Leadership in Economic Development: *Model the Way*

*By Joy Wilkins, CEcD*

*Leaders reside in every city and every country, in every position and every place. They’re employees and volunteers, young and old, women and men. Leadership knows no racial or religious bounds, no ethnic or cultural borders... There is no escape. Leadership is everyone’s business... And, because you are the most important leader to those closest to you, the only choice you really have is whether or not to be the best leader you can be.* – James M. Kouzes and Barry Z. Posner

Individuals can and do make a difference, and ordinary people can accomplish extraordinary goals. This is the underlying premise of Kouzes and Posner’s *The Leadership Challenge*, a book that calls for all of us to be in the business of leadership. As economic development professionals – given the high stakes of our potential impact on the communities we serve – we must not only respond to this call but also continually work toward being the best leaders we can be. Easy, right? Well, not so much...

Fortunately, this decades-in-the-making masterpiece by Kouzes and Posner offers a guide for our efforts. And while there are a number of traits and competencies important to becoming a better leader, first and foremost, say Kouzes and Posner, “credibility matters.”

A periodic survey on leadership characteristics – conducted by Kouzes and Posner for more than 25 years and reflecting insights from more than 75,000 participants across the globe – reveals that the number one trait people look for in their leadership, time and time again, is honesty. According to the survey, a track record of honesty is followed in importance by three additional traits: being forward-looking, inspiring and competent.

Drawing on the findings of this research, Kouzes and Posner identified five practices which serve as a guide for exemplary leadership. These are:

1. Model the way,
2. Inspire a shared vision,
3. Challenge the process,
4. Enable others to act, and
5. Encourage the heart.

The remainder of this article focuses on the first practice, “model the way.”

**Clarifying values**
Exemplary leaders “model the way” by expressing their voice and affirming shared ideals for their team, explain the authors. In their research, they have inventoried the characteristics of people who are most admired for their leadership. Those most frequently mentioned in this regard are, not surprisingly, Abraham Lincoln and Martin Luther King, Jr. They point out a striking characteristic such leaders share: “strong beliefs about matters of principle.” It is this unwavering commitment – as demonstrated in their words, actions, and lives – which sets these leaders apart.

Indeed, passionate leadership is essential for serving effectively in economic development, as noted in IEDC’s paper on *High Performing Economic Development Organizations* (PDF). However, expressing your voice can come only after finding your voice, explain Kouzes and Posner: “to act with integrity…you have to take a journey into places in your heart and soul…you must know what you care about.”

While passionate leadership is an imperative ingredient, whether this ends up influencing an organization’s culture is another matter. Top-notch leaders are known for being able to transform their values into shared values with those they serve, note Kouzes and Posner. Given the multiple constituencies served by the economic development leader, he or she must be able to communicate, convene, connect, and collaborate effectively (characteristics also mentioned in the IEDC paper above). Passion, combined with the ability to engage others in sharing that passion, is what enables leaders to have powerful and lasting influence.

**BEING the example**

“Titles are granted, but it is your behavior that wins you respect,” say Kouzes and Posner. They describe exemplary leaders as those who “model the way” with their own behavior – not only by following through on promises and commitments, but also in terms of stubbornly aligning actions with shared values. “How you spend your time is the single clearest indicator, especially to other people, of what’s important to you,” they note.

So, for example, if an EDO’s leadership has determined that ongoing professional development is important for the organization’s team members, how much time do the leaders spend on their own professional development? In programmatic terms, if an EDO’s leadership has determined that serving existing industry is most important, is this reflected in the amount of time its leaders spend with such businesses?

One of the challenges associated with being a leader is that the better leader you become, the more you are watched from 360 degrees – that is, by your bosses, employees, peers, customers, and partners. And while being watched, you are influencing others in countless ways. Therefore, as Kouzes and Posner point out, it is critical for leaders to be careful with the use of language – word choice speaks volumes – and to ask purposeful questions in every conversation. In addition, being watched provides the opportunity to receive meaningful feedback on your leadership. For example, the authors note the importance of learning how your actions align with shared values, and how your efforts may impact the performance of others.
To model the way, one must also be an effective teacher, say Kouzes and Posner. They point out three ways of doing so. First, they advise the importance of confronting “critical incidents” – those events “in the lives of leaders (and organizations) that offer the chance to improvise while still staying true to script.” Secondly, the authors point to the power of storytelling, particularly to provide examples of when members have acted upon shared values and such actions have led to desirable results. Relating to this, their third piece of advice is to “reinforce the behavior you want repeated” by recognizing (celebrating) performance which is aligned to your organization’s shared values.

**Moving forward**

Fortunately, a helpful tool for modeling the way now exists for the economic development profession in IEDC’s newly released guide on *Executive and Professional Competencies for Economic Developers* (PDF). Following are just some examples from the executive competency model that align with Kouzes and Posner’s ideas for becoming a better leader:

- Builds common ground, convergence, and consensus about the future direction of the organization.
- Exhibits strong executive presence as reflected by behavior, appearance, demeanor, and posture.
- Demonstrates a strong personal commitment to the organization and its long-term success.
- Possesses a strong sense of personal integrity, duty, and responsibility. Upholds ethical practices.
- Has a high level of personal energy.
- Understands how own behaviors affect others.
- Makes self accountable; readily admits own mistakes and shortcomings, and offers ways to address.

Whatever role we may play on our team, it is important to engage in regular self-examination regarding our personal leadership to continually improve in what we do. For example, borrowing from the *Leadership Practices Inventory* – an assessment tool developed by Kouzes and Posner based on their work in *The Leadership Challenge* – following are three questions we can ask ourselves as we move forward:

- Am I clear about my philosophy of leadership?
- Do I set a personal example of what I expect of others?
- Do I spend the time and energy making certain that the people I work with adhere to the principles and standards we have agreed on?

*Joy Wilkins is a Senior Fellow with The University of Georgia Fanning Institute and a member of the IEDC Board of Directors.*