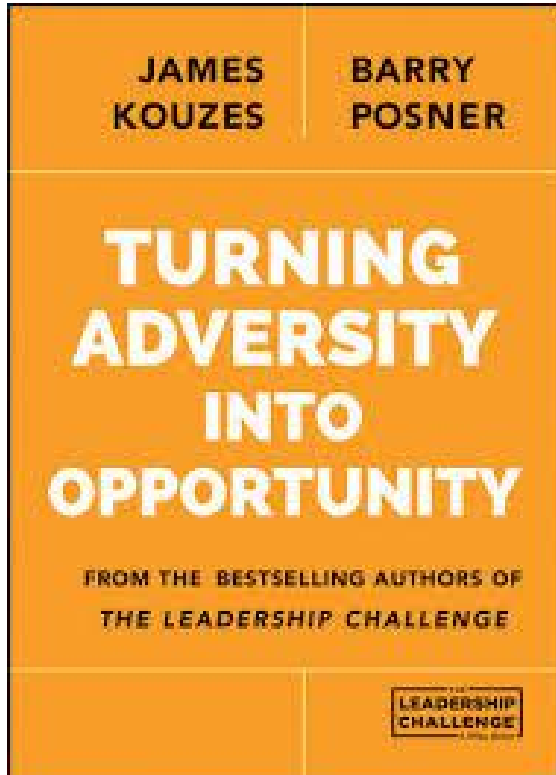


TURNING ADVERSITY INTO OPPORTUNITY

BY JAMES KOUZES AND BARRY POSNER



Summary

James Kouzes's and Barry Posner's book *Turning Adversity into Opportunity* provides leaders with a framework for how to turn situations of uncertainty and difficulty into opportunities for success. The authors do this by sharing six strategies that will benefit any leader in a difficult position. These six strategies include:

1. Broaden the Context
2. Defy the Verdict
3. Fully Commit to What's Important
4. Take Charge of Change
5. Engage Others
6. Show You Care

While this book was written to benefit those in positions of leadership, it certainly a valuable piece of literature for everyone to study, as these six principles have value and worth for anyone struggling with adversity.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

James Kouzes and Barry Posner have been working together in the area of leadership for over thirty years. They have co-authored more than a dozen award winning book, and have devoted their careers to the research and study of leadership, and the development of that field. James Kouzes is the Dean's Executive Fellow of Leadership at the Leavey School of Business at Santa Clara University. Barry Posner is Accolti Professor of Leadership and former Dean (1997-2009) of the Leavey School of Business at Santa Clara University. These individuals are recognized globally for their work in the field of leadership, and their input of how to turn adversity into opportunity is a valuable source of information for anyone seeking to learn more about the topic.

STRATEGY #1: BROADEN THE CONTEXT

We all experience areas of uncertainty or times of disruption in our lives, and organizations are no different. They face volatility, uncertainty, complexities, and ambiguities on a regular basis, and while this is often pushed to the side, the consequences of these disruptions can be a difficult experience for those in positions of leadership. Fortunately for these leaders, others in leadership positions have faced similar difficulties, thus it is crucial to broaden the context and observe what those before you have done to turn adversity into opportunity (pg. 6).



Spiske, M. (November 10, 2018). *Brown game pieces on white surface* [Photograph]. Unsplash. <https://unsplash.com/photos/QozzJpFZ2lg>

“Challenges, adversity, uncertainty, ambiguity, volatility, and complexities are not partial to an individual, organization, or a period in history.”

-James Kouzes & Barry Posner (pg. 6)

“Resilience is enhanced when people are able to share positive stories about handling past hardship.”

-James Kouzes & Barry Posner (pg. 7)

PUTTING THINGS INTO PERSPECTIVE

Here are some questions that leaders can ask to help broaden the context:

- What is the bigger picture?
- How can we help people understand what is happening in the broader environment and how it is affecting our business?
- How can we educate others about the larger context?
- How can we get people to see that we are not any worse off than others were before us?
- How can we give people time and space to discuss their answers and gain perspective?
- What can we do to frame what is happening and being done in ways that give people hope?

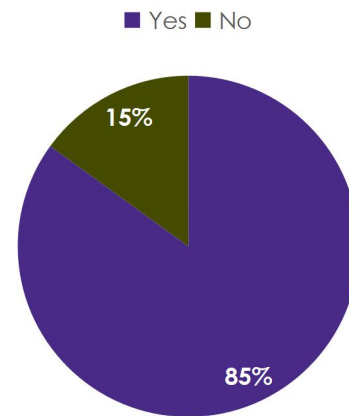
“Putting things into perspective is vital to transforming adversity into opportunity.”

Strategy #2: Defy the Verdict

"The first responsibility of a leader is to define reality" (pg. 9). The notion of truth is crucial to one's credibility, but it is also crucial in having the ability to fully understand a situation. Often times leaders will deny the reality of an adverse situation, thus ignoring the problem which led to the adverse situation. Instead, a leader must acknowledge the adverse situation, but defy the verdict that often comes in association. An example of this principle is cancer patient recognizing the diagnosis, but defying the verdict of a low survival rate and fighting despite the verdict.

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DO YOU FEEL BETTER KNOWING, EVEN IF IT IS BAD NEWS?



When some cancer patients were presented with a serious diagnosis they "responded with a fierce determination to overcome. They didn't deny the diagnosis. They defied the verdict that is usually associated with it. Was it any coincidence that a substantial number of these patients lived significantly longer than had been predicted by their oncologists" (pg. 10)?

Do not deny the diagnosis. Defy the verdict.

WHAT CAN A LEADER DO?

Defying a verdict is not simply a mental assent, there must be specific actions that a leader takes to demonstrate that they are maintaining a grasp on reality, but allowing themselves to defy the negative verdict. A leader must:

- Define and acknowledge reality, but not accept it as their personal fate.
- Recognize that things are not transpiring in accordance to your plan.
- Do not dwell on the potential threat.
- See change as a challenge and as an opportunity for renaissance and learning.
- Move resources or personal to adjust to the change.
- Do not become resentful, bitter, or alienated.
- Become engaged, involved and committed.
- Act quickly as to avoid falling into despair.

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Leaders have the ability to inspire others in the organization through a demonstration of their determination. This means the leader must recognize the reality, regroup, reassess, and prepare a plan to move forward. A crucial aspect of this strategy is to ensure that the leader does not fall into grief or self-pity. An important note, is that this strategy will not make the problem disappear, but rather give hope that a better future is within the grasp of those that persevere through the adversity.

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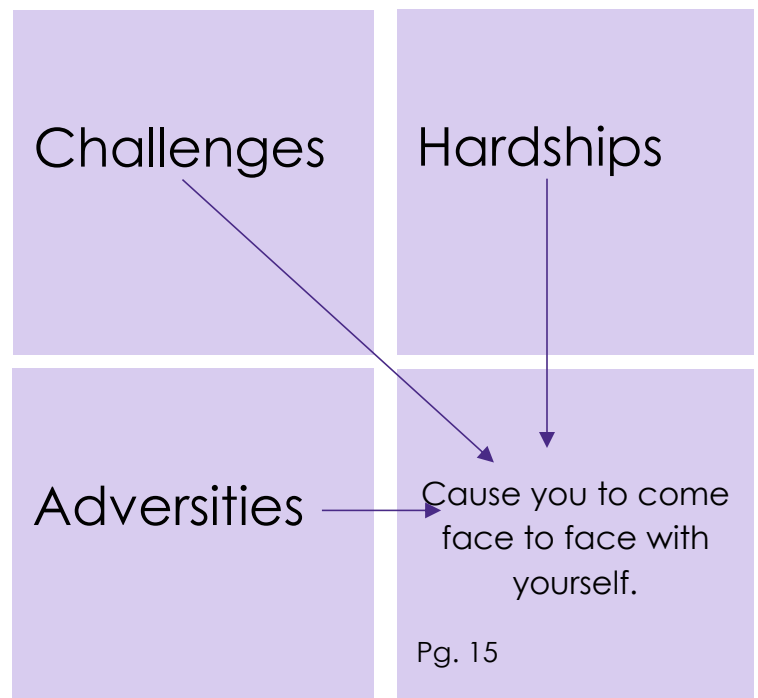


“Being willing to defy the verdict, and giving people reasons why, are critical to keeping them focused on what is possible” (pg. 13).

Strategy #3: Fully Commit to What’s Important

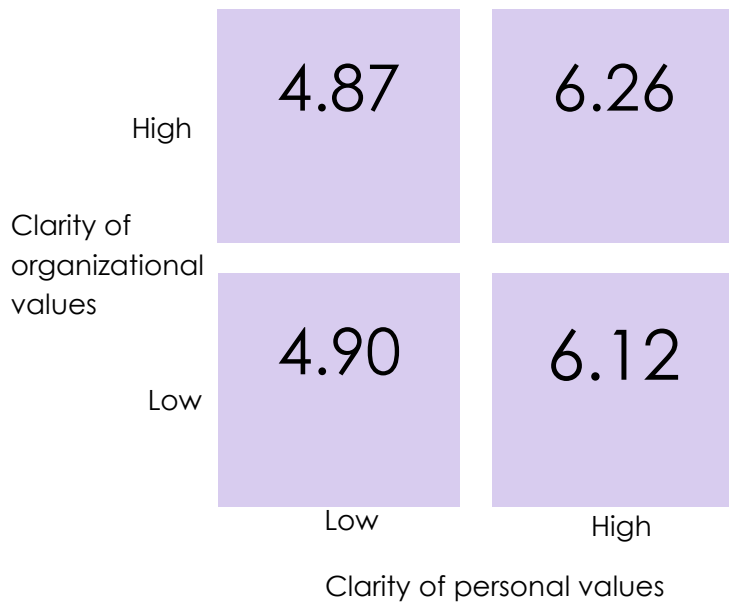
A commitment to what is important is an essential aspect of being a leader in times of adversity. To demonstrate this principle, create a list of historical leaders that had a significant impact on the world around them. If you were to examine the list, it is likely that every individual on the list was a person of solid principles and fully committed to an idea they considered important. This principle does not change over time or change based on the significance of the organization. A leader must have strong values and beliefs and fully commit to them.

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The chart to the right is a graphic which measures the significant impact on people's performance when the organization's values and personal values are clear. The chart shows the extent to which people said they were committed to the organization as measured on a 1 (low) to 7 (high) scale. We can see that when values are clear, people are more committed to the organization than when values are not clear.

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“What does all this mean? Essentially, clarity about personal values has the most significant impact on employees' feelings about their work and what they're doing in the workplace”

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A notable observation about the level of commitment seems to have more to do with the clarity of personal values and less to do with the clarity of organizational values. This puts emphasis on the importance of a leaders clarity and their response to adversity.

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Determining Commitment

Questions a leader can ask to determine if people can be more fully committed:

- “Why are we doing what we are doing?”
- What's the larger purpose?
- Why does what we're doing matter?
- What are we really passionate about?
- What important shared values and beliefs can we emphasize to keep people engaged?
- Who's counting on us? Who Cares about and depends on the quality, innovativeness, and efficiency of our efforts?”

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Strategy #4 Take Charge of Change

Leaders must take charge of change. This principle holds true regardless of whether the change is a large scale problem or a minor inconvenience. These adversities can range from having an inhibiting routine, introducing a new technology, dealing with a reluctant team or having an over-controlling boss. A leader must take charge over all of these areas and change them to be more beneficial.

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Researches asked their participants to describe characteristics of a leader in 5-6 words. 95% of all answers are included the follow list:

- Challenging
- Rewarding
- Exciting
- Dedication
- Intensity
- Commitment
- Determination
- Persistence
- Inspiring
- Uplifting
- Motivating
- Energizing
- Unique
- Important
- Proud
- Empowering

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“Leadership opportunities are in the moment/ What makes the difference between being a leader or not is how you respond in the moment.”

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“If you think you're too small to make a difference, you haven't spent a night with a mosquito.”

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When approaching changes in an organization, a leader must know that their will be stress that comes with taking charge. Taking charge of a situation means rocking the boat and shaking up the status quo. This can only be done by making changes that run counter to the previous way the organization functioned, thus causing short term instability. This process can be stressful, and a leader must be prepared to face such a challenge.

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Leaders do not always seek the challenges they face.

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“Challenge is the motivating environment for excellence.”

Pg. 23

“Challenging opportunities often bring forth skills and abilities that people don't know they have.”

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“It's not so important whether you find the challenges or they find you.”

Pg. 23

When taking charge of change, it is crucial that the leader responds in a manner that demonstrates positivity and assertiveness. However, this can be a difficult task in a moment of adversity or trial. This ability to respond to high degrees of stress in a positive manner is called psychological hardness, and it is a skill which can be learned.

Psychological hardness is a trait often found in lawyers, corporate managers, nurses, combat soldiers, and other positions that have a high degree of stress, but where the individual can bounce back in a positive manner.

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Three Essential Attitude of Psychological Hardness

- Commitment
- Control
- Challenge

These three C's demonstrate that for a leader to maintain a positive mindset in the face of adversity, they must be committed to the change, have control over the situation, and be willing to challenge the status quo.

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“Personal improvement and fulfillment comes through the continual process of staying engaged in the uncertainties of life.”

Pg. 25

“You can't play it safe.”

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Taking charge of change is not a one step process. It is an incremental process, which requires a step-by-step solution. If a leader attempts to make changes too quickly, it will result in failure and if a leader attempts to make changes too slowly, it will result in failure. Make sure that you are working with your team to ensure that the changes are occurring at a pace which can be handled. Moving step-by-step allows the team to master the changes one piece at a time develop a fuller understanding of the new system.

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Questions to Ask Before Taking Charge

- “What do we deeply want to have happen?”
- What decisions and actions can we control?
- How can we positively influence the outcome?
- What actions can we take to create forward momentum?
- What little things can we do to get moving in the right direction?
- How can we transform this struggle into an engaging learning experience?
- If we are going to fall, how can we fall forward and achieve a sense of progress?”

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Strategy #5: Engage Others

The minds of human beings are wired to build connections with others. Neuroscientists have concluded that just having one supportive and stable relationship will provide an individual with enough support to power through adverse situations. Scientists have also concluded that individuals with stable relationships will live longer and happier lives. This social aspect of life is crucial for humans to thrive, and this principle of engaging with others is also crucial to the success of a leader in getting through times of adversity.

Pg. 29-30



Duy P. (June 16, 2018). People Holding Shoulders Sitting on Wall. [Photograph]. Unsplash. https://unsplash.com/photos/Cecb0_8Hx-o

“Humans are social animals, and trust and collaboration are essential to dealing with challenge and adversity.”

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It does not matter how capable a leader is if there is not a joint effort from the team.

Pg. 30

How Does Engagement With Others Turn Adversity Into Opportunity?

The American Psychological Association reported that “accepting help and support from those who care about you and will listen to you strengthens resilience” (pg. 31). When adversity arises and a leader must call on their team to get through the difficulty ahead, this resilience will be needed. When individuals are engaged and dependent on one another in times of adversity, they will be motivated to strengthen their relationships, find favorable outcomes for all parties and resolve interpersonal conflicts with one another.

Questions that a leader should consider with their team:

- “Who else is affected?”
- How can we engage with them?
- How can we use this opportunity to fortify relationships with others and build partnerships?
- How can I connect people with one another on the project?
- How can I let others make choices?
- Whom can we turn to for caring support and wise counsel [spelling error in book]?
- How do we strengthen the sense that we are in this together?
- Who has done something that has helped to make a difference, and how can we tell their story?”

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Strategy #6: Show You Care

A leader demonstrating their care for those around them is important in every organizational situation, but certainly in times of adversity. During times of adversity people have a desire to be appreciated. This is when a leader must be able to demonstrate their care for others. This demonstration of caring and appreciation can help lower stress and build relationships, which is crucial to the success of a leader and the organization.

Pg. 33

“An important way that leaders show they care is by participating in any hardships and pain like any other member of the organization; not doing so almost always irreparably damages their credibility.”

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“The truth is that we all need encouragement. We may not all need the same variety, texture, or frequency, but none of us can expect extraordinary accomplishments without knowing that someone cares about what we are doing.”

Pg. 33-34

“Only those who have suffered with their constituents can genuinely uplift them.”

Pg. 34-35

Communication is a crucial aspect of showing others that you care. Individuals within the team must feel as though they belong to the group, thus it is the role of the leader to effectively convey to the group members that they belong and that their contributions have a positive impact on the organization. A potential harm in not effectively conveying this attitude of caring is that individuals may internalize a negative association or feeling with the group. It is thus the job of the leader to give the individuals a positive/ caring feeling to internalize.

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A leader must ensure that those around them feel appreciated and valued through effective communication and a clear demonstration of caring acts. A failure to do so could result in people feeling unappreciated, inconsequential, unimportant, or invisible. To ensure that communication is clear, a leader should ask themselves the following questions:

- “How can I make sure that people on my team know that I care about them?”
- What can I do to maintain face-to-face interactions and conversations with people?
- How do I communicate my belief that the people I am working with are winners?
- How can I share the sacrifices that people may be, or are being, called on to make?”

Pg. 37-39

Critical Evaluation

Turning Adversity Into Opportunity by James Kouzes and Barry Posner is a must read book for a leader in any organization. It is a short read, but every sentence provides the reader with a great piece of information that will allow them to thrive as a leader. The use of real life examples all throughout the book provides the audience with a relatable and memorable context that will allow for an easier implementation of all six strategies. While this book was written for those in leadership positions, this book is a must read for anyone who is seeking to improve themselves. This book teaches caring, dedication, self-improvement, communication skills, etc. Every one of these topics can be implemented into the lives of individuals not in formal positions of leadership and improve their lives and careers.

While this book has a lot of great attributes, there are some flaws that need to be addressed. This book is written for leaders, but throughout the book there would be instances where the focus would shift away from leaders and begin explaining situations and scenarios from a different perspective, without any explanation as to why the focus was shifting. These instances still had important information within them, but it did distract from the focus of the book.

Overall, this was a fantastic book and is a must read for anyone in a formal or informal position of leadership.

“Let’s get excited about the adversities. Yes, that’s right – excited. They are not brick walls. They are turning points.”

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Kouzes, J. M., & Posner, B. Z. (2014). *Turning Adversity Into Opportunity*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.