

# SUMMARY

*BY ALYSSA BURNETTE*

# LEARNING LEADERSHIP

*BY JAMES KOUZES  
AND BARRY POSNER*



# **Summary of “Learning Leadership” by James Kouzes and Barry Posner**

**Written by Alyssa Burnette**

Learn why leaders are made, not born.

# Table of Contents

Introduction .....	5
The Myth of the Born Leader .....	6
Never Stop Learning.....	8
Be Open to Constructive Criticism .....	10
Final Summary .....	12



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# Introduction

Leadership: we hear about it all the time. From our earliest days in elementary school, we have “line leaders” and “pencil monitors,” and we quickly learn that power is awarded to those who show initiative and take charge. As we get older, the pressure to be a leader intensifies. Professional workshops prioritize “leadership skills” and college applications call for us to identify the ways in which we have lead at school, at home, and in the community. But what do you do if you don’t identify as a leader? What if you’re shy or nervous or prefer to stay out of the spotlight? What if you feel like you just don’t have what it takes to be a leader?

The author observes that many people feel this way. In fact, many people assume that leaders are born rather than made; either you’re born with leadership skills or you simply don’t have them. But what if that isn’t exactly true? What if it’s possible to learn everything you need to know to be an effective leader? The author believes that this is absolutely possible and that learning leadership is actually a life-long process. So, over the course of this summary, we’ll take an in-depth look at his top tips for learning leadership.



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# The Myth of the Born Leader

As we discussed in the introduction, the concept of the “born leader” is pervasive in our society. But the author argues that, actually, there’s no such thing! It’s true that some people are born with more naturally assertive personalities and that those qualities are well suited for a leadership role. But it’s not an “either/or” situation! Even if you aren’t a “take charge” kind of person, the truth is that leadership is much more than telling people what to do. And those qualities can be cultivated and developed, no matter what type of personality you have. So, how do you learn leadership? Well, the best way to start is by conducting an internal examination of yourself. Spend some time in quiet reflection and ask yourself: Who am I really? How do I make a difference? Another important question is one that you often see on college applications: What challenges have you faced? How did you handle them? How do you respond when confronted with conflict?

These five questions will help you better understand yourself. They will also help you to take stock of the leadership skills that you have at your disposal. And the best part is that everyone has these skills inside of them! You just have to identify them and put them to work. Once you’ve answered these questions, you might find it helpful to write them down. The act of writing something down helps us to solidify thoughts and retain information. So, once you put your answers down on paper, you’ll have a physical list that you can use as a reminder any time you need reassurance about yourself and your leadership skills. This reminder can also help you to focus on what’s really important.

This is especially helpful because it’s easy to get lost in the deluge of mixed messages about leadership. For example, many people think that leadership is about telling everybody else what to do or about being in a position of power. You might also cling to the mistaken assumption that every leader is supposed to act a certain way or embody a certain set of qualities. But all of these ideas are incorrect! That’s why it’s good to identify what makes you a good leader and to keep that reminder with you at all times. You can also

start each day anew by tailoring the questions you ask yourself to fit each day. After all, every day brings a new set of tasks, goals, and responsibilities, so ask yourself what you can bring to the table in each day's unique scenario. Identify your goals for the day and remember that, above all, you should never stop learning. A good leader knows that leadership is all about learning and improvement. They also know that that process is a life-long, never-ending cycle. So, work constantly on self-improvement and refresh your questions so they reflect your goals for the day!



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# Never Stop Learning

In the previous chapter, we debunked the common myth that leadership roles belong only to those who are considered “natural born leaders.” We also explored the truth that anyone can learn to become a leader if they are simply willing to open their minds and cultivate a pattern of life-long learning and self-improvement. So, in this chapter, we’re going to expand on that concept and discover why learning is essential to leadership. In short, we’re going to talk about the slogan that should characterize your life’s goal. That slogan is “never stop learning.” To understand why we should never stop learning, let’s put this concept into practical application by considering an example.

Imagine that you’re a budding novelist. You want to write the next great American novel. And if you get it right, your book might be the one good thing about 2020. But in order to do that, you need some advice. You need to learn more about the components that define a good novel. You need to know about the state of the literary market. You need to learn all about literary agents and how to find a good one. You’ve heard good things about the leading “writer’s guide” that every aspiring author relies on, so you head to your local book store to pick up a copy. But when you get there, you find that this book hasn’t been updated since 2003! There are no new editions, so all you can do is rely on the best writing and publishing advice that was available in 2003. Why would that be a problem?

Well, for starters, the literary market has changed a lot between 2003 and 2020! Many of the publishing companies that were big in 2003 have gone out of business. The leading literary agents of that time may no longer be employed, and if they are, there’s a strong possibility that they are no longer the best in the business. Likewise, literary trends might have changed a great deal since 2003. The trends that were so hot 17 years ago are not in vogue today. So, for all of these reasons, a writing guide published in 2003 is less than no help to you! In fact, it’s totally worthless. And the same would be true for you if you never continued to grow and evolve! This is pretty much true in every area of life, but it’s especially relevant when it comes to personal



growth and professional development. After all, how can you lead others if you aren't growing and improving yourself? How can you motivate your department to improve if you're still living in the trends of 2003?

That's why you have to grow personally and professionally. But it's also crucial that you look ahead to the future and prepare for the world's upcoming needs and trends. If you don't do this, you have no hope of staying relevant as an employee or a leader. So, that's one reason why it's important that you never stop learning! But continual growth is also important for guiding and helping others. After all, if you're not prepared for the future, how can you help your team evolve and prepare? That's why the author recommends dedicating some time to thinking about the future and asking yourself what you, your organization, and the people around you will need. This strategy is applicable whether you're part of a major corporation or a non-profit and it's equally relevant in both scenarios. So, make sure that you set aside time to reflect and think about the future. How might the needs of your employees or your customers change in ten years? Could your organization be more diverse? More inclusive? What is your organization's number one goal? Answering these questions will help you identify the areas in which you need to grow and enable you to formulate strategies that will help you achieve that growth.



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## Be Open to Constructive Criticism

No one likes being criticized-- that's simply a fact for every human being! But sometimes, well-intentioned feedback can help us grow and learn. That's because there's a difference between somebody saying, "You suck!" (which is designed to cut us down) and constructive criticism that is designed to help us grow. It's never fun to hear that we're in the wrong or that we should have done something better, even if it's true. But if we never acknowledge our inadequacies and failures, we'll never grow! So, even when it's painful, we have to be open to constructive criticism from people who have our best interest at heart. In fact, the author observes that this is a crucial skill for any leader.

We often associate positions of power with immovable strength and emotional security. And as a result, it's easy to assume that leaders don't need constructive criticism, especially not from others. But in reality, everybody needs advice and emotional support, no matter where you are in life! That's why it's important for us to never feel as though we're above taking advice and support from people who care about us. In fact, the author observes that our relationships with others are the most important things in our lives. Our personal and professional relationships keep us grounded, keep us connected, and keep us happy. Put simply, we need other people! So, don't be afraid to open up and be vulnerable with those around you.

Many people in positions of leadership feel that they shouldn't be vulnerable or admit that they are human too. But this actually strengthens your relationships with others and encourages them to like and trust you! Above all, people value sincerity and authenticity. So don't try to appear powerful or confident or infallible. Just focus on being real. Because when you're real and honest with yourself, you communicate a few things to others. For one thing, you show that you're open and relatable. And for another, you demonstrate that it's okay to struggle with things and okay to be honest about it. So, when you lead by this example, you advance a culture of sincerity and honesty that encourages other people to be emotionally healthy too. And

when you encourage other people to be their best, healthiest selves, you know you're succeeding as a leader!

So, when you find yourself in a leadership position, don't make a few of the common mistakes that typically beset people. Don't assume that you have to be anything you aren't. If you're nervous or new at something, it's okay to say that! And don't assume that a position of power automatically grants you emotional stability. Leaders struggle too and no one is perfect. And lastly, don't ever feel as though you're too important to acknowledge that other people may have good insights about how you can improve. Being a leader doesn't make you better than everybody else; it simply means that you have an opportunity to guide and encourage others. So, be vulnerable, be honest, and be open to constructive criticism. Accepting feedback with grace is part of our "never stop learning" philosophy because you can't grow if you never learn anything new! And all growth starts with admitting that you have room to improve.



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## Final Summary

You may feel as though this book has concluded without offering you any concrete steps for becoming a leader. But this book isn't a step-by-step guide for acquiring a leadership position or giving yourself motivational pep talks that will encourage you to take charge. Instead, this book is about cultivating the mental and emotional qualities that will make you an effective leader. You can begin to develop those qualities by debunking the myth of the natural born leader. Because that misconception goes hand in hand with another common assumption: that being a leader and having a position of power are the same thing. But actually, nothing could be further from the truth!

The truth is that anyone can be a leader, whether you're a CEO or a volunteer at an animal shelter. In reality, a leader is anyone who uses their gifts and talents to motivate others. A leader is also someone who knows that you should never stop learning and never stop growing. As a result, a good leader will always look for ways to improve and strive to be open and authentic in everything they do. That's what makes a good leader and anybody can learn those skills!



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