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# Applying Kouzes & Posner's Leadership Concepts to Poverty Alleviation Work in the Developing World



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## *Abstract*

Many people in the developing world struggle with significant poverty. People who feel trapped in a cycle of poverty often describe feeling inferior and powerless. Those who are relatively wealthy and in leadership roles may suffer from a different pathology that some have described as a “god-complex” in which a sense of superiority may develop, leading to the belief that they have been chosen to decide what is best for the poor. As the leaders of organizations that do poverty alleviation work in the developing world contemplate what approach to take when formulating their leadership style, they would do well to base their decisions on the writings of Kouzes and Posner in their seminal book titled, “The Leadership Challenge.” While this book was not written specifically for leaders working in the realm of poverty alleviation in the developing world, its leadership concepts are particularly well-suited for use in that context.

## **Poverty in the Developing World**

Many people in the developing world struggle with significant poverty, poor access to quality healthcare, inadequate and unsafe food and water supplies, lack of safe housing, rampant unemployment, financial barriers to high quality affordable education, poor infrastructure to promote commerce and lack indoor plumbing, electrical power, internet connections and more (Corbett & Fikkert, 2009).

While most people might think of the material consequences of poverty — such as those described above — or a lack of money to pay bills, buy food, or pay rent, Corbett and Fikkert (2009) describe the deep psychological toll that poverty has on those who find themselves in its grip. Based on excerpts from research conducted by the World Bank (2000) in which poor people were asked to describe what poverty means to them, the descriptions they provided

were striking. Participants described poverty using such words as “humiliation,” “shame,” “depressed,” “low self-esteem,” “inferior,” and “powerless” (Corbett & Fikkert, 2009, p. 52-53).

While people who feel trapped in a cycle of poverty often describe the above mentioned inferiority and powerlessness (Corbett & Fikkert, 2009, p. 64), those who are relatively wealthy may suffer from a different pathology that some have described as a “god-complex” in which a subtle sense of superiority occurs leading to the belief that they have been chosen to decide what is best for the poor (Christian, 1994).

While few in the developed world would admit to consciously acknowledging the presence of a god-complex, those attitudes can influence how we might think about the poor or what should be done to help them. Some may be motivated to do charity work; more because of the way it makes the volunteers feel than for any lasting benefit for the poor they claim to serve. Subconsciously, there may be a desire to show others how kind, generous, and noble they are instead of doing the hard work of getting at the root causes of the poverty and partnering with the poor to overcome those forces. It is also not uncommon for well-intentioned people from the developed world to try and be helpful, but at times those efforts can actually create more dependence and perpetuate poverty (Corbett & Fikkert, 2009).

In order for people stuck in a cycle of poverty to ever gain a sense of value and human dignity, they need more than a handout that might meet an acute need and make their benefactors feel good about themselves. Those who truly want to help the poor need to focus on ways to empower them to move towards independence and to overcome obstacles that have been impediments to progress in the past. No person feels good about relying on the charity of others to provide the necessities for his / her family. There is something much more fulfilling and affirming about obtaining provisions through honest work using personal talents and skills to generate an income. While it is certainly important that the necessities of life are secured, it is also vital to recognize that what a person must do to get those necessities shapes one’s self image and sense of worth (Corbett & Fikkert, 2009).

There are many situations where people are trapped in poverty and have never really known anything else. Many of these examples can be found right in the US. Sometimes their default coping mechanism is to want, or even expect, a handout. Perhaps someone has had a challenging upbringing and drops out of high school. Maybe she also got pregnant as a teenager and now finds it very difficult to secure a good full-time job that will hire a high school dropout and generate enough income to cover her family’s expenses. As a result, she starts working low-paying, part-time jobs and receiving welfare checks. The only apartment she can afford is in a subsidized, low-income public housing project. If the young woman’s income reaches a certain threshold, she may lose those welfare benefits and then there may not be enough additional income to cover the loss of public assistance. This can cause the person to become entrapped in a cycle of poverty where reliance on handouts (public assistance) is necessary, but may concomitantly trigger a sense of dependence, low self-esteem, and hopelessness that things can never get better.

This same type of scenario is also very possible in the developing world where access to free public education is often lacking, so its inhabitants fail to acquire and develop literacy and

other important skills that are essential in well-paying jobs. Desperate people with no obvious path out of poverty often end up becoming dependent on the charity of others. While the assistance that is received from aid organizations may temporarily meet some needs, it likely will do nothing to eliminate ongoing poverty-based needs in the future (Corbett & Fikkert, 2009).

## **Applying Kouzes and Posner's 5 Leadership Practices in the Developing World**

As the leaders of organizations that do poverty alleviation work in the developing world contemplate what approach to take when formulating their leadership style and strategic plans, they would do well to base their decisions on the writings of Kouzes and Posner in their seminal book titled, "The Leadership Challenge" (2007). While this book was not written specifically for leaders working in the realm of poverty alleviation in the developing world, its leadership concepts are particular well-suited to providing a foundational framework that such leaders can build on that will ensure that the people they intend to help are actually involved in the process of working towards poverty alleviation and not just the unintentional victims of assistance that actually does more harm than good.

Kouzes and Posner (2007) have conducted extensive research on what makes some leaders highly effective at what they do. This research has served as the impetus for developing what they call the "Five Practices of Exemplary Leadership" (Kouzes & Posner, 2007, p. 14). These leadership practices have been described as follows:

- 1. Model the Way**
- 2. Inspire a Shared Vision**
- 3. Challenge the Process**
- 4. Enable Others to Act**
- 5. Encourage the Heart (Kouzes & Posner, 2007, p. 14)**

When an analysis of these five leadership practices is overlaid onto the needs and dynamics at play in those struggling with poverty in the developing world, it can be argued that leaders who base their leadership style on Kouzes and Posner's framework may be perfect agents of change in the ongoing effort to alleviate poverty for many.

Like Cashman (2008), who writes about the importance of leaders understanding their true core purpose in life and using their leadership gifts to focus on service "to improve the lives of everyone and everything (they) touch" (p. 77), Kouzes and Posner's writing has a very similar service- and values-based emphasis. Woven throughout their *Five Practices of Exemplary Leadership* is the theme that leadership is all about relationships. The status and characteristics of those relationships lie at the very center of determining what sort of results any initiative might produce. Kouzes and Posner (2007) describe it this way: "A leader-constituent relationship that is characterized by mutual fear and distrust will never, ever produce anything of lasting value. A relationship characterized by mutual respect and confidence will overcome the greatest adversities and leave a legacy of significance" (p. 24).

Successful and inspired leaders who are working in developing nations to try and alleviate poverty and assist people in breaking out of the cycles that keep them there, by the very nature of their work will need to overcome great adversity, including multi-generational beliefs and practices that have led to the present reality.

As appropriate relationship-based programs are developed and implemented that are designed to empower those in need, hope will rise and profound change can occur. A closer look at each of Kouzes and Posner's (2007) *Five Practices of Exemplary Leadership* and their associated *Ten Commitments of Leadership* (there are two commitments for each of the five practices) may reveal many practical suggestions for leaders who face the challenge of inspiring the transformational change that is vitally important when trying help people move towards self-sufficiency and improved feelings of self-worth.

### **Exemplary Leadership Practice #1: Model the Way**

1. **“Clarify values by finding your voice and affirming shared ideals.**
2. **Set the example by aligning actions with shared values” (Kouzes & Posner, 2007, p. 26).**

Effective and trusted leaders must have credibility and respect from their constituents. Credibility and respect are earned through long-term relationships and showing consistently over time a commitment to principles and values that are deemed important to all relevant stakeholders. These ideals must be evident in both the speech and actions of leaders and be done in such a way that others who work or come in contact with the leaders have a clear picture of what these leaders and their organizations represent (Kouzes & Posner, 2007).

If leaders from affluent countries in North America or Europe worked in developing nations to try and alleviate poverty, it would take some time to earn the trust and respect of the indigenous people. If these leaders from far-away lands acted too condescending or mistreated the locals, any advice that they offered, even if done with noble intentions, would likely be ignored or rejected.

It would be important for the leaders to come alongside the poor to understand the forces at play in their lives that hold them back from reaching their potential. Instead of hiding away in some affluent ivory tower where advice and charity is dispensed from afar, the leaders should be in the trenches learning from those in need and working diligently to develop strategies that have buy-in from those struggling with poverty.

As trust and understanding develops between the leaders and the people they intended to assist through their lives of service, the leaders would have opportunities to both model a different way of thinking and functioning to the indigenous people that might start to instill hope, while showing the ways the leaders' staffs should approach their missions and interact with the local citizens. Each time a new team member joins the poverty alleviation effort, the leaders would have another opportunity to model the correct way to show respect and honor the people they serve, so that not only can monetary-based poverty be alleviated, but also the poverty of the soul that leads the poor to believe that they are inferior and powerless (Corbett & Fikkert, 2009).

## **Exemplary Leadership Practice #2: Inspire a Shared Vision**

1. "Envision the future by imagining exciting and ennobling possibilities.
2. Enlist others in a common vision by appealing to shared aspirations" (Kouzes & Posner, 2007, p. 26).

Kouzes and Posner (2007) describe the best leaders as those who see things in ways that are different from others. They see how things are now, but envision a future filled with possibilities about what could be. These leaders have a strong belief that a better future is possible and have the ability to inspire others to join them on the journey to making those possibilities into realities.

Because leaders are only leaders if they have constituents, it is imperative that leaders have the ability to inspire a shared vision that can serve as a rallying cry to prompt the group moving together towards their common goals. In regard to this concept, Kouzes and Posner (2007) say,

***To enlist people in a vision, leaders must know their constituents and speak their language. People must believe that leaders understand their needs and have their interests at heart. Leadership is a dialogue, not a monologue. To enlist support, leaders must have intimate knowledge of people's dreams, hopes, aspirations, visions, and values (p. 17).***

While the previous passage was not written specifically with leaders in mind who work in developing nations, one could easily believe that it was taken from a textbook on best practices in poverty alleviation.

The centrality of relationship-building is once again woven throughout this second of five practices of exemplary leadership. In order for impoverished individuals to be willing to do the hard work necessary to break the cycle of poverty that holds them down and not just settle for the next handout, those people will need to believe that the alternative path offered to them by leaders from outside of their immediate environs is credible, possible, and worth the difficulty that will need to be overcome to implement the new way of thinking and functioning. Unless leaders have invested time and energy into getting to know the people, understand the specific challenges they face, and developed the kind of relationship that generates trust, leaders' visions of what is possible will not be shared by the people mired in poverty.

While leaders in developing nations must work hard towards gaining the trust of the people they are there to serve, they must also gain the trust and respect of their staff. Just as the leaders come alongside indigenous peoples to understand their struggles, hopes, and dreams, so too must the leaders connect with their staffs and invest time in relationship-building with them. Significant societal changes can only happen when all of the leaders' constituents are on the same page and have been given the opportunity to provide input into the organizations' plans for change.

In best practices, the leaders set the general goals and articulate core objectives of a mission, but each of the constituents is empowered to help flesh out the details as they begin to adopt the vision as well. Once everyone has coalesced around the central vision of the leader, it

becomes a shared vision (Kouzes & Posner, 2007). This shared vision may generate possibilities that various constituents had previously never believed were possible. When a leader generates the spark of new possibilities and others begin to share and take ownership of the vision as well, true transformation can occur that is beyond what any one person could hope to do.

### **Exemplary Leadership Practice #3: Challenge the Process**

1. **“Search for opportunities by seizing the initiative and looking outward for innovative ways to improve.**
2. **Experiment and take risks by constantly generating small wins and learning from experiences” (Kouzes & Posner, 2007, p. 26).**

Kouzes and Posner (2007) point out that no great leaders are known for just keeping everything the same. They see the challenging issues before them and create an atmosphere that is conducive to innovation and reimagining how things can be done better. Leaders are thought pioneers who also encourage creative solutions from their team members. They know that they won't always be the one with all of the answers, so they remain open to ideas and inspirations that might come from many different sources that could be either internal or external to their organizations. Not all ideas are successful, but leaders are not afraid to try something new, learn from it if it fails, and then try something else. As each successive small victory occurs, momentum builds and eventually the team's confidence grows to the point where they believe they have the ability to tackle very large challenges (Kouzes & Posner, 2007).

Once again, this component of the *Five Practices of Exemplary Leadership* is very relevant for leaders working in developing nations. Certainly, the challenge of overcoming generations of poverty is monumental and no one person can fix it alone or very quickly. In fact, the problem may seem so overwhelming that many refrain from even trying to intervene.

All leaders who are willing to step into a role that requires working in the realm of poverty alleviation are going to first have to spend considerable time immersed in the culture with which they have agreed to partner and genuinely attempt to understand the nature of the contributing issues. Obviously, if rampant poverty exists, the current approach has likely been a failure for most people, so leaders will eventually need to challenge the status quo process for how things are done. The best leaders in this type of scenario will have trusted advisors who emanate from the indigenous population to ensure there is a sound understanding of the cultural context for what has been done in the past and possible unexpected consequences of introducing new approaches that might seem totally logical and appropriate for a visitor to a new culture, but be deemed offensive or inappropriate for an indigenous person.

Creative people who are not part of the indigenous population may have ideas that appear obviously helpful to an outsider, but may have never been considered by those who are immersed in their own impoverished state. Great leaders recognize that sometimes a slightly (or profoundly) different perspective on an issue can be the impetus for an idea that revolutionizes the way things are done.

Transformational and sustainable change can occur if leaders working in the developing world challenge the process by doing the following:

- Surround themselves with people from the indigenous population who have good insights into the challenges faced by their people and knowledge of what solutions have been tried in the past.
- Also surround themselves with people from outside that local population who honestly care about empowering the indigenous people to ensure an infusion of fresh new ideas.
- Learn from past successes and failures, both within their own organization and other organizations that work in a similar geographic area or do similar relief work in other developing nations.
- Build on the success of small victories to reshape the culture from one of defeatism and despair, to one of great hope and a “can do” attitude.

#### **Exemplary Leadership Practice #4: Enable Others to Act**

1. **“Foster collaboration by building trust and facilitating relationships.**
2. **Strengthen others by increasing self-determination and developing competence” (Kouzes & Posner, 2007, p. 26).**

Kouzes and Posner (2007) report that in all of the research they have done on best practices among outstanding leaders, a common denominator is that those effective leaders were not hoarders of power. They created an environment in their organizations that was based in trust and focused on “we” instead of “I” when describing their successes (p. 20). The employees who were in these enlightened organizations felt empowered to participate in the strategy-making process and were more engaged in their work because they felt like valuable members of the team. The best leaders actively sought input and participation from all of their stakeholders and did not cluster power and decision-making to a small group of people near the top of the corporate hierarchy.

This type of work environment helps the employees to feel a higher level of commitment and personal strength and reinforces the idea that their leaders believe they are capable of doing high quality work. All of these workplace attributes result in each employee having a greater sense of ownership in the mission of the organization and promotes a positive sense of self-esteem and personal value. When leaders demonstrate high levels of trust and take steps to reinforce the value of everyone’s contributions, people feel strong and capable and start to believe that they can do more than they ever thought was possible (Kouzes & Posner, 2007).

This fourth practice of exemplary leadership could be very powerful for an indigenous person in the developing world to encounter when interacting with a leader from the developed world. As has been previously established, those who find themselves trapped in states of poverty develop profound feelings of worthlessness and low self-esteem (Corbett & Fikkert, 2009). There is certainly a long history of people from the developed world exploiting and causing significant harm to people in the developing world. Leaders who serve in developing nations with a sincere desire to empower and include the local people in decision-making could begin



to change the very fabric of a society still dealing with the ravages of slavery and other colonial abuses.

As indigenous people work with those from the developed world to analyze the causative factors that have created poverty in their culture and together develop economic, educational, healthcare, and other strategies to gradually address the factors that have been identified, a sense of empowerment and a profound reduction in feelings of hopelessness and despair can occur for current generations and a totally different, more positive reality can be created for future generations. There may be no greater application in the world of the practice of enabling others to act, than for enlightened leaders to employ this approach with those in the developing world who have so much potential to reinvent their current reality if only they are mentored by those who believe in them and help them manifest their abundant potential.

### **Exemplary Leadership Practice #5: Encourage the Heart**

1. **“Recognize contributions by showing appreciation for individual excellence.**
2. **Celebrate the values and victories by creating a spirit of community” (Kouzes & Posner, 2007, p. 26).**

Kouzes and Posner (2007) make a strong case for the real impact leaders can have when they make a concerted effort to be ongoing sources of encouragement and support for the people within their organizations. They point to multiple case studies of leaders who created a positive work environment by giving people handwritten “thank you” notes, initiated various mechanisms to recognize team members’ contributions and accomplishments, and invested time in relationship-building that enabled them to know about important events in their team members’ lives – both struggles and victories. They describe organizational events where fun and games occur, but point out that these events can be sources of great value to organizations’ cultures as they bring people together in a way that creates genuine comradery and builds cohesiveness. They point out that these various approaches to encouraging team members, “... when done with authenticity and from the heart, build a strong sense of collective identity and community spirit that can carry a group through extraordinarily tough times” (Kouzes & Posner, 2007, p. 23).

When whole cultures of people have spent their entire lives crushed under the weight of poverty and all of its inherent struggles, both physically and psychologically, one cannot underestimate the value of working with leaders who come from developed nations and place a strong emphasis on emotional connectivity.

When every day is a struggle to survive, encouragement can provide the small ray of hope that someone might need to have the strength to face another day. Despair is pervasive when people have to wonder how they will feed their families, provide clothes and shelter, and generate enough money to pay for healthcare or schooling for their children. It could be lifesaving to work with a leader that generously dispenses genuine encouragement, while regularly reminding them that their lives matter and that hope exists for a brighter future.

No matter where people live, their race, ethnicity, financial status or any other defining characteristic, all people need to feel that their lives have value, purpose, and that others care

about them. Many of the poor in developing nations have probably been exposed to people with greater resources and perceived power who have not been benevolent; these people have instead exploited them and contributed to their feelings of inadequacy.

If leaders from developed nations came to a developing nation and showed the people genuine concern and became a source of encouragement, the impact of this on the indigenous people could not be overstated. As such, those leaders who connect with indigenous people and who have invested time in relationship-building while communicating messages that express genuine belief in their value and the enormity of their untapped potential while encouraging hope for a better future, would likely grow to have an amazingly dedicated and loyal team that would tirelessly support the leaders' efforts to improve the conditions in their country.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

Being trusted as leaders is a privilege that carries with it much responsibility. It could be argued that when leaders find a large proportion of their constituents coming from vulnerable populations in developing nations, there are even higher ethical standards that must be followed. When leadership skills, such as those espoused by Kouzes and Posner (2007), are applied to massive global problems like poverty alleviation in the developing world and all of its associated comorbidities, the potential to leave an amazing legacy is heightened. Collins and Hansen (2011) report that the best of the leaders they studied did not define success by traditional materialistic standards, fame or power. Instead they report that,

**They defined themselves by impact and contribution and purpose. Even the uber-ambitious Bill Gates, who became the wealthiest person in the world, wasn't primarily driven by gratifying his personal ego... After working tirelessly for a quarter of a century to make Microsoft a great company, creating powerful software and contributing to the vision of a computer on every desk, he turned with his wife, Melinda, to the question, 'How can we do the most good for the greatest number with the resources we have?' And they set forth the audacious aim, among other goals, to eradicate malaria from the face of the earth (p.33-34).**

Most leaders that decide to work in developing nations will never be able to achieve something as monumental as the eradication of malaria from the earth, but leaders can make a difference in the lives of the people they come in contact with and then if those people are empowered to change the course of their lives, they can become teachers and mentors to show other indigenous people the way out of the cycle of poverty. One relationship at a time, communities can be changed and generational curses broken. Leaders may never see the full impact of the positive ripple effects they have had that spread out over time and space, but their lives will be well-lived if they used their leadership skills to alter the destiny of even one person who otherwise would have been sentenced to a life spent anguishing in poverty. Each person, regardless of where they are born or into what level of financial means they arrived, is worth the effort.

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