



# The Truth About Leadership

## The No-Fads, Heart-of-the-Matter Facts You Need to Know

### THE SUMMARY IN BRIEF

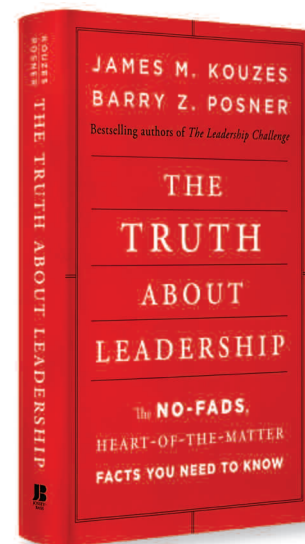
In these turbulent times when the very foundations of organizations and societies are being shaken, leaders need to move beyond the pessimistic predictions, the trendy fads and the simplistic solutions. They need to turn to what's real and what's proven in order to understand what the evidence tells us about how exemplary leaders get extraordinary things done. This is the imperative that best-selling, award-winning leadership experts James M. Kouzes and Barry Z. Posner have undertaken in their work.

Based on 30 years of research — and more than 1 million responses to Kouzes and Posner's leadership assessment — *The Truth About Leadership* explores the fundamental, enduring truths of leadership that hold constant regardless of context or circumstance. In 10 time-tested truths, this summary reveals what all leaders must know, the questions they must be prepared to answer and the real-world issues they will likely face.

*The Truth About Leadership* shows emerging and experienced leaders the heart of leadership and what they need to know to be effective. It also offers a dynamic new look at what it means to lead today. The lessons in *The Truth About Leadership* help leaders do their real and necessary work — bring about the essential changes that will renew organizations and communities.

### IN THIS SUMMARY, YOU WILL LEARN:

- Ten fundamental truths about leadership.
- How sharing responsibility can help you become a more effective leader.
- Lessons that will sustain you in your personal and professional development.
- How a focus on values, commitment and trust can help you become a successful leader.



by James M. Kouzes and  
Barry Z. Posner

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# THE COMPLETE SUMMARY: THE TRUTH ABOUT LEADERSHIP

by James M. Kouzes and Barry Z. Posner

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For additional information on the authors, go to <http://www.summary.com> or [www.truthaboutleadership.com](http://www.truthaboutleadership.com).

## Introduction: What Everyone Wants to Know About Leadership

There are fundamental principles that inform and support the practices of leadership that were true 30 years ago, are true today and will be true 30 years from now. They speak to what the newest and youngest leaders need to appreciate and understand, and they speak just as meaningfully to the oldest leaders, who are perhaps re-purposing themselves as they transition from their lengthy careers to other pursuits in volunteer, community or public sectors. They are truths that address what is real about leadership.

Here are 10 fundamental truths about leadership and becoming an effective leader:

1. The first truth is that **You Make a Difference**. It is the most fundamental truth of all. Before you can lead, you have to believe that you can have a positive impact on others. You have to believe in yourself. That's where it all begins. Leadership begins when you believe you can make a difference.

2. The second truth is that **Credibility Is the Foundation of Leadership**. You have to believe in you, but others have to believe in you too. What does it take for others to believe in you? Short answer: credibility. If people don't believe in you, they won't willingly follow you.

3. The third truth is that **Values Drive Commitment**. People want to know what you stand for and believe in. They want to know what you value. And leaders need to know what others value if they are going to be able to forge alignments between personal

values and organizational demands.

4. The fourth truth is that **Focusing on the Future Sets Leaders Apart**. The capacity to imagine and articulate exciting future possibilities is a defining competence of leaders. You have to take the long-term perspective. Gain insight from reviewing your past and develop insight by looking around.

5. **You Can't Do It Alone** is the fifth truth. Leadership is a team sport, and you need to engage others in the cause. What strengthens and sustains the relationship between leader and constituent is that leaders are obsessed with what is best for others, not what is best for themselves.

6. **Trust Rules** is the sixth truth. Trust is the social glue that holds individuals and groups together. And the level of trust others have in you will determine the amount of influence you have. You have to earn your constituents' trust before they'll be willing to trust you. That means you have to give trust before you can get trust.

7. The seventh truth is that **Challenge Is the Crucible for Greatness**. Exemplary leaders — the kind of leaders people want to follow — are always associated with changing the status quo. Great achievements don't happen when you keep things the same. Change invariably involves challenge, and challenge tests you. It introduces you to yourself.

8. The eighth truth is that **You Either Lead by Example or You Don't Lead at All**. Leaders have to keep their promises and become role models for the values and actions they espouse. You have to go first as a leader. You can't ask others to do something you aren't willing to do yourself.



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9. The ninth truth is that **the Best Leaders Are the Best Learners**. Leaders are constant improvement fanatics, and learning is the master skill of leadership. Learning, however, takes time and attention, practice and feedback, along with good coaching. It also takes willingness on your part to ask for support.

10. The tenth truth is that **Leadership Is an Affair of the Heart**. Leaders make others feel important and are gracious in showing their appreciation. Love is the motivation that energizes leaders to give so much for others. You just won't work hard enough to become great if you aren't doing what you love.

These are *enduring* truths about leadership. You can gain mastery over the art and science of leadership by understanding them and attending to them in your workplace and everyday life. ●

### Truth 1: You Make a Difference

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 what you do counts for something.

**The Truth Is That You Make a Difference.** It is not a question of "Will I make a difference?" Rather, it's "What difference will I make?"

#### You Are the Most Important Leader

Leader role models are local. You find them close to where you live and work.

You also definitely find leader role models "close to home" in your organization. The media, and many leadership gurus, focus a lot of attention on people at the top of organization — founders, CEOs, generals, presidents and the like. They make it seem as if these top dogs are the only ones responsible for everything that's great, and everything that's lousy, about organizations. It's a subtle thing, but it perpetuates the trickle-down theory of leadership: All things start at the top and trickle down to the bottom. But, when you actually look at the data, you see a very different picture.

The leader who has the most impact on your day-to-day behavior is, in fact, not the CEO, the COO, the CFO or any other C — unless, of course, you report directly to that person. The leader who has the most influence over your desire to stay or leave, your commitment to the organization's vision and values, your ethical decisions and actions, your treatment of cus-

### The Five Practices of Exemplary Leadership

1. Model the way.
2. Inspire a shared vision.
3. Challenge the process.
4. Enable others to act.
5. Encourage the heart.

tomers, your ability to do your job well and the direction of your career, to name but a few outcomes, is your most immediate manager.

This means that if you're a manager, to your direct reports *you* are the most important leader in the organization. ●

### Truth 2: Credibility Is the Foundation of Leadership

Leadership begins with you and your belief in yourself. Leadership continues only if other people also believe in you.

**The Truth Is That Credibility Is the Foundation of Leadership.** What does it take to be the kind of person, the kind of leader, others want to follow, and will do so enthusiastically and voluntarily?

It turns out that the believability of the leader determines whether people will willingly give more of their time, talent, energy, experience, intelligence, creativity and support. Only credible leaders earn commitment, and only commitment builds and regenerates great organizations and communities.

#### Constituents Have Clear Expectations of Their Leaders

Leadership is a relationship between those who aspire to lead and those who choose to follow. You can't have one without the other. Leadership strategies, tactics, skills and practices are empty without an understanding of the fundamental dynamics of this relationship.

In every relationship people have expectations of each other. Sometimes these expectations are clearly voiced, and other times they're never discussed, but nonetheless, expectations are present in every human relationship. By surveying tens of thousands of people around the world, asking them to select the qualities that they most want in a leader, the results reveal there are a few essential "character tests" someone (you) must pass before others

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are willing to grant the designation of leader.

Before anyone is going to willingly follow you — or any other leader — he or she wants to know that you are *honest, forward-looking, inspiring and competent*. Before they are going to voluntarily heed your advice, take your direction, accept your guidance, trust your judgment, agree to your recommendations, buy your products, support your ideas and implement your strategies, people expect that you will measure up to these criteria. Credibility ties it all together.

In the investigation of admired leadership qualities, the data reveals that more than anything people want to follow leaders who are credible. Credibility is the foundation of leadership. ●

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### Truth 3: Values Drive Commitment

Imagine you're sitting in a meeting with a group of your colleagues. The door to the conference room opens and in walks someone you've never met before who says, "Hi, I'm your new leader." What questions immediately come to mind that you want to ask this person?

People have lots of questions they would want to ask, but 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 prepared 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 understand your personal story. They want to know why they ought to be following you.

Before you can effectively lead others, you have to understand who you are, where you come from and the values that guide you.

#### **The Truth Is That Values Drive Commitment.**

You cannot fully commit to something that isn't important to you. No one can. You can't fully commit to something that doesn't fit with who you are and how you see yourself. In order to devote the time, to expend the energy and to make the sacrifices necessary, you have to know exactly what makes it worth doing in the first place.

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. 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.

#### **Listen to Your Inner Self**

If you are ever to become a leader whom others willingly follow, you must be known as someone who stands by his or her principles.

Values represent the core of who you are. They influence every aspect of your life: your moral judgments, the people you trust, the appeals you respond to, the way you invest your time and your money.

Clarity of values 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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### Truth 4: Focusing on the Future Sets Leaders Apart

Angela Gu was in her first year as assistant controller, overseeing the accounts payable function in Finance for Wal-Mart China. While Wal-Mart had opened 11 stores in six cities across China, it had expansion plans to triple the store count and enter into more new cities over the following three years. At that time the Finance Department was set up by city, and Angela could see that if the accounts payable function grew at the same rate as the company expanded they would grow from about 200 people to more than 800 people within a few years. She explained how she imagined the challenges and problems this would create for her area, "including the people management, procedural control, and compliance and costs related to personnel, travel, training and telecommunications."

Anticipating the future challenges the company would face, Angela proposed an alternative to the CFO — a centralization initiative — and received approval to move ahead. The program involved all divisions in the home office and local cities, including human resources, merchandising and operations, in addition to finance. The effort paid off almost immediately in terms of productivity, improved control and standardization, and established a platform for future efficiency-driven programs. Within a year the average number of accounts payable associates serving one store was reduced by 40 percent, and within three years the actual headcount in accounts payable had been reduced by nearly 50 percent, despite the almost fourfold expansion of new stores. Angela explains:

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*The initiative was quite new, with no other precedent to refer to, but the vision of a national accounts payable center excited me. You can always choose to follow whatever you have been doing — which demands from you no extra thinking or efforts — or you can focus on accomplishing something different that would do good for the enterprise.*

Being forward-looking paid dividends for Angela and for Wal-Mart. This kind of anticipatory thinking can do the same for you.

**The Truth Is That Focusing On the Future Sets Leaders Apart.** Your constituents expect you to know where you're going and to have a sense of direction. You have to be forward-looking; it's the quality that most differentiates leaders from individual contributors. Getting yourself and others focused on the exciting possibilities that the future holds is your special role on the team.

### Spend More Time in the Future

Developing the capacity to envision the future requires you to spend more time in the future — meaning more time reflecting on the future, more time reading about the future and more time talking to others about the future. It's not an easy assignment, but it is an absolutely necessary one. It also requires you to reflect back on your past to discover the themes that really engage and excite you. And it means thinking about the kind of legacy you want to leave and the contributions you want to make.

None of this can be done by a pessimist. You must remain optimistic and hopeful about what is yet to come. A positive difference can only be made by a positive leader. ●

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## Truth 5: You Can't Do It Alone

Leadership is not about the leader *per se*. It is not about you alone. It's about the relationship between leaders and their constituents. It's about the connection you and your teammates have with each other. It's about how you behave and feel toward each other. It's about the emotional bond that exists between you and them. Exemplary leaders know that they must attend to the needs and focus on the capabilities of their constituents if they are going to get extraordinary things done.

### Ask Great Questions

Rather than thinking that you have all the answers, you need to be able to ask great questions. Great questions send people on pioneering journeys in their minds.

They're a lot more likely to discover novel ideas when you set them free to explore on their own. The answers are out there, and they will be found among your constituents as long as people feel safe in offering them.

Asking questions is just one way that you can communicate that you believe in other people's abilities. Giving them choices, providing them with discretion over how things are done and fostering accountability are other ways. People want to feel in charge of their own lives. They want to be in control. They want to determine their own destinies. They want to know that their input matters, that their ideas are good ones, that their answers are correct and that their decisions will be supported. It's your job as a leader to increase people's sense of self-determination, self-confidence and personal effectiveness.

### Interact With Others

High-quality relationships don't happen spontaneously. They require leadership. It's your job to interact with others in ways that promote connection, collaboration, confidence and competence. When you do, you'll see learning, innovation and performance soar.

**The Truth Is That You Can't Do It Alone.** Leaders alone don't make anything great. Leadership is a shared responsibility. You need others and they need you. You're all in this together. To build and sustain that sense of oneness, exemplary leaders are sensitive to the needs of others. They ask questions. They listen. They provide support. They develop skills. They ask for help. They align people in a common cause. They make people feel like anything is possible. They connect people to their need to be in charge of their own lives. They enable others to be even better than they already are. ●

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## Truth 6: Trust Rules

A PricewaterhouseCoopers study of corporate innovation among the *Financial Times* 100 showed that the number one differentiating factor between the top innovators and the bottom innovators was trust. That means that if people don't trust you, your organization is likely to underperform and be slow to innovate.

If you are going to build cohesive teams, then you must also create a structure for trust in your organization. Without it you can't lead.

**The Truth Is That Trust Rules.** Trust rules your personal credibility. Trust rules your ability to get things done. Trust rules your team's cohesiveness. Trust rules your organization's innovativeness and performance.

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Trust rules your brand image. Trust rules just about everything you do.

### Increase Your Trust, Increase Your Influence

Researchers have found that the level of trust that constituents have in their leaders determines the amount of influence they will willingly accept. In an experiment on the impact of trust on group problem solving, leaders in a high-trust condition had greater influence on group members and were more willing to accept influence attempts by group members than were leaders in a low-trust condition. This same study also found that high trust led to greater acceptance of group member interdependence, more cooperation and enhanced information flow among all group members.

Studies involving soldiers in combat in Iraq found that the more the soldiers trusted their platoon leaders, the more willing they were to accept their leader's influence concerning their motivation to become better group members, strive for excellence and improve as people. Even in a traditional command-and-control environment, trust comes first and following comes second, not the other way around.

Trust motivates people to go beyond mere compliance with authority. It motivates them to reach for the best in themselves, their teams and their organizations. ●

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### Truth 7: Challenge Is the Crucible for Greatness

When people think of the business leaders they admire, they think about people who have turned around failing companies, started entrepreneurial ventures, developed breakthrough products and services, or transformed industries. Challenge was the context in which these leaders operated and change was the theme of all their campaigns.

You don't have to study historical leaders to learn this lesson. You can just look at everyday leaders such as yourself and those down the hall or across the street. For example, here is what Katherine Winkel, marketing communications coordinator at Monsanto, had to say about a discussion in a seminar about peers' personal best leadership experiences:

*The similarity that most stuck out in my mind at the time, and indeed remains with me, was that in each story the person described having to overcome uncertainty and fear in order to achieve his or her best. Whatever the case, staring down uncertainty and ultimately overcoming this hurdle was a major theme.*

Typically, you would think people would describe uncertainty and fear as negative or even de-motivating factors in leadership, but here it seems they are almost prerequisites for success! It teaches us that uncertainty is a necessity that drives us to do our very best.

The personal best leadership cases, as Katherine observed, are about triumphs over adversity, about departures from the past, about doing things that had never been done before, about going to places not yet discovered. They are all about challenge and change.

**The Truth Is That Challenge Is the Crucible for Greatness.** The study of leadership is the study of how men and women guide people through uncertainty, hardship, disruption, transformation, transition, recovery, new beginnings and other significant challenges. It's also the study of how men and women, in times of constancy and complacency, actively seek to disturb the status quo, awaken new possibilities and pursue opportunities.

As the late John Gardner, adviser to four U.S. presidents and founder of Common Cause, was fond of saying: "What we have before us are some breathtaking opportunities disguised as insoluble problems." Sometimes leaders have to shake things up. Other times they just have to grab hold of the adversity that surrounds them. Whether challenge comes from the outside or the inside, leaders make things happen. Leadership and challenge are simply inseparable. ●

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### Truth 8: You Either Lead by Example or You Don't Lead at All

Jazz virtuoso Dizzy Gillespie once said, "That trumpet is lying in the case every day, waiting for me." In the same sense, leadership is waiting for you every day. It's waiting for you to take action. It's waiting for you to show others that you mean what you say. It's waiting for you to demonstrate that you know how to get people moving. In the final analysis, leadership is about playing that instrument called "you." But when you perform, you have to make sure that you play in tune. Your audience won't applaud dissonant notes.

That was certainly the insight that Casey Mork, manager of the new product team, shared about one of his supervisors, someone Casey felt wasn't clear about his values, never "had a true voice," and said one thing and did another. "As could be predicted," explained Casey, "with the lack of a model at the top, our group failed in internal cohesion, customer experience and business results." Casey learned what every aspiring leader must realize:

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*You've got to walk the talk, not just talk the talk. Leaders are responsible for modeling behavior based on the values they communicate. The leader must then live by them, in plain view of those he or she expects to follow the values. A leader must go beyond just talking about organizational values — such as “customers are always different” — he or she must actually demonstrate how to do this.*

Casey understood that leading is not about telling others what to value and what to do. You have to model the way you want others to feel, think and act. You have to show others that you are going to do exactly what you are asking them to do.

**The Truth Is That You Either Lead by Example or You Don't Lead at All.** Enduring leadership truth No. 2 is “*Credibility is the foundation of leadership.*” Your actions had better be consistent with your words. In the final analysis, people believe what you do over what you say. As journalist and author Alan Deutschman writes in his book *Walk the Talk*, “Leaders have only two tools at their disposal: what they say and how they act. What they say might be interesting, but how they act is always crucial.” ●

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### Truth 9: The Best Leaders Are the Best Learners

The potential to lead exists in you. If you apply your head, your heart and your courage, you can learn to lead.

Leadership is not preordained. It is not a gene, and it is not a trait. There is no hard evidence to support the assertion that leadership is imprinted in the DNA of only some individuals and that the rest of us missed out and are doomed to be clueless.

**The Truth Is That the Best Leaders Are the Best Learners.** Leadership can be learned. It is an observable pattern of practices and behaviors, and a definable set of skills and abilities. Skills can be learned, and when we track the progress of people who participate in leadership development programs, researchers observe that they improve over time. They learn to be better leaders as long as they engage in activities that help them learn how.

No matter how good you are, you can always get better.

#### Learning Is the Master Skill

Studies show that leadership can be learned in a variety of ways. It can be learned through active experimentation, observation of others, study in the classroom or reading books or by simply reflecting on one's own and

others' experiences.

Certain styles contribute to more effectiveness in some practices, but there is no one best style for learning everything there is to know. The style is not the thing.

What is more important is the extent to which individuals engage in whatever style works for them.

#### Passion for Learning

You have to have a passion for learning in order to become the best leader you can be. You have to be open to new experiences and open to honestly examining how you and others perform, especially under conditions of uncertainty. You have to be willing to quickly learn from your failures as well as your successes and to find ways to try out new behaviors without hesitation. You won't always do things perfectly, but you will get the chance to grow.

Another dynamic that gives rise to the need for aspiring leaders to be first-rate learners is the astounding pace of change in the world. Not only do you have to be able to learn, but you have to learn how to learn, constantly absorbing and teaching yourself new ways of doing old things and new ways of doing new things. ●

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### Truth 10: Leadership Is an Affair of the Heart

Leaders shouldn't turn a blind eye to reality or hide it from their teams. You must be honest with your constituents about the state of the organization's or the nation's health. Then you have a choice.

You can tell people they're doomed, criticize the ideas they present, contradict them at every turn and offer little or no support as they struggle to survive. Or you can give them hope. You can tell people that if they apply themselves — and if they're willing to struggle and suffer — they will overcome one day. You can tell them you have confidence in their abilities, help them to broaden their perspectives, build on their ideas, support them as they look for solutions and recognize their contributions. It's not hard to recognize the right option to choose.

Positive energy is especially important in volatile times. When the news is worrisome, and often downright scary, it's pretty easy for folks to become negative. And people become negative even faster when they see it in their leaders, whether overtly in speeches or even if they just mope around a bit. Negative leadership breeds negative emotions. And these negative emotions are far more damaging to an organization's and an individual's

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health than doing nothing at all. In uncertain and challenging times, it's your obligation as a leader to accentuate the positive. If you don't, you're either keeping things the same or making them worse.

**The Truth Is That Leadership Is an Affair of the Heart.** Leaders put their hearts in their businesses and their businesses in their hearts. They love what they're doing and they stay in love with leading, with the people who do the work, with what their organizations produce and with those who honor them by using their products and services. They show they care by paying attention to people, sharing success stories and making people feel important and special. Exemplary leaders are positive and upbeat, generating the emotional energy that enables others to flourish. ●

### Epilogue: Leaders Say Yes

Everything you do as a leader begins with one word: *yes*. Until you say *yes*, nothing great can happen.

#### Reminders About the Truths

You can make a difference. Leadership begins when you believe in yourself and believe that you can make a positive difference in the world.

Others have to believe in you too, and gaining followers can be tough. Followers comes when you work hard to earn their faith and confidence.

You have to be clear about what's important to you if you're going to devote yourself fully to something. Values drive commitment.

Leaders focus on the future, whether it's the future of a group, organization, nation or the planet. Big dreams that resonate with others inspire and energize.

While the leader may initially provide the spark of an idea, it takes a group of people — sometimes small and sometimes large — to make something extraordinary happen. And when beginning something brand new, the truth that trust rules is especially relevant. There isn't much else to go on. You just have to show that you trust others. Your trust in them will bring greater trust in you.

All leaders are severely tested and there will always be detractors — those who will tell you it's impossible, that it can't be done, that you're not capable and that your dream is foolish. Despite the obstacles and despite the naysayers, you just have to go out there and do it. You have to make mistakes, bounce back and persist. You have to go first as a leader. You have to be the example that others can follow.

### How to Show You Are Trustworthy

Research has shown that a few key behaviors contribute to whether or not others perceive you as trustworthy. Here are four actions to keep in mind:

- Behave predictably and consistently.
- Communicate clearly.
- Treat promises seriously.
- Be forthright and candid.

Leadership is not about wishful thinking. It's about determined doing. There are no shortages of problems to solve. Leadership is not about telling others that they ought to solve these problems. It's about seeing a problem and accepting personal responsibility for doing something about it. And it's about holding yourself accountable for the actions you take.

Leaders aren't bystanders. They are active participants who work tirelessly to mobilize others to want to struggle for shared aspirations. Leaders believe that they have an obligation to do something to bring about change and that, with the active engagement of others, they can move things forward.

#### You Have to Say Yes to Leadership

You have to say *yes* to begin things. You have to say *yes* to your beliefs, you have to say *yes* to big dreams, you have to say *yes* to difficult challenges, you have to say *yes* to collaboration, you have to say *yes* to trust, you have to say *yes* to learning, you have to say *yes* to setting the example and you have to say *yes* to your heart.

Are you ready to say *yes* to leadership? When you are ready to say *yes*, doors will open to entirely new adventures in your life. When you are ready to say *yes*, people will join you on the quest. When you say *yes*, you will discover your own truth about leadership. ●

#### RECOMMENDED READING LIST

If you liked *The Truth About Leadership*, you'll also like:

1. ***A Leader's Legacy* by James M. Kouzes and Barry Z. Posner.**  
The authors present powerful essays that explore leadership and legacy.
2. ***Leadership Gold* by John C. Maxwell.**  
John Maxwell shares a lifetime of leadership truths.
3. ***The Accountable Leader* by Brian Dive.**  
This book argues that most leadership-related problems arise from the lack of accountability in jobs.