Conference Report: The Leadership Challenge

How to Make Extraordinary Things Happen in Your Organisation

19th September 2012, London

When your speakers have spent 30 years collecting leadership data from 5000 case studies in 72 countries, run over 3 million leadership surveys and are on the fifth edition of their best-selling book – The Leadership Challenge - you know you’re in for an interesting day.

It’s clear that Jim Kouzes and Barry Posner are as passionate about their work today as when they first started. With so many prestigious awards, honours and impressive biographies it’s impressive to find them both extremely likeable and indeed humble, proven by Barry’s opening line, “We won’t tell you anything you don’t already know”.

We were there to understand how ordinary people achieve extraordinary results as leaders, what the skills of exemplary leaders really are. We expected to be inspired, to be challenged and be encouraged - we weren’t disappointed.

The Foundation of Leadership

According to Kouzes & Posner leadership is a skill. An effective leader is someone whose direction you would willingly follow. Their studies show that exemplary leadership breaks down into attributes and behaviours which we can all learn.

In our first exercise we were asked to choose 7 attributes that we personally look for in a leader. I was staggered: in over 30 years of research, there are 4 that have consistently scored over 51%: Honest, Forward-thinking, Competent and Inspiring. I had 3 of those on my list.

We were then introduced to The Leadership Practices Inventory (LPI) questionnaire. Each “practice” (there are 5 – more of these later) has 6 behaviour based statements asking how frequently you engage in them. We scored ourselves – 1 being almost never, 10 being almost always. We were reminded that this is not a test, nor are there “right” or “wrong” answers.

The rest of the day was spent looking at each of the practices in detail, each brought to life by Jim and Barry through quotes from real leaders, case studies, exercises, videos and the pure passion of their delivery.

Anywhere in the world, when leaders perform at their best, the stories may be different but the skills are the same. It’s about how we choose to behave. And the more frequently leaders demonstrate each of the 5 practices; the more engaged their people are.
The 5 Practices of Exemplary Leadership

• **Model the Way**
  “A good leader takes the time to know his or her team on a personal level, but a great leader goes one step further and learns about each person’s values, how they build trust and what is core to their motivation and drive.” Hilary Hall, General Electric.

To be credible as leaders we need to understand our own and others’ personal values. We must set an example by aligning our actions (what we do, what we say, how we behave) with these shared values, indeed we must DWWSWWD (do what we say we will do) to build trust and credibility.

So answer this question at the end of every day: “What have I done today that demonstrates the values that I hold near and dear to me?”

• **Inspire a Shared Vision**
  “Leadership is more than influence. It is about reminding people of what it is we are trying to build – and why it matters. It is about painting a picture of a better future.” Michael Hyatt, CEO, Thomas Nelson

Envision the future and the prospects and possibilities it brings. Share your story with passion and conviction to those around you, so they buy into your vision and are just as enthusiastic about the future as you are. And try this exercise:

*Imagine it’s the year 2022 and you’re attending a ceremony honouring you as ‘The Leader of The Year’. What do you hope others are saying about you that night?*

• **Challenge the Process**
  “The similarity that most stuck out.. was how each person had to overcome uncertainty and fear in order to achieve his or her best.” Katherine Winkel, Seattle Genetics

Leaders search for opportunities by seizing the initiative to look for innovative ways to improve. Things stop at no, so say yes. Try. Make mistakes. Try again. Look for new and different ways to be better, improve and challenge and ask: “Why have we always done it this way?”. As Jim and Barry say, “People do their best when faced with challenge or when they challenge themselves.”

So once a week, ask those you lead this question: “What have you done this week to improve so that you’re more effective than you were last week?” and be prepared to answer it yourself, too.
**Enable Others to Act**

“We will work harder and more effectively for people we like. And we like them in direct proportion to how they make us feel.” Irwin Federman, US Venture Partners.

Collaborate with others. Empower them to be better and to challenge themselves. Build strong relationships with your team so that they can grow and be able to do things they couldn’t before. Remember, leaders are good learners and good listeners. So in EVERY interaction with every person ask yourself, “What can I do in this moment to make others feel more powerful, competent and able to do more than they think they can?”

**Encourage the Heart**

“They want to know that I value them. That I think they are doing a great job. And that I am not taking their contribution for granted.” Jane Binger, Lucille Packard Children’s Hospital

Recognise others. Show appreciation for the work they do. Celebrate the victories and create a team spirit. Take time out to make others feel they are doing a good job and contributing to the successes. Make people feel good. If you express confidence in their abilities, they will put their hearts into whatever project is on the table.

So every day thank each team member for something he or she has done to contribute to high performance.

It was a truly inspiring day. Thank you Jim and Barry.

**About the author**

This report was written by Kevin Alboni, Learning Consultant at Masterclass Training.

I am a Consultant with over 10 years’ industry experience. I recently joined Masterclass – one of the leading providers of the framework in the UK and Europe. The video featuring Lance Burn was created with us following the leadership programme we did with his team - so it was a real privilege to attend this event and hear, first hand, from Jim and Barry. It was an excellent event – Jim and Barry are engaging and inspiring speakers. They speak with passion about their subject and inspired us to take action and become leaders in our own right.