

## Leader**SHOP**

Rodger Dean Duncan talks with Jim Kouzes

# Leadership As Dialogue, Not Monologue

**Expert:** Jim Kouzes—co-author of *The Leadership Challenge*, named as one of the best executive educators in the U.S.

**What you'll learn:** Effective leadership is based on genuine empathy for other people's feelings, opinions, and circumstances. Mutual understanding is a critical ingredient.

You may have excellent technical skills. You may even be innovative and visionary. But if you don't know how to *engage* people, you're toast.

The best leaders (regardless of title or lack thereof) have good people skills. They talk well. They listen well. They offer feedback in ways that inspire improvement rather than resistance. They welcome feedback, and accept it without excuses.

To explore these all-important behaviors, I visited with Jim Kouzes, the Dean's Executive Fellow of Leadership at Santa Clara University.

With his colleague Barry Posner, Kouzes is co-author of the internationally award-winning and bestselling book *The Leadership Challenge* (with upwards of three million copies sold). They've co-authored more than 30 other books, including *The Truth About Leadership*, *Credibility*, *Encouraging the Heart*, and *A Leader's Legacy*.

*The Wall Street Journal* named Jim as one of the ten best executive educators in the U.S., and he's been recognized as one of *HR Magazine's* Top 20 Most Influential International Thinkers.

Jim's approach to communication is especially relevant to your work with change.

**Rodger Dean Duncan:** *In your practice you often make the point that leadership is a dialogue, not a monologue. How does dialogue inspire a shared vision and enable others to act?*

**Jim Kouzes:** Leadership is about relationships, and strong relationships are built on mutual understanding. You can get to that *mutual* understanding only through conversation and dialogue.

This means you can't adopt the view that visions come from the top down. You have to start engaging others in a collective dialogue about the future, not delivering a monologue. You can't mobilize people to willingly travel to places they don't want to go. No matter how grand the dream of an individual visionary, if others don't see in it the possibility of realizing their hopes and desires, they won't follow voluntarily or wholeheartedly.

To become an exemplary leader, you must develop a deep appreciation of the collective hopes, dreams, and aspirations of your constituents. Constituents come to believe in their leaders—to see them as worthy of their trust—when they believe that the leaders have the constituents' best interests at heart.



**Duncan:** *Genuine empathy is essential.*

**Kouzes:** Absolutely. Leaders who are clearly interested only in their own agendas, their own advancement, and their own wellbeing will not be followed willingly. You have to reach out and attend to others, be present with them, and listen to them.

This isn't just theory. We know from our research that when

leaders seek consensus around shared values, constituents are more positive. People who report that their managers engage in dialogue regarding common values feel a significantly stronger sense of personal effectiveness than individuals who feel that they're wasting energy trying to figure out what they're supposed to be doing.

**Duncan:** *What else does good dialogue bring to relationships?*

**Kouzes:** Dialogue also produces clarity. One study, for example, reported 185 different behavioral expectations about the value of "integrity" alone. Even with commonly identified values, there may be little agreement on the meaning of the values statements.

The lesson here is that leaders must engage their constituents in conversation about matters of principle. A common understanding of values emerges from a process, not a pronouncement.

**Duncan:** *So, dialogue helps produce a sense of community?*

**Kouzes:** Exactly. Exemplary leaders also know that they can't do it alone. Nothing extraordinary ever happened without the enthusiastic and committed involvement of others. Leadership is not a solo performance. It's a team effort. Leaders need partners to make extraordinary things happen in organizations.

Therefore, effective leaders invest in creating trustworthy relationships. They build spirited and cohesive teams, teams that feel like family. They actively involve others in planning and give them the discretion to make their own decisions. Leaders make others feel like owners, not hired hands.

Leaders develop collaborative goals and cooperative relationships with colleagues. They are considerate of the needs and interests of others. They know that these relationships are the keys that unlock support. Leaders bring people together, creating an atmosphere understanding and a shared fate. Mutual respect is what sustains extraordinary group efforts.

**Duncan:** *To help people clarify their strengths and identify opportunities for improvement, 360-degree feedback is often used in leadership training and coaching. What advice do you have for people who resist participating in such a feedback process?*

**Kouzes:** The truth is that the best leaders are the best learners. We find in our research that higher performing leaders more frequently engage in learning activities than do lower performing leaders.

Feedback is at the center of any learning process. Without feedback there is no learning. Thoughtfully studying feedback on your performance is the only way for you to know whether you're getting close to your goal and whether you're executing properly. Researchers consistently point out that the development of expertise or mastery requires one to receive constructive, even critical, feedback.

People need to know if they're making progress toward the goal or simply marking time. People's motivation to perform a task increases only when they have a challenging goal *and* receive feedback on their progress.

Goals without feedback, or feedback without goals, have little effect on people's willingness to put extra effort (or motivation) into the task. Just announcing that the idea is to reach the summit is not enough to get people to put forth more effort. They need information on whether they're still climbing in the right direction, making progress toward the top, or sliding downhill.

With clear goals and detailed feedback, people can become self-correcting and can more easily understand their place in the big picture.

**Duncan:** *So you agree that feedback directly influences the amount of effort a person invests in self-improvement?*

**Kouzes:** Absolutely. For example, consider what happens to your self-confidence without feedback. In a study, people were told that their efforts would be compared with how well hundreds of others had done on the same task. They received praise, criticism, or no feedback on their performance. Those who heard nothing about how well they did suffered as great a blow to their self-confidence as those who were criticized. Only those who received positive feedback improved.

However, our studies on exemplary leadership consistently show that the statement receiving the lowest rating, both from leaders as well as their constituents, is “Asks for feedback on how his/her actions affect other people’s performance.” In other words, the behavior that leaders and their constituents consider to be the weakest is the behavior that most enables leaders to know how they’re doing!

You can’t learn very much if you’re unwilling to find out more about the impact of your behavior on the performance of those around you. It’s your responsibility as a leader to keep asking others, “How am I doing?” If you don’t ask, they’re not likely to tell you.

**Duncan:** *What can be done to create a “feedback-friendly” environment, and what are the characteristics of helpful feedback?*

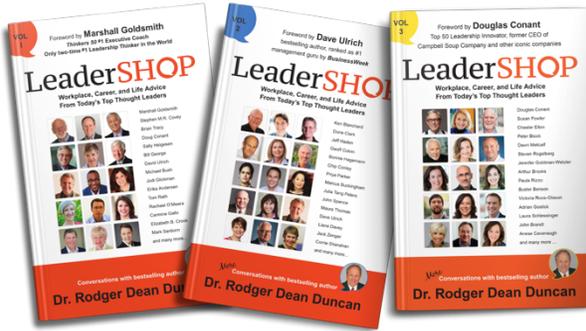
**Kouzes:** It’s not always easy to get feedback. It’s not generally asked for, and most people aren’t used to providing it. Skills are required to do both. You can increase the likelihood that people will accept honest feedback from you if you make it easier for people to give honest feedback to you.

To be most effective, good feedback needs to be specific, not general. It must be focused on behavior, not on the individual (personality). It should be solicited rather than imposed. It should be timely rather than delayed. And it should be descriptive rather than evaluative. You must be sincere in your desire to improve yourself, and you must demonstrate that you are open to knowing how others see you.

### **Personal application:**

1. In interacting with the people you lead, under what circumstances might you be tempted to engage in a monologue rather than dialogue?
2. What specific steps can you take to help create a “feedback-friendly” environment in your workplace?
3. How can you use Jim’s ideas on conversation in your Scan for Speed Bumps work?

For dozens of Dr. Duncan's one-on-one conversations with today's top thought leaders, see the **LeaderSHOP** series. Go to <https://amzn.to/2KMf0Dg> to find it on Amazon.



"Whether you're striving to be more effective with colleagues in the boardroom or with loved ones at your kitchen table, *LeaderSHOP* is sure to become a favorite item in your personal development toolkit." - **Marshall Goldsmith, #1 Executive Coach in the World**

"Rodger Dean Duncan's previous book *CHANGE-friendly LEADERSHIP* is goldmine of actionable wisdom. With *LeaderSHOP*, he continues to pass out the gold nuggets." - **Jack Canfield, co-creator of *Chicken Soup for the Soul***