "getting better."

For more than three decades we have been fortunate to study the stories of thousands of ordinary people who have led others to make extraordinary things happen. And our qualitative and quantitative research shows that leadership is not a talent that you have or you don't. In fact, it is not a talent but an observable, learnable set of skills and abilities, distributed in the population like any other set of skills. The belief that leadership is only available to a talented

Jim Kouzes and **Barry Posner** are the authors of the award-winning and best-selling book *The Leadership Challenge*, now in its fifth edition, with more than 2 million copies sold worldwide. They've coauthored more than a dozen other award-winning leadership books and developed the highly acclaimed Leadership Practices Inventory (LPI). Among their numerous awards, Jim and Barry have received the Association for Talent Development's highest honor for their Distinguished Contribution to Workplace Learning and Performance. Jim Kouzes is the Dean's Executive Fellow of Leadership, Leavey School of Business, Santa Clara University. Barry Posner is the Accolti Endowed Professor of Leadership at the Leavey School of Business, Santa Clara University.

few is a far more powerful deterrent to development than anything else is. It prevents too many people from even trying, let alone excelling.

To become a better leader than you are right now, you first have to believe you can be a better leader and that you can learn to improve your leadership skills and abilities.

THE POSITION MYTH

This myth associates leadership with a hierarchal position. It assumes that when you have a position at the top, you're automatically a leader. It assumes that leadership is a title and that if you don't have a title of authority, then you aren't a leader. It assumes that leadership starts with a capital "L."

Every day, both the mass media and social media perpetuate this myth. People write and talk about how the recent turnaround of an organization was because of what the CEO did or that the founder of a new startup was responsible for a multibillion-dollar valuation. It's as if, people at the top or those with the highest rank and the most privilege are the only ones who ever do anything extraordinary.

Nothing could be further from the truth. Leadership is not a rank, a title, or a place. Look it up in the dictionary. You'll find that leadership starts with a lower case "l" and the word lead comes from an Old English word meaning "to go" or "to guide." That's what leadership is about: going places and guiding others. You could be a CEO, but it's much more likely

have to aspire to excel. Regardless of thing greater, dream of something nobler than what exists right now.

that you are a parent, coach, teacher, frontline worker, middle manager, volunteer, community activist, or concerned citizen. Every student of history knows that people without title, rank, or tenure have initiated and led world-changing movements. It's also true that those who made it to the top didn't start there. More than likely, they got there because they learned leadership skills along the way. Leadership is about what you do and not about where you are sitting.

To become an exemplary leader you have to aspire to excel. Regardless of position, you have to aim for something greater, dream of something better, and strive for something nobler than what exists right now.

and don't have natural talent, you or the organization should assign those tasks to other people.

That's not to say that people shouldn't attend to their strengths or that they aren't generally happier and more successful if they're using their strengths at work and in other aspects of their lives, but the emphasis on strengths has fundamentally discouraged people from challenging themselves to become better leaders. They can just throw up their hands and say, "Well, envisioning the future just isn't a strength of mine, so I'm not going to become very good at it." Or, "I'm not very comfortable letting people know how much I appreciate their accomplishments, so I won't bother." First, ignoring feedback about what you are not good at is inconsistent with research on learning. Second, it's not very motivating to tell someone to give up before they even start or the first time things don't go well. Finally, this approach is impractical. Organizations can't bring in a new person every time someone makes a mistake or there's a new challenge that someone initially didn't have the skill and abilities to handle.

To become an exemplary leader you have to challenge yourself. Over all the years we've been researching leadership, we've consistently found that adversity and uncertainty characterize every single personal-best leadership experience. If people only built on strengths, they would likely not challenge themselves or their organizations. And when confronting things they haven't done before, people will have to develop new skills and overcome existing weaknesses and limitations. You simply can't do your best without searching for new experiences, doing things you've never done, making mistakes, and learning from them.

No one ever made anything extraordinary happen alone. Leaders cannot possibly design breakthrough

THE STRENGTHS MYTH

From the ancient literature on leadership that searched for the individual "kissed by the gods" (charisma) to historical "great man" approaches (already limited by gender biases), people have been searching for a magic elixir that explains leadership success. The current fascination is with the concept of strengths.

Now there's nothing inherently wrong with the notion that there are certain skills, knowledge, and attitudes that produce higher levels of performance in a task, whether it's sales, engineering, nursing, or hospitality. But the strengths approach has been misapplied to mean that you should take on only tasks in which you are strong, not waste your time attending to your weakness, and in areas where you aren't strong

innovations, produce high-quality products, provide awesome service, attract raving fans, break sales

THE SELF-RELIANCE MYTH

records, assure financial soundness, and build great places to work without the trust and teamwork, strength and capabilities of everyone in the organization. Leadership is a team sport and not a solo performance.

Yet, there's folklore about the leader-as-hero who magnetizes a band of followers with courageous acts or the leader-as-rebel who charges headlong into the winds of resistance without regard for life or convention. There are myths about prescient visionaries with Merlin-like powers who save kingdoms, companies, industries, or nations. All these perpetuate a belief that leaders have to be self-reliant and superhuman. They have to be able to get things done without the help of anyone else. They have to be independent and autonomous and never express doubts about their own abilities. They can never appear in need of support or assistance; stiff upper lip, don't break a sweat, and all that balderdash.

Although there is certainly great benefit to being confident in your own abilities to handle challenging situations, the best leaders know they can't lead alone and they can't learn to lead alone. They know

they need the support, engagement, and commitment of others. Isn't it intriguing to note that world-class athletes all have coaches, often more than one? These coaches are revered and celebrated. But rarely will you hear leaders even admit to having had a coach in the past, let alone one in the present, or talk about the training and development program they attended that helped them build their skills. They might even believe that people would consider it a weakness if they did. But just as leaders can't make extraordinary things happen all by themselves, they can't become exemplary leaders by themselves either.

THE IT-COMES-NATURAL MYTH

To learn to lead you have to engage support in your learning and growth.

A corollary to the myths of talent and strengths is that leadership comes naturally to those who are the best. People admire those who make it seem so easy and attribute that ease to natural ability. Whether it's a performer on stage, an athlete on the court, or a leader in an organization, people assume effortless performance develops without effort. While there may be a small percentage for whom this is true, for the vast majority this is just not so.

Although there is certainly great benefit to being in challenging situations, the best leaders know they can't

“Until most individuals recognize that sustained training and effort is a prerequisite for reaching expert levels of performance,” professor Ericsson points out, “they will continue to misattribute lesser achievement to the lack of natural gifts, and will thus fail to reach their own potential.” His research finds that raw talent is not the only requisite to becoming a top performer. Staggeringly high IQs don’t characterize the great performers, either. What truly differentiates the expert performers from the good performers is their dedication to doing something every day to improve.

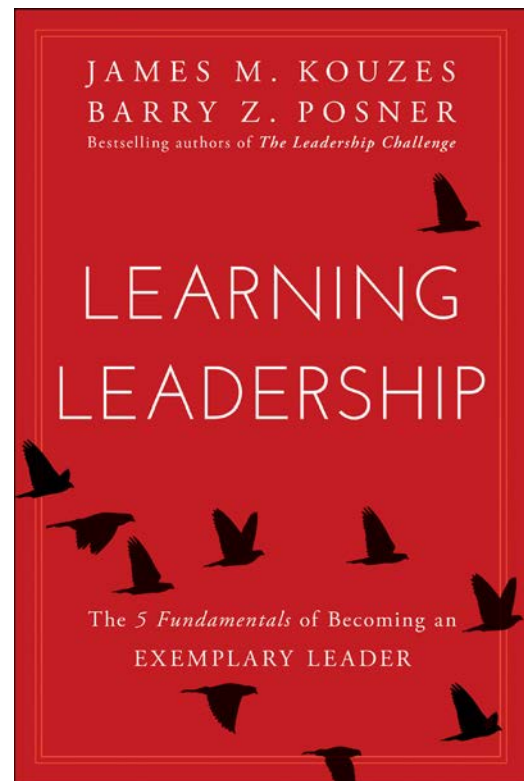
The truth is that the best leaders become the best because they work hard at it and put in the hours of practice. You have to practice deliberately. You have to put considerable effort into learning to lead in order to make leadership look effortless. No surprise that the more you practice, the easier it gets. Which is why professionals make it look easy, and amateurs make it look hard.

The Key Message

Leadership potential and leadership skills are not talents that some people have and other people don’t.

The truth is the best leaders are the best learners. Leadership is a set of abilities, and like any other skill-set it can be learned and improved.

Based on more than 30 years of research, with data from more than 70 countries, Learning Leadership explores the fundamentals of becoming an exemplary leader and presents a solid foundation on which to strengthen and expand leadership skills.



They are broadly distributed; everyone already has some capacity to lead. What gets in the way of learning to become the best are prevailing myths and assumptions about leadership. Learning to lead requires adopting a different mindset—one that embraces believing that you can lead, aspiring to make a difference, challenging yourself, engaging support from others, and practicing deliberately. **TQ**

confident in your own abilities to handle challenges alone and they can't learn to lead alone.