Credibility
How Leaders Gain and Lose It; Why People Demand It
by James M. Kouzes and Barry Z. Posner

Followers Choose Their Leaders
Give them something to believe in.

QUICK OVERVIEW

With economic downturns caused by greed, political infighting and religious scandals in recent memory, it’s no wonder people are skeptical of those in leadership positions. We’re all tired of leaders who abuse their titles.

In their new and revised book, Credibility, James Kouzes and Barry Posner offer a wealth of research and interesting insights on what people want from their leaders. Not surprisingly, credibility ranks at the top of the list. For leaders who want their followers to want to follow them this particular character trait is essential. The book includes interviews with noteworthy leaders and personal stories to help readers understand what makes a great leader. The authors also offer six key disciplines that can help anyone become a more capable, confident and credible leader.

APPLY AND ACHIEVE

Competence is a key aspect of credibility. As a leader, you may have a big vision for where you want your organization, family or business to go, but without the skill and knowledge to get there, you’ll lose your followers’ respect and loyalty.

The authors explain that leaders may not need the same technical expertise as their followers. After all, delegation is part of a leader’s job. Being competent in finding the right people for specific tasks is an essential leadership skill.

But there are certainly specific skills you need to develop as a leader in your unique organization. That may mean you need help with strategic planning or goal setting. It could be that you need to work on your communication or presentation skills. Take some time to identify areas you are weak in, and then engage the help of a mentor, coach or training program to improve in those areas.

SUCCESS Points
In this book you’ll learn:

- The admirable qualities of good leaders
- Why trust is essential to leadership
- How to strengthen your credibility
- That leadership principles apply at work, at home and in social and volunteer settings
Leadership may once have been conferred by rank and privilege. It may have once been something that was characterized by a command-and-control, top-down, do-as-I-say style. But no more. Those days are long gone. Today, leadership is only an aspiration. It is something you have to earn every day, because on a daily basis, people choose whether or not they’re going to follow you. It’s something you keep striving to achieve and never assume you’ve fully attained.

The old organizational hierarchy just can’t generate the kind of commitment that’s required in our global society. This isn’t a call for open elections inside organizations, but managers should not kid themselves. People do vote—with their energy, with their dedication, with their loyalty, with their talent, with their actions. Don’t you put forth higher-quality effort when you believe that the people leading you are there to serve your needs and not just their own interests?

Leadership is a relationship between those who aspire to lead and those who choose to follow. Any discussion of leadership must attend to the dynamics of this relationship. Strategies, tactics, skills, and practices are hollow and fruitless unless the fundamental human aspirations that connect leaders and their constituents are understood and appreciated. Ultimately the constituents are the arbiters of the quality of leadership they receive. In the end, leaders don’t decide who leads. Followers do.

Loyalty is not something a boss (or anyone for that matter) can demand or even command. It is something the people—the constituency—choose to grant to a leader who has earned it. The people’s choice is based not upon authority but upon the degree to which the leader lives up to the expectations constituents hold.

The key to unlocking greater leadership potential can be found when you seek to understand the desires and expectations of your constituents and when you act on them in ways that correspond to their image of what an exemplary leader is and does.

**The Characteristics of Admired Leaders**

We began our investigation into what people expect from their leaders more than three decades ago, in a study sponsored by the American Management Association. We asked the open-ended question, “What values (personal traits or characteristics) do you look for in your superiors?” (As you can see, we were stuck in the old hierarchical metaphors back then.)

More than 1,500 managers nationwide provided 225 values, characteristics, and traits that they believed to be crucial in the people leading them. A panel of researchers and managers subsequently analyzed the 225 factors and reduced them to 15 categories. Of those, the most frequent categories, in order of mention, were:

1. **Integrity** (is truthful, trustworthy, has character, has convictions)
2. **Competence** (is capable, is productive, is efficient)
3. **Leadership** (is inspiring, is decisive, provides direction)

The results of our studies over the last three decades have been strikingly consistent. They have remained consistent not only over time but also around the world and across categories of age, gender, ethnicity, functional discipline, organizational level, and the like. People are remarkably clear about the qualities leaders must demonstrate if they want others to voluntarily enlist in a common cause and to freely commit to action.

What are these crucial attributes? According to our empirical data, the majority of people look for and admire leaders who are honest, forward-looking, inspiring, and competent.

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**Honest**

In virtually every survey, honesty is selected more often than any other leadership characteristic. Honesty is absolutely essential to leadership. If people are going to follow someone willingly, whether into battle or into the boardroom, they first want to assure themselves that the person is worthy of their trust. They want to know that the would-be leader is truthful, ethical, and principled.

**Forward-Looking**

Leaders are expected to have a sense of direction and a concern for the future of the organization. Leaders must know where they
are going. They must have a destination in mind when asking others to join them on a journey into the unknown.

It isn’t all that surprising that being forward-looking would be so important for senior executives. But the data also indicate that it is very important for frontline supervisors and middle managers as well. If leaders are to be admired and respected, they must have the ability to see across the horizon of time and imagine what might be. People are unwilling to follow those who are directionless. Leaders can be unquestionably honest, but if they don’t know where they are going, no one is likely to go any further ahead with them than they themselves can see.

**Insight**

People admire and respect leaders who are dynamic, uplifting, enthusiastic, positive, and optimistic. Claudio Lucero, who led the first South American team’s climb to the top of the world’s highest mountain explained: “Dreaming about something is not enough; you have to be able to share that dream and get others to work with you to achieve it.” Leaders can’t just have dreams of the future; they must be able to communicate those dreams in ways that encourage people to sign on for the duration and to work hard for the goal.

**Competent**

The universal expectation is that the leader will be able to get things done for the organizational unit. In this sense, having a winning track record is the surest way to be considered competent. Yet it is not necessary that the leader have the same level of technical competence as constituents. Much more significant, explained Victor Wang, marketing technical services manager for the Swedish steel company ASSAB Tooling in Dongguan, China, “is that the leader takes the time to learn the business and to know the current operation and everyone in the company, before making changes and decisions.”

Expertise in leadership skills per se is another dimension of competence. The abilities to model, inspire, challenge, enable, and encourage, must be demonstrated if leaders are to be seen as capable.

Taken singularly, the characteristics of honest, forward-looking, inspiring, and competent provide a consistently useful guide for leadership selection, action, and development. Taken together, they communicate a more powerful message, one that offers a deeper understanding about the fundamentals of leadership.

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**CREDIBILITY IS THE FOUNDATION OF LEADERSHIP**

The characteristics of trustworthiness, expertise, and dynamism compose what communications researchers refer to as “source credibility.” In assessing the believability of sources of information—whether the president of the organization, the president of the country, a salesperson, a TV newscaster, or a product spokesperson—those who rate highly on these three characteristics are considered to be credible, believable sources of information.

People everywhere want to believe in their leaders. They want to have faith and confidence in them as people. People want to believe that their leaders’ words can be trusted, that they have the knowledge and skill necessary to lead, and that...
they are personally excited and enthusiastic about the direction in which they are headed. *Credibility is the foundation of leadership.*

**THE SIX DISCIPLINES FOR EARNING AND SUSTAINING CREDIBILITY**

Let’s shift from the overarching behaviors of credible leaders to the actions that leaders need to take, day in and day out, to earn and sustain credibility. The process of building and sustaining credibility requires you to take the following steps:

1. Discover your self.
2. Appreciate constituents.
3. Affirm shared values.
4. Develop capacity.
5. Serve a purpose.

We selected the word *discipline* quite intentionally, in part because its root originates from a word meaning, “to learn.” Discipline also implies hard work and commitment to a way of doing things. Earning and sustaining credibility is not a casual exercise. It requires adherence and devotion to a way of doing things that goes beyond mere acknowledgement of its importance.

Here is a brief look at these disciplines.

**Discover Your Self**

The place to begin the enhancement of credibility is with an exploration of your inner territory. Who are you? What do you believe in? What do you stand for?

To be credible as a leader you must first clarify your own values, the principles that guide your decisions and actions and the standards by which you choose to live your life. Values guide how you feel, what you say, what you think, how you make choices, and how you act. Once clear about your own values, you can translate them into a set of guiding principles, a credo that you can communicate to the people you aspire to lead.

But a leadership philosophy isn’t enough. You must have the competence to deliver on your promises. You must know what you are doing and have the experience and training to do it. You must also have the confidence that you can deliver. You must really believe that you have the will and the skill to persist in the face of adversity. Seek the developmental experiences you need in order to improve your capacity to lead.

**Appreciate Constituents**

Leaders can’t assume, just because they have a clearly articulated set of personal values, that those values are necessarily aligned with the values of their constituents. Leadership is a dialogue, not a monologue. To be a leader, you must develop a deep understanding of the collective values and desires of your constituents. Constituents come to believe in their leaders—to see them as worthy of their trust—when they believe that the leaders have the constituents’ best interests at heart. Leaders who are clearly only interested in their own agendas, their own advancements, and their own well-being will not be followed willingly. Reach out and attend to others. Be present with them, listen to them. Go out and talk to your constituents and find out what they value.

**Affirm Shared Values**

Credible leaders honor the diversity of their many constituencies. They also find a common ground of agreement on which everyone can stand. Inevitably, conflicts will arise between diverse constituencies. Shared values give everyone an internal compass that enables them to act independently and interdependently, responsibly and publicly.

Credible leaders build a strong sense of community. They get people together in forums to talk about their values. Part of your job as a leader is to find the common ground and build consensus around a core of shared values. Affirm these values passionately and speak enthusiastically on behalf of your community. And renew your community. Do not take it for granted.

**Develop Capacity**

People cannot contribute to the aims and aspirations of an organization if they do not know what to do, and they cannot contribute if they do not know how to do it. Therefore, it is essential for leaders to continuously develop the capacity of their constituents to keep their commitments.

You must educate, educate, educate. Bring the values and purposes to life, whether in one-on-one sessions, in large group forums, or YouTube videos, on webcasts, in tweets and texts, or in conversations and in presentations. Ensure that educational opportunities exist for individuals to build their knowledge and
Credibility

Doing What We Say: The Critical Difference

When asked: How do you define credibility behaviorally? The most common response was: “They do what they say they will do.” This straightforward definition leads to a simple prescription for strengthening personal credibility: “Do what you say you will do.”

In the domain of leadership, however, while this prescription is necessary, it is not sufficient. When you do what you say, it may make you a credible person, but it may not necessarily make you a credible leader. Why? Because leaders don’t just represent themselves; they also represent other people. Leaders must act in ways that are consistent not only with their own personal value but also with the core value that everyone in the organization stands for and believes in. Leadership is not about what the leader wants. It’s about the needs and interests, goals and aspirations, values and visions, and hopes and dreams of all those who are represented. Therefore, to earn and strengthen credibility in the context of an organization, leaders must “Do What We Say We Will Do.”

Forgetting the We has derailed many managers. When managers are inconsiderate of others’ points of view and resort to the use of power and position to command compliance and to get things done, they are not leading. They are dictating.

Serve a Purpose

Leadership is a service. Leaders exist to serve a purpose for the people who have made it possible for them to lead—their constituents.

Credible leaders know that it is through their visible actions that their true commitment is demonstrated. When leaders affirm the shared values of an organization they are also vowing that the promises will be kept consistently. They set the example by going first. They spend their time—the trust indicator of priorities—on core values. They hold themselves accountable to the same standards as everyone else, and when their leadership is inadequate, they make amends for it, just as they would expect others to do.

Show others what is important to you and the organization. Audit how you spend your time. Determine how well the proportions relate to the importance of the shared values. Establish new routines and systems that reinforce shared values, and, when necessary, take dramatic actions to confront critical inconsistencies. Take a stand based on principle.

Seek the developmental experiences you need in order to improve your capacity to lead.

Sustain Hope

Credible leaders keep hope alive. An upbeat attitude is always essential, and it’s even more important in troubling times. Optimists are proactive and behave in ways that promote health and combat illness. People with high hope have higher aspirations and higher levels of performance. Leaders foster the optimistic attitudes that lead to more challenging goals and achievements.

Sustaining hope means that leaders are personally there for the team in times of need. Credible leaders also recognize and reward people for actions that are in line with shared aims and aspirations. Recognition reinforces the shared values, providing an opportunity to tell success stories and foster feelings of appreciation.

Renewing credibility is a continuous human struggle and the ultimate leadership struggle. Strenuous effort is required to build and strengthen the foundations of working relationships. Constituents do not owe leaders allegiance. Leaders earn it. The gift of another’s trust and confidence is well worth the struggle and essential to meeting the challenges of leading people to places they have never been before.
ACTION STEPS
Get more out of this SUCCESS Book Summary by applying what you’ve learned. Here are a few questions, thoughts and activities to get you started.

1. Has your expectation been that people will (or should) follow you because of your title?
2. Think about a person to whom you are loyal. List three to five characteristics that you admire in that person.
3. Are you scrupulously honest? Or do you tend to gloss over or make light of problems or challenges?
4. Do you have a plan for where you want your organization to go? If not, take time this week to outline goals for the next few months and years.
5. Think about what is required for your role as a leader. In which areas of competency do you need to improve?
6. Where can you go or whom can you engage to improve those necessary skills? Make an appointment with a mentor or coach, or purchase materials that can help you learn and develop those skills.
7. Does the way you spend your time reflect your core values? If not, evaluate your schedule for the week and make sure to plan time for your priorities.

Recommended Reading
If you enjoyed this summary of Credibility, check out:

- Developing the Leader Within You by John C. Maxwell
- Take the Lead by Betsy Myers
- Great by Choice by Jim Collins

About the Authors
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Together they have authored the best-selling books The Leadership Challenge, The Truth About Leadership, A Leader’s Legacy, Encouraging the Heart and more than a dozen other books and workbooks on leadership. They have also developed the Leadership Practices Inventory, an acclaimed 360-degree leadership assessment tool.