

# WHAT IF SELLERS BEHAVED AS LEADERS?

**James Kouzes, Barry Posner, and Deb Calvert**



# It is time we start making a shift.

Research shows you can make more sales by abandoning sales-y behaviors buyers resist and replacing them with leadership behaviors buyers desire. Sellers do extraordinary things when they stop pushing people to buy before they're ready, and start guiding buyers by transforming values into actions, visions into realities, obstacles into innovations, separateness into solidarity, and risks into rewards.

It is about ennobling the sales profession and dignifying buyers, a shift that turns tedious transactions into exciting customer experiences. This shift is focused as much on buyers as it is on sellers, which represents a truth every exemplary leader understands: it's not about you, it's about your constituents—their needs, hopes, dreams, and aspirations—and leaders can't make anything happen all by themselves.

## What If Sellers Behaved as Leaders?

Amy spellman made a mid-life career change. She became an insurance agent because she wanted to help people. Amy was excited about the fresh start, income potential, and the opportunity to make a difference in people's lives.

Six months later, Amy left sales. For her, the role was unfulfilling despite the higher income. Following up company-generated leads and making cold calls felt like dialing-for-dollars, and calling people multiple times felt like an imposition. Selling in a high-pressure environment meant spending less time helping people in the way she'd envisioned. Instead of feeling supportive, she felt pushy. Instead of enjoying connections with clients, she felt inauthentic, rushed, and slightly manipulative when using sales tactics she had observed and learned from others.

Perhaps you've felt the same way at some time in your sales role. Maybe you've sensed that buyers seem suspicious and guarded when you contact them. Possibly your friends and family are cynical, and question your character and integrity because you are in sales.

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# Redefining the B2B Buyer Experience

The pervasive, negative stereotypes about sellers affect how people initially react to you, even, on occasion, family and friends who know you well. The Glengarry Glen Ross and Wolf of Wall Street movie personas of sellers are reinforced in real life often enough to put buyers on the defensive. Amy put it to us this way: “It didn’t feel like I could win. The people I called assumed I was going to take advantage of them. They didn’t even give me a chance to show how I would be different.” What’s a seller to do?

## More of the Same Behaviors Results in More of the Same Reactions

Too many sellers shrug their shoulders and adopt these stereotypical behaviors. Others defuse buyers’ negative perceptions by operating with integrity, the more challenging path to be sure.

For buyers, the challenge is to separate the wheat from the chaff, determining which sellers are trustworthy. An overwhelming refrain from buyers in our study was, as one person said, “All sellers seem to be saying and doing the same things.” Sellers, despite their intentions, are failing to behaviorally differentiate themselves.

As buyers become increasingly self-sufficient and more resistant to advances, sellers scramble to find more leads, make more calls, and get in front of more buyers. Engaging in more of the same old sales behaviors exacerbates the problem. All sellers seem the same because they’re all behaving the same way.

# Something Different, but What?

There must be another option. Retail researchers Robin Lewis and Michael Dart concluded that winning people's wallets requires delivering "such an awesome connecting experience that they will go out of their way to come to you."

"An awesome connecting experience?" Now that's something different in selling! It's a phrase that's more likely to be associated with leadership. Let's break it down.

**Awesome.** When we're using the slang definition of awesome, it means the sales call is going to be "very impressive." Jaded buyers won't rate even the bestselling behaviors as "very impressive." Quality is a weak differentiator that may go completely unnoticed. The dictionary meaning of awesome is more applicable: "causing an overwhelming feeling of admiration or respect." Now that's something that would certainly capture a buyer's attention and clearly be differentiating.

**Connecting.** Connecting, too, aims for differentiation. Connecting means joining or linking. To be clear, connecting means much more than a social media link. It involves more than the initial rapport building you do with prospects. A connection isn't just a name in your CRM. Automation and artificial intelligence (AI) can't adequately make connections. In human interactions, there's a need for emotional connection.

**Experience.** In ancient times, people traded commodities to survive. As manufacturing expanded, sellers offered variety and quality to distinguish their goods. In time, service became the differentiation between one manufacturer's goods and another's. Today, service is no longer enough. Buyers demand more.

Creating an “awesome connecting experience” is also essential in leadership. After all, where would leaders be without followers; and where would sellers be without buyers? Leadership research and theories have evolved over the years, from a transactional to a transformational perspective, from seeing leadership as an exchange between leaders and constituents to thinking about it as a way to foster positive changes for those who follow.

Similarly, experiences aren’t manufactured or engineered by sellers or their companies. Instead, a buyer derives personal meaning because of his or her imprint on the interactive experience. The seller’s role is to facilitate a highly personalized interaction.

An “awesome connecting experience” is an incredibly high standard. Most B2B sellers focus on goods and services. Buyers react by commoditizing these offerings and focusing on price alone. Striving toward the high standard of an awesome connecting experience is no longer optional. It’s absolutely essential because buyers are accustomed to it in their B2C shopping experiences.

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# Meeting the Preferences of Today's Buyers

CX researcher Esteban Kolsky concluded that 86 percent of buyers will pay more for an emotionally satisfying experience that is relevant and personalized than for something generic. The value of a meaningful and unique experience significantly exceeds the value of the goods and service accompanying it.

The need for B2B sellers to catch up with consumer sales thinking is crystal clear. Less obvious is how B2B sellers can provide personalized experiences and help buyers to participate in creating what they want. Currently, sellers are not trained, equipped, or expected to:

- Cause an overwhelming feeling of admiration or respect.
- Provide the unexpected that triggers a euphoric response.
- Connect with buyers personally.
- Enable buyers to participate in creating what they want.
- Make buyers feel significant or important.

These expectations seem less like a job description for sales and more like one for leadership. Buyers told us repeatedly that they want sellers to behave differently. Buyers resist “sales” behaviors and erect barriers to avoid sellers altogether. By contrast, they invite and welcome seller behaviors that produce awesome connecting experiences.

Behaviorally, how can sellers create powerfully differentiating, awesome connecting experiences for their B2B buyers, who bring high expectations from their B2C experiences? Those behaviors are leadership behaviors.

## Research Provides a Behavioral Blueprint

For over thirty years, Jim and Barry have continuously gathered and analyzed data about the behaviors of exemplary leaders. By analyzing thousands of case studies and millions of survey responses from leaders around the globe and from all walks of life and backgrounds, they identified what leaders do when they are at their “personal best” as leaders. Their framework—The Five Practices of Exemplary Leadership<sup>®</sup>—has been adopted by scores of organizations for their leadership development programs, and hundreds of researchers have used the model in studies about the effectiveness of leaders across a variety of settings and circumstances.

The Five Practices of Exemplary Leadership<sup>®</sup> framework is an evidence-based operating system for leadership that’s highly relevant for sellers.<sup>1</sup> Our research set out to determine just how buyers would respond to seller leadership, in the form of The Five Practices. Buyers in our studies spanned a variety of industries, company sizes, job functions, and ages. This cross-section of buyers represents different experience levels as B2B buyers, the number of sellers engaged with on a regular basis, the percentage of time spent working with sellers, and the buyer’s actual role in the decision-making process, including whether purchasing decisions are made by the individual or by a group.

1. The Five Practices or Exemplary Leadership<sup>®</sup> is the leadership model developed by James M. Kouzes and Barry Z. Posner, and is discussed in detail in their book, *The Leadership Challenge: How to Make Extraordinary Things Happen in Organizations*, Sixth Edition. (John Wiley & Sons, 2017)

# Findings and Implications

The results of our research are eye-opening. Buyers definitely want sellers to stop selling and start leading:

- The ideal frequency of each leadership behavior is statistically higher (beyond a chance level of probability) than what buyers currently experience with the sellers they do business with.
- Buyers are significantly more likely to meet with sellers who exhibit these leadership behaviors.
- Buyers are substantially more likely to purchase from sellers who exhibit these leadership behaviors.

We now have a clear behavioral blueprint of what buyers want sellers to do.

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# The Five Practices of Exemplary Leadership

Cam Johnson sells library automation and school security software. His company, COMPAnion Corporation, dominates the field, a direct result of their commitment to customers. COMPAnion continually pursues quality improvements to fulfill their mission of designing software with users in mind.

For Cam, opening the sale starts with researching the “mission, values, and beliefs” of the organization and learning all he can about the buyer. He looks for common ground and values, knowing this will give him a solid starting point.

Next, Cam asks open-ended discovery questions. When he does, he says, “I sit back and listen to every bit of information they give me.” He wants to understand buyers’ needs and long-term goals. When describing his personal best as a seller, Cam told us about a time when a buyer admitted he was seriously considering buying from one of Cam’s competitors. Having established common ground and shared values, Cam knew what to do. He first thanked the buyer for sharing this information. Instead of bashing the competition, he then shared relevant data and industry insights. He continued to demonstrate his commitment to the buyer by asking how he could earn the opportunity to work together.

When the buyer eventually chose COMPAnion, he told Cam it was because of that commitment to do whatever it would take to be a partner. Over time, Cam has continued to faithfully deliver on all the buyer’s needs and affirm the buyer’s decision.

For many sellers, this may sound like business as usual. On the surface, what Cam described is a classic consultative sale. Looking through the lens of leadership, though, something more is visible.

Cam, like many successful salespeople who are preferred by buyers, actually demonstrated The Five Practices of Exemplary Leadership:

1. Model the Way
2. Inspire a Shared Vision
3. Challenge the Process
4. Enable Others to Act
5. Encourage the Heart

The Five Practices are all about behaviors. That makes them accessible to those who accept the challenge of leadership—the challenge of taking themselves, their buyers, and their organizations to new heights, of moving beyond the ordinary to the extraordinary. The Five Practices create the awesome connecting experience buyers crave.

## Model the Way

Model the Way is the leadership practice that addresses buyers' preferences for sellers who are consistent in displaying trustworthy behaviors.

To effectively Model the Way, you must first be clear about your own guiding principles. You must *clarify values by finding your voice*. When you understand who you are and what your values are, you can give voice to those values in all you say and do.

As a seller/leader, your values aren't the only ones that matter. Everyone on the team—including your buyer—has principles that guide his or her actions. Therefore, you must *affirm the shared*

*values of the group.* This requires involving everyone in establishing common values and holding everyone accountable for adhering to them. In this way, you will *set the example.* You will work to consistently align words and actions.

Model the Way matters because, without trust, there will be no sale. Buyers determine the trustworthiness of sellers by observing how they behave. Buyers are on the lookout for seller behaviors that demonstrate credibility, reliability, relate-ability, and an orientation focused mostly on the interests of others.

### **Inspire a Shared Vision**

Inspire a Shared Vision is the leadership practice that will help you become more effective in designing and presenting the customized solutions that buyers prefer.

As a leader, you *envision the future by imagining exciting and ennobling possibilities.* To do so, you need a clear picture of the buyer's current circumstances and desired outcomes. A one-size-fits-all solution with generic features won't be exciting or ennobling. Translating those features into meaningful benefits and a picture of each buyer's unique future will be.

Even so, you can't command the buyer's commitment; you have to inspire it. You must *enlist others in a common vision by appealing to shared aspirations.* Your vision will be exciting and ennobling when buyers can clearly see themselves as part of it.

It makes a difference when you Inspire a Shared Vision. It's how you gain buy-in before asking for the buy. It's how you deliver on buyer preferences for customization, and it's how you ignite buyers' passion for your solutions. Your buyers become, in essence, your internal sellers and leaders.

## Challenge the Process

Challenge the Process is the leadership practice for creating unique and relevant value for your buyers.

Buyers are looking for sellers who can innovate and recognize opportunities by looking outside themselves, and outside their usual resources, for new and inventive solutions. You need to *search for opportunities by seizing the initiative and by looking outward for innovative ways to improve.*

Because innovation and change involve *experimenting and taking risks*, you can help buyers by creating a climate for experimentation, recognizing and supporting good ideas, and challenging business-as-usual thinking and systems. One way of dealing with the potential risks and failures of experimentation is by *constantly generating small wins and learning from experience.*

When you Challenge the Process, you increase opportunities to create unique value. This makes a difference because buyers are more fulfilled when the experience is relevant, personal, and meaningful.

## Enable Others to Act

Enable Others to Act is the leadership practice that positions your buyers to participate in creating precisely what they want.

Achieving success in sales, as in leadership, takes a collaborative team effort, one that springs from solid trust and enduring relationships. Leaders *foster collaboration by building trust and facilitating relationships.* At a time when there are increasing numbers of decision-makers

involved in purchasing decisions, you must find ways to engage every individual who will influence the decision and everyone who will be impacted by it, too.

To create genuine collaboration, you must *strengthen others by increasing self-determination and developing competence*. Your buyers and internal partners are more likely to give it their all when they feel trusted, informed, and empowered.

### **Encourage the Heart**

Encourage the Heart is the leadership practice that cements meaningful connections between you and your buyers.

Consider what you're asking buyers to do when they partner with you. You are asking them to make a change, to do things differently. Ushering in change is often arduous for buyers. They must convince others, take a risk with you, dedicate budget and other resources, and invest time in making all this happen. That's why it's important to *recognize contributions by showing appreciation for individual excellence*. Formally or informally, one-on-one or in group settings,

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in simple or grand gestures, you can keep your buyers feeling good about the work you're doing together so they'll continue to move it forward.

Being a leader requires showing appreciation for people's contributions and *celebrating the values and victories by creating a spirit of community*. This applies to your buyers and their extended teams, and to your internal team as well.

When you Encourage the Heart, you deliver on the buyer preference for meaningful connections with sellers. This makes a tremendous difference as you work to build buyer loyalty and meet your sales objectives.

These five leadership practices—Model the Way, Inspire a Shared Vision, Challenge the Process, Enable Others to Act, and Encourage the Heart—are what people are doing when they are at their best as leaders, and there's abundant empirical evidence that these leadership practices matter. The more you use The Five Practices of Exemplary Leadership, the more you'll succeed with buyers by meeting their preferences.

## Leadership Is Everyone's Business

Throughout our new book, *Stop Selling & Start Leading*, we share observations and stories from sellers who've made extraordinary things happen. They sell a wide variety of products and services, and they represent all age groups and experience levels. They work for companies of all sizes.

These are professionals, sellers who regularly call on buyers and diligently work to reach their quotas. They experience their fair share of sales successes and inevitable sales slumps. The

people we've written about, however, are regular people, just like you. Like leaders, they've made behavioral choices that have allowed them to accomplish extraordinary things.

The outcomes are impressive, but we don't tell these stories merely because of those sales results. Instead, we focus on how sellers make extraordinary things happen. We identify the behaviors and actions that led to the successful outcomes. Exemplary sellers are those who exhibit these behaviors more frequently and, subsequently, are more welcomed by buyers. Sellers who lead are leaders who sell.

Being a leader doesn't mean you have a position of formal authority, a formal title, or a specific spot on an organizational chart. Leadership isn't for a chosen few. Leadership is about relationships, credibility, passion, and conviction, and, ultimately, about what you do.

You don't have to look up for leadership. You don't have to look out for leadership. You only have to look inward. You have the potential to lead your buyers and internal partners to places they have never been. But before you can lead others, you have to believe you can have a positive impact. Just as the best sellers are the ones who not only believe in what they sell and make use of it themselves, the first person you have to sell is yourself. You have to believe that your values are worthy and that what you do matters. You have to believe your words can inspire and your actions can move others. You have to have the confidence that you can comfortably engage in The Five Practices of Exemplary Leadership.

You already have the capacity to lead. You already have buyers who want you to lead. The question is: What are you going to do to stop selling and start leading?

The buyers in our study left little room for doubt. They already are choosing sellers who exhibit leadership behaviors over sellers who do not. What's more, they say the ideal frequency of leadership behaviors is even higher than what they're seeing from the sellers with whom they've

chosen to work. There's plenty of room for upping your game, and buyers will respond favorably to leadership behaviors that create an awesome connecting experience for them.

Leadership makes a difference. The best leaders bring out the best in others. Leadership has an impact on people's commitment, their willingness to put forth additional discretionary effort, to take personal initiative and responsibility, and to perform beyond the ordinary. You can have this effect on your buyers, giving them the courage to persevere when they meet challenges. When you show up as a leader with your buyers, you help them work inside their organizations to champion the shared vision, to be exemplary leaders in their own right so others can follow them, too.

We're confident that you want to become the best leader you can be—and not just for your sake, not just to make more sales, but for the sake of your buyers and others in your shared pursuits. The only remaining question is: How can you learn to lead?

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You already have buyers who want you to lead. The question is: What are you going to do to stop selling and start leading?

Learning leadership takes practice. It also takes practice to set aside the sales behaviors you've seen modeled by others and many of the sales habits you've acquired. The good news is that leadership is learnable. You can do this! Leadership is an observable pattern of practices and behaviors, a definable set of skills and abilities. Any skill can be learned, strengthened, honed, and enhanced, given the motivation and desire, along with practice, feedback, role models, and coaching.

Here is your moment of truth. We know with certainty that leadership can be learned. We know, without a doubt, that buyers want sellers to demonstrate leadership. The remaining gap is yours to fill.

Leadership, like selling, is often misunderstood. Some believe that you must be a "natural born" leader or seller to succeed. They attribute the success of exemplary leaders and sellers to inborn personality characteristics. They self-select themselves out of leadership or sales because they mistakenly believe they don't have the charisma, charm, abilities, or perseverance required to excel. Research debunks and refutes these notions. If you want to become exemplary in any field, you have to train hard and put in extra effort to practice and hone your skills. This is true in sales. It's also true in leadership. As the old saying goes: Hard work beats talent when talent doesn't work hard.

To become an exemplary leader, make learning leadership a daily habit. You must commit to practicing leadership with buyers in every encounter. You have to make choices to lead your internal partners. To lead, you must engage in leadership behaviors more often.

You won't ever be 100 percent perfect, and certainly not on day one. That's okay. Buyers in our research rated the frequency of behaviors, not their quality. They want to see sellers utilizing leadership behaviors more often. With dedicated practice on your leadership, quality will naturally develop.

Don't wait until you've mastered a leadership practice before you demonstrate it to your buyers. Instead, practice every day with your buyers. They will notice and respond favorably to the behaviors themselves and, in this way, you will differentiate yourself from other sellers.

As you step into your role as a leader with your buyers, there's one more thing to work on. It's a big one. You must also lead yourself.

The instrument of leadership is the self. Mastery of the art of leadership comes from mastery of the self. Engineers have computers, painters have canvas and brushes, musicians have instruments, and sellers have products and services. Leaders have only themselves. Becoming the best leader you can be means becoming the best self you can be. Therefore, leadership development is fundamentally self-development.

Self-development makes you more than a seller with a product to sell. It gives you confidence in you—and this confidence is infectious, making buyers believe in you. The better you know yourself, the better you can make sense of the often incomprehensible and conflicting messages you receive daily. Sell this, sell that. Pitch this, pitch that. Change this, change that. You need internal guidance to navigate the turmoil in today's highly uncertain environment. The internal compass you need comes from understanding yourself and what you value, why you value it, and what actions you can take to back up what you believe. From this self-development comes self-assuredness and, in turn, an ability to inspire others. The confidence that others have in you gives you the latitude to challenge your buyers' status quo. It makes it possible for you to support buyers in ways that allow them to participate in creating what they want.

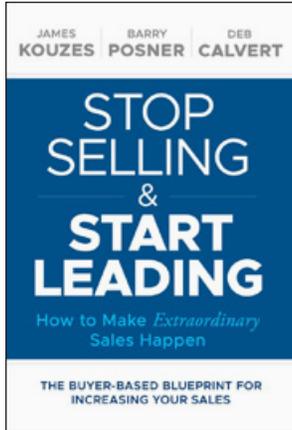
Learning about yourself and about leadership gives you a strong start. But deciding to be an exemplary leader is not the same as being one. Leading is doing. It's making behavioral choices in everything you do. You need to do something every day to learn more about leading, and you need to put those lessons into practice daily.

Leadership happens in the moment. There are many moments with buyers each day when you can choose to lead. In those interactions you can choose to do small things that will make a difference. Each day you can choose to lead by your example. Each day you can choose to lift the spirits of your buyers. Each day you can choose to find exciting opportunities for your buyers. Each day you can choose to strengthen the relationships you have with your buyers. Each day you can choose to say “thank you” more often.

**Start leading. The more frequently you choose to lead, the more you will create those awesome connecting experiences that make extraordinary things happen. 📌**



# Info



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For more information about their new book *Stop Selling and Start Leading*, please visit <http://stopsellingstartleading.com>



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