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## Executive Book Summaries®

# Learning Leadership

## The Five Fundamentals of Becoming an Exemplary Leader

### THE SUMMARY IN BRIEF

Leadership is a set of abilities, and like any other skill set it can be learned and improved. Becoming an exemplary leader isn't easy. It takes self-belief, aspiration, grit, support and deliberate practice. *Learning Leadership* delivers the concrete framework and practical steps for building exemplary leaders for today's and tomorrow's challenges.

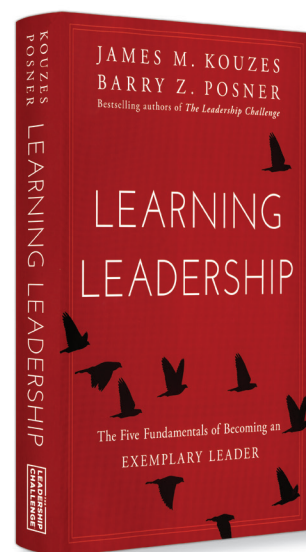
Whether you're an experienced leader or someone new to the role, this comprehensive guide offers evidenced-based strategies for taking charge of your own leadership development and unleashing the leader within. Based on more than 30 years of research, with data from more than 70 countries, this insightful treatment on learning explores the fundamentals of becoming an exemplary leader and presents a solid foundation on which to strengthen and expand leadership skills.

For those in roles of mentoring and coaching people, the practical and proven framework in this resource enables you to develop leadership potential in the emerging leaders with whom you work.

An exemplary leader must master many skills, but one of the most important is the ability to learn. *Learning Leadership* challenges you to do the meaningful and disciplined work necessary to becoming the best you can be.

### IN THIS SUMMARY, YOU WILL LEARN:

- Authoritative explanations on what's inhibiting leadership development.
- To take initiative for your own leadership development.
- The most critical leadership skill is the ability to learn.
- The first thing you need to learn in leadership is who you are.



by James M. Kouzes  
and Barry Z. Posner

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# THE COMPLETE SUMMARY: LEARNING LEADERSHIP

by James M. Kouzes and Barry Z. Posner

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*Learning Leadership: The Five Fundamentals of Becoming an Exemplary Leader* by James M. Kouzes and Barry Z. Posner. © 2016 by James M. Kouzes and Barry Z. Posner, has been summarized with permission of the publisher, The Leadership Challenge: A Wiley Brand. 248 pages, \$25.00, ISBN 978-1-119-14428-1. To purchase this book, go to amazon.com. Summary copyright © 2017 by Soundview Executive Book Summaries ® www.summary.com 1-800-SUMMARY.

## Learning Leadership Fundamentals

A universal set of leadership practices is associated with exemplary leadership, and these practices are within the capacity of everyone to follow. The challenge is to increase the frequency with which you engage in these leadership practices and become more comfortable and confident in their use.

### Leaders Are Born and So Are You

Every one of us has the necessary material to become a leader. The question you should be asking yourself is not "Will I make a difference?" In becoming a better leader, the most demanding and significant question you should be asking is "How will I make the difference I want?"

Five myths inhibit learning to lead and contribute most to the misunderstandings about what leadership is and isn't.

**The Talent Myth.** The belief that leadership is available only to a talented few is a far more powerful deterrent to development than anything else. It prevents too many people from even trying, let alone excelling. To become a better leader than you are right now, the first fundamental thing you have to do is *believe you can* be a better leader and that you can learn to improve your leadership skills and abilities.

**The Position Myth.** This myth assumes that leadership is a title and that if you don't have a title of authority, you aren't a leader. Leadership is not a rank, a title or a place. Leadership is about going places and guiding others. Leading is about the actions you take. It's about the values that guide your decisions and actions. It's about

the visions you have for yourself and others. To become an exemplary leader, the second fundamental is that you have to *aspire to excel*. You have to aim for something greater, dream of something better and strive for something nobler than what exists right now.

**The Strengths Myth.** 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 weaknesses, and in areas where you aren't strong and don't have natural talent, you or the organization should assign those tasks to other people. The emphasis on strengths has fundamentally discouraged people from challenging themselves to become better leaders. The third fundamental of becoming an exemplary leader is *challenge yourself*. If people built only on strengths, they would likely not challenge themselves or their organizations. You simply can't do your best without searching for new experiences, doing things you've never done, making mistakes and learning from them. Challenge is an important stimulus for leadership and for learning.

**The Self-Reliance Myth.** Leaders cannot possibly design breakthrough innovations, produce high-quality products, provide awesome service, attract raving fans and build great places to work without the trust, teamwork, strength and capabilities of everyone in the organization. Although there is certainly great benefit to being confident in your abilities to handle challenging situations, the best leaders know they can't do it alone. They know they need the support, engagement and commitment of others. Just as leaders can't make extraordinary things happen all by themselves, they can't become exemplary leaders by



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themselves either. That's why the fourth fundamental is to *engage support* in your learning and growth.

**The It-Comes-Naturally Myth.** A corollary to the myths of talent and strengths is that leadership comes naturally to those who are the best at leading. People admire those who make it seem so easy and attribute that ease to natural ability. The truth is that the best leaders become the best because they work hard at it and put in the hours of practice. Therefore, the fifth fundamental of becoming an exemplary leader is to *practice deliberately*. You have to put considerable effort into learning to lead to make leadership look effortless. No surprise that the more you practice, the easier it gets.

## You Are Already Leading — Just Not Frequently Enough

From an analysis of thousands of personal-best leadership case studies and interviews, it was discovered that ordinary people who guide others along pioneering journeys follow rather similar paths. Though each experience was unique in expression, every case followed remarkably parallel patterns of action.

These common practices create a leadership framework called The Five Practices of Exemplary Leadership. Leadership is not about personality; it's about behavior. Hundreds of scholars have used this framework in their own studies of leadership, investigating the central role leadership plays in personal well-being and organizational productivity and effectiveness.

Here are The Five Practices along with the two key essential leadership commitments connected with each one:

### Model the Way

- Clarify values by finding your voice and affirming shared values.
- Set the example by aligning actions with shared values.

### Inspire a Shared Vision

- Envision the future by imagining exciting and ennobling possibilities.
- Enlist others in a common vision by appealing to shared aspirations.

### Challenge the Process

- Search for opportunities by seizing the initiative and by looking outward for innovative ways to improve.
- Experiment and take risks by constantly generating small wins and learning from experience.

### Enable Others to Act

- Foster collaboration by building trust and facilitating relationships.

- Strengthen others by increasing self-determination and developing competence.

### Encourage the Heart

- Recognize contributions by showing appreciation for individual excellence.
- Celebrate the values and victories by creating a spirit of community.

Hundreds of studies by independent researchers have found that the extent to which people engage in these five leadership practices is consistently associated with important aspects of managerial and organizational effectiveness, such as work-group performance, team cohesiveness, commitment, satisfaction, motivation and productivity.

How frequently people report that their leaders engage in The Five Practices of Exemplary Leadership relates directly to their level of engagement. Demographic factors about direct reports do not illuminate why they are or are not engaged in the workplace, but knowing how they see their leaders behaving provides a substantial explanation for their levels of engagement. ●

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## Fundamental One: Believe You Can

Believing that you can lead is essential to developing your leadership skills and abilities. No one can put leadership into you. You have to bring it out of yourself. Authentic leadership flows from the inside out. You have to liberate that capacity you already have, and that begins by taking an inner journey to discover who you are. You already have it in you to lead.

### You Have to Believe in Yourself

Learning to lead all starts with what you think of yourself and the assumptions you feed. Learning to lead is about discovering what *you* value, what inspires *you*, what challenges *you*, what gives *you* energy and what encourages *you*. When you discover these things about yourself, you'll also know more about what it takes to lead those qualities out of others.

Sure, every leader has to learn the fundamentals and the discipline, and there are periods during which you're trying out many things you know nothing about and you have no idea what will work and what won't. There are times when you copy others and absorb a lot of information from the outside. These are necessary stages in your development as a leader. The point is that you can't begin to do any of these things until you *truly decide that inside of you is a person who can make a difference and provide leadership*.

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## Learning Is the Master Skill

Although there are many different ways to learn — for example, by taking action (e.g., preferring to learn by trial and error); by thinking (e.g. reading articles or books or going online to gain knowledge and background); by feeling (e.g., confronting themselves on what areas they are worrying about); and by accessing others (e.g., bouncing hopes and fears off someone they trust) — people can be differentiated by the range and depth of learning tactics they use when facing a new or unfamiliar experience.

Learning to lead is not dependent on any particular learning style. It doesn't matter how you learn. What matters is that you do more of whatever learning tactic works best for you. Clearly linked to becoming a better leader is becoming a better learner. The best leaders are the best learners.

## Leadership Emerges From Within

You can't expect to accomplish anything grand until you are aware of who you are and comfortable with being able to share yourself with others. If you're going to lead, then you have to wrestle with questions about what shaped you into the person you are now and what gives meaning to your leadership, your life and your work. Through the process of self-examination, you find the awareness needed to lead yourself and others.

In terms of how leaders learn and grow, there are three developmental stages.

**Looking Out.** When first learning to lead, you want to learn everything you can from others and you often try to copy their style. You do this to learn the fundamentals and to acquire the tools and techniques others have learned from their experience.

**Looking In.** Somewhere along the way, you'll notice that your talks sound mechanical and rote, that your meetings are boring, and that your interactions feel terribly routine and empty. You'll awaken to the frightening thought that the words aren't yours, that the vocabulary is someone else's, and that the technique is right out of the textbook but not straight from the heart. For aspiring leaders, this awakening initiates a period of intense exploration, a period of testing and a period of invention. You go beyond technique, training, imitating the masters and taking the advice of others. You go through a period of exhausting experimentation, second-guessing, and anxious and even painful moments, to emerge from all those abstract strokes on the canvas to an expression of self that is truly your own.

**Finding Your True Voice.** The turning point in your development as a leader comes when you're able to merge

the lessons from your outer and inner journeys. You awaken to the fact that you don't have to copy someone else, and you don't have to wear someone else's clothes. Because unless it's your words and your style, then it's not really you; it's just an act: you pretending to be you. You cannot lead out of someone else's experience. You can only lead out of your own. ●

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## Fundamental Two: Aspire to Excel

To become the very best leader you can be, you need to be clear about the core values and beliefs that guide your decisions and actions. You have to determine what you care most about and why it's important. Your motivation needs to be intrinsic and not instrumental. Top-performing leaders want to lead because they care deeply about the mission and people they are serving. Your success as a leader is inextricably linked to how successful you can make others.

### You Have to Know What's Important to You

Your fundamental values and beliefs 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, and the way you invest your time and your money. Values help you determine what to do and not to do. The leaders people admire the most, whether public figures or personal acquaintances, are those who have strong beliefs about matters of principle, an unwavering commitment to a clear set of values and passion about their causes.

You have to know in your gut that when you are making a decision, you are being true to who you are and what you stand for.

### Who You Are Isn't Who You Will Be

Becoming an exemplary leader fundamentally changes who you are. It changes your relationship with yourself. You're no longer just an individual contributor. You're now someone who takes people on journeys to places they've never been.

It changes how you see the future. You are expected to be able to imagine exciting future possibilities and communicate them to others. It changes how you respond to challenges. You are expected to be comfortable with uncertainty, champion experimentation and learn from experiences.

People expect their leaders to be forward-looking. To look toward the future, you start by being mindful of the present. Stop, look and listen to what is happening around you. That way you'll be better attuned to your own and

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others' aspirations. The ability to draw people forward requires you to be able to imagine what the future will look, sound and feel like. One place to start is envisioning the kind of leader you'd like to be in five, 10 or 20 years. This ideal image of self greatness generates the necessary emotional energy to pull you forward.

## It's Not Just About You

If you are marching forward toward a future destination and you turn around and notice that no one is there, then you're just out for a stroll. Leadership is fundamentally a relationship between those who aspire to lead and those who would choose to follow, and if no one is following you, then there's no relationship there. There's nothing that connects what you see to what they want.

Although you need to be clear about your vision and values, you must also be attentive to those around you. If you can't find alignment between what you care about and what others care about, then you won't find a common purpose or achieve much success.

This means that to become the best leader you can be, you have to know deep down what *others* want and need. You have to understand their hopes, their dreams, their needs and their interests. You have to know your constituents, and you have to relate to them in ways they will find engaging.

Finding common ground is what enables you to have something upon which to build. It creates the platform for constructing a better future.

Connecting deeply with others enables leaders to appreciate what drives the people around them and what unites them. Leadership becomes a dialogue and not a monologue. It becomes a conversation and not a recitation.

People want to follow a meaningful purpose, not simply do some work in exchange for cash. If you want to lead others, you have to put principles and purpose ahead of everything else. The larger mission is what calls everyone, leader and constituent alike, forward. It's what gives significance to the hard work required to do anything extraordinary. ●

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## Fundamental Three: Challenge Yourself

To develop as a leader and do your best, you have to step outside your comfort zone. It takes courage to learn. When you challenge yourself, it's likely that you'll be doing things that scare you. There will be fear and

uncertainty, so you need to see yourself making a choice about how to move forward, finding meaning and purpose in setting off in a new direction.

## Challenge Is Your Leadership Training Ground

Challenging yourself doesn't mean you need to go out and start something entirely new, launch a new company, begin a social movement or change history to be considered a leader. But you do have to be involved in exploring, investigating and experimenting with how things could be better than they are now.

Research shows that

- Opportunities to challenge the status quo and introduce change open the door to doing one's best. Challenge is the motivating environment for excellence.
- Challenging opportunities often bring forth skills and abilities that people don't know they have. Given opportunity and support, time and again ordinary people can get extraordinary things done in organizations.
- People who become leaders don't always seek the challenges they face. Challenges also seek leaders.

It's clear that if you want to develop your leadership capabilities, you need to take the initiative and volunteer for assignments that stretch you beyond your current comfort zone. You need to make them part of your personal leadership development curriculum.

Remember that a learning curve is not a straight line. When you engage in learning, instead of getting better, your performance at the beginning typically declines. That's why it's called a learning *curve*. When learning something new, performance always goes down before it goes up — and if it doesn't go down, then you are only doing something you already know how to do.

You're not growing until you feel you're pushing the edges.

## Get Curious and Go Kick the Ball Around

Questions send people on journeys in their minds. Knowing what to ask and how to ask it are critical skills for leaders and learners. Preparing to ask questions forces you to think about what you'd like to learn.

When you are curious about things that are outside of your regular affairs, and when you start asking questions, what you learn often becomes the catalyst for change and opens up new possibilities. This is all part of having a growth mindset. Because they believe that they are capable of always learning and developing and that their abilities aren't fixed, individuals with a growth mindset

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seek opportunities to learn. Gathering information about how they are doing and what they could do better is part of that process.

With a learning mindset, you can act like a scientist. Make your life a laboratory, and use it to conduct as many experiments as possible. Try something new, fail, learn and repeat. This should be one of your leadership mantras. Realize, as well, that you will learn that every so often you should try something entirely different, pursue another approach or change pathways.

### Get Gritty and Stay Hardy

Knowing what you want and wanting it intensely are two essential elements in the formula for success in learning, in leadership and in life. There's yet another vital component, and that's persistence. Together these ingredients make up what University of Pennsylvania psychology professor Angela Duckworth calls *grit*.

"Grit," Angela says, "is passion and perseverance for very long-term goals ... Grit is living life like it's a marathon, not a sprint."

Hardiness is a pattern of attitudes and skills that enables people to respond adaptively under high-stress conditions. There are three fundamental beliefs to being hardy: commitment, control and challenge. To turn adversity into advantage, first you need to commit yourself to what's happening. You have to get involved, engaged and curious. You also have to take control of your life. You need to make an effort to influence what is going on. Finally, if you are going to be psychologically hardy, you need to view challenge as an opportunity to learn from both negative and positive experiences.

Together, grit and hardiness make you resilient. They enable you to recover quickly from difficult circumstances. From a learning perspective, instead of just returning to the state you were in before the setback occurred, you move ahead and are in better shape than you were previously.

### Courage Gives You the Strength to Grow

Courage is not about being fearless so much as it is about being able to control your fear. When you remind yourself why you are doing something challenging — when you can find the meaning in the hard work and energy to make a change — your brain will see the situation more as a motivator than as a source of stress.

As theologian Mary Daly puts it, "Courage is a habit, a virtue. You get it by courageous acts. It's like learning to swim by swimming. You learn courage by couraging." The

reward for doing so is, at a minimum, learning — learning about yourself and learning about what might be possible.

Courage gives you the energy to move forward. Courage makes it possible for you to raise your hand and offer an alternative, speak out and express an opinion, stand up and be counted, and step forward and move in a new direction. Courage makes it possible for you to learn to be your best. ●

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## Fundamental Four: Engage Support

In learning to become an exemplary leader, you need to get connected. You need those connections to be strong and close. You need them to be personal, not just transactional. Often you're going to have to take the initiative to create and sustain these relationships.

You will also have to rely on the people around you to let you know the impact your actions and behaviors have on them. Getting open and honest feedback happens only when there is a foundation of mutual trust. You have to go first in creating a climate in which people trust one another enough to provide valid and useful information that will help you grow.

### I Couldn't Have Done It Without You

The best performers in all fields know that they can't make extraordinary things happen alone. You can't lead alone, and you can't learn alone. You need to involve others to become the best leader you can be.

Learning to lead requires getting help from others. Social support is a necessary condition for growth and development, particularly when that learning is challenging. "The single most important thing you can do to help ensure your future success," according to a Gallup study of more than 27 million employees worldwide, is to find someone who has an interest in your development.

Research across a broad range of disciplines consistently demonstrates that social support enhances learning, productivity, psychological well-being and even physical health. In fact, George Vaillant, Harvard professor of psychiatry, who directed the world's longest continuous study of physical and mental health, said, "The only thing that really matters in life are your relationships to other people."

Of course, you have to find a balance between trying to learn something on your own and sucking it up, swallowing your pride, and admitting that you are stuck and need help.

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When seeking help from others, the point is not to get someone else to do your work. The point is to get help to learn. Be prepared to describe what you've already tried and what you've learned. Come armed with a few action possibilities of your own so that it doesn't appear that you're asking for a handout. But when you're stuck, don't delay asking for help for too long. Often, the longer you wait, the worse problems can become and the more limited the options are.

Don't assume you know what others know, and don't discount their willingness to help. Until you ask, you can't be sure of either.

Finally, don't worry about other people thinking less of you if you seek advice. In fact, just the opposite is true. Reaching out to others for advice on tough challenges on which you need help not only builds your competence but also increases the sense in others that they can have confidence in your leadership.

### Get Connected

To become an exemplary leader, you have to connect to others. You have to invite people into your life. You have to be willing to get close to people and open up with them. You need to plug into the resources others have, find opportunities to observe leaders in action, and learn the social skills that will facilitate social interaction. You don't have to be a fiery extrovert to do all this; you can be a quiet introvert and still make lots of connections.

Research shows very clearly that when social connections are numerous and strong, there's more trust, reciprocity, information flow, collective action, happiness and wealth.

Recent longitudinal research has found that when people are in their twenties, the number of social interactions predicts greater well-being. As people move into their thirties and beyond, however, the quality of relationships becomes more important. Your ability to cultivate intimacy with others increasingly become a significant factor in your personal and professional development.

### Without Feedback You Cannot Grow

Valid and useful feedback is essential to learning. Learning cannot happen without knowing how you are doing and without identifying what you need to change to improve. Research shows that the best leaders are active learners, never believing that they know it all.

When it comes to leadership, feedback has to come from the people you are attempting to influence. They're the only ones who can reliably tell you the impact your

actions have on them. Asking for feedback is a habit you need to develop.

How do you get more comfortable giving and receiving feedback? The first thing you have to do is view feedback through the frame of a growth mindset instead of a fixed mindset. With a growth mindset, you assume that you can learn from criticism, that your capabilities are always evolving, that you can overcome obstacles and deficiencies if you put in the effort, and that even the most painful information can motivate you to improve. This may initially be difficult to do, but if you practice reframing feedback as an opportunity to get better at what you do, then it'll get easier over time.

Getting open and honest feedback can happen only when there is a foundation of mutual trust. As a leader, you have to go first in creating a climate in which people trust one another enough to provide valid and useful information that will help you grow. ●

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## Fundamental Five: Practice Deliberately

You can't get any better at leading without practice. Moreover, the time spent practicing won't amount to much unless you adhere to some discipline.

### Leadership Takes Practice and Practice Takes Time

Raw talent is not sufficient to achieve greatness. You need a particular kind of practice — *deliberate practice* — to develop expertise. Deep learning just doesn't happen without intentionality and intensity. The time required needs to fit with the skill you're practicing. Moreover, during repetition you need to pay as much attention to the methodology as to the goal.

CrossFit training in the gym, working out with weights, with specified repetitions and varied fitness stations, is a whole lot different from running around your neighborhood while talking with a friend on your mobile. Sloppy execution is not acceptable to top performers.

What keeps the top performers going during the often-grueling practice sessions is not the enjoyment that they are having but the knowledge that they are improving and getting closer to their dream of superior performance.

Mastery is about how you use your time to maximize your potential and learn your craft. If you want to be the best leader you can be, you will have to attend to your weaknesses. You can't delegate or assign to others those

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leadership behaviors you aren't comfortable doing. If you do, you'll get to be only as good as your weakest skill.

Although you may never get as good as someone else at everything you do, by continuously practicing, practicing and practicing, you can improve. You will also gain an appreciation for why persistence is another one of those attributes that differentiate the best from the wannabees.

The mantra for the 21st century learner is this: "No matter how good I am, I can always get better."

### Context Matters

Context matters. When applied to the workplace, context is often talked about as the organizational culture.

According to Edgar Schein, emeritus professor at MIT's Sloan School of Management, organizational culture can be best understood as having three levels.

First are artifacts, and these are the things you can see: structures, processes and observed behavior. You see them in dress, interior design, furniture, formal management systems, organization charts, employee perks, company publications and the like.

The second level is espoused beliefs and values. These are the ideals, aspirations, visions and ideologies the organization and its leaders champion. You hear and see these beliefs in speeches, employee orientations, training programs and posters on the wall.

The third level of organizational culture is "underlying, taken-for-granted beliefs and values" that are not expressed overtly in speech or text. They're implicit rather than explicit, but they are often the most influential factors in how people think, feel and act.

In growth-mindset organizations there is a "culture of development." If you want to become the best leader you can be, you will benefit immensely from working in an organization with a culture of leadership — a culture in which the artifacts, espoused beliefs and values, and underlying assumptions are supportive of leadership development.

What are the attributes of a culture in which leaders are most likely to thrive and be productive? Four major clusters of cultural attributes are trust, opportunities for learning, support for risk and failure, and models of exemplary leadership. ●

## Commit to Becoming the Best

Leadership is not just in making the decisions to act; it's about acting on the decisions you make. The best way to take those actions is to do little things every day that make

meaningful progress on your work as a leader. Small acts accumulate and provide momentum. You have to freely choose the actions you take, go public with your choices and then make sure it's hard to reverse course.

### It's Not How You Start; It's How You Finish

Becoming an exemplary leader requires your behavioral commitment. It's not something you do now and then when you feel like it. The people around you expect you to be the best leader you can be every day. They expect, and so should you, that when you commit to lead you are also committing yourself to doing it well.

Leadership is hard work. It's challenging work. There will be conflicts and struggles. There will be resistance to the changes you want to make. There will be times when you want to give up. As rewarding as it is, leadership can be exhausting. That's just the reality of leading. That's why you have to keep your hope alive.

People expect their leaders to be inspiring, upbeat and energetic. No one wants to follow a negative, downbeat and lethargic person. You have to sustain hope. Hope has three essential ingredients. First you have to have a goal — something you want to attain or obtain. Then you have to have the willpower, the "reservoir of determination," and third, the waypower, the "mental plans or road maps that guide hopeful thought" to get you to your goals whatever the obstacles that you might face.

People with high hope are not Pollyannas. They are not blind to the realities of the present. If something isn't working or if the current methods aren't effective, they don't ignore it, cross their fingers or just redouble their efforts. They assess the situation and find new ways to reach the goals. And if the goals begin to recede rather than appear closer, people with hope reset their goals.

You can learn to be full of hope, just as you can learn to lead. ●

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