

Sage Advice for Christian Leaders

from Saint Benedict and Kouzes & Posner

by William I. Sauser, Jr.



The Rule of St. Benedict, written in the sixth century by a Christian abbot as a guide for ordering temporal and spiritual life in a monastery, and *The Leadership Challenge*, written by modern leadership theorists James Kouzes and Barry Posner, both provide sage advice for Christian leaders. To what extent do these two works, written fifteen centuries apart, provide similar guidance? William Sauser's lengthy analysis of the content of the two works uncovered numerous themes in common.¹ Though St. Benedict does not use the phraseology of Kouzes and Posner, all five of their key practices from *The Leadership Challenge* are incorporated into his *Rule*. Here Sauser summarises his analysis and includes thoughts on how Kouzes and Posner's suggested five practices might be strengthened by incorporating additional advice from St. Benedict.²

The *Leadership Challenge*, a modern best-selling book on business leadership, and *The Rule of Saint Benedict*, which has been used as a guidebook in seminars for business leaders in the UK³, contain much wisdom in common. It is impossible to explore in depth in this short article the riches contained in either work, so I will not attempt to review the entire contents of these two fine guidebooks for Christian leaders. Instead I will take a different approach: I will review in order each of Kouzes and Posner's 'five practices of leadership' using key quotations from their book, then show how each practice is dealt with by St. Benedict in *The Rule*. In doing so I hope to demonstrate adequately that the two works share much spiritually thematic advice in common. Let us now examine each of Kouzes and Posner's 'five practices' in turn.

Model the Way

Exemplary leaders know if they want to gain commitment and achieve the highest standards, they must be models of the

behavior they expect of others. Leaders model the way. To effectively model the behavior they expect of others, leaders must first be clear about their guiding principles.... Leaders' deeds are far more important than their words.... Words and deeds must be consistent. Exemplary leaders go first.... Modeling the way is essentially about earning the right and the respect to lead through direct individual involvement and action. People first follow the person, then the plan. (LC, pp.14-15)

Here are the two commitments Kouzes and Posner associate with this practice:

- Find your voice by clarifying your personal values.
- Set the example by aligning actions with shared values.

This practice and these two commitments are woven throughout *The Rule of Saint Benedict*. When advising how the abbot should be selected, Benedict recommends election by the monastic community (or some part of it which possesses sounder judgment), then states, "Goodness of life and ►►

▶▶ wisdom in teaching must be the criteria for choosing the one to be made abbot” (RB 64: 2). Thus it is the individual who best exemplifies in his life the shared values of the community that should be selected to lead. The abbot must “be learned in divine law” and “be chaste, temperate, and merciful” (RB 64: 9). “He must hate faults but love the brothers” (RB 64: 11).



Abbot Kevin
of Worth Abbey

“Excitable, anxious, extreme, obstinate, jealous or over-suspicious he must not be. Instead...he should be discerning and moderate” (RB 64: 16-17). Thus it is based on the way he lives his life, advises Benedict, that the abbot - the wise father of the community - should be chosen. Indeed, “people first follow the person, then the plan” (LC, p.15).

Once he has been selected, the abbot must continue to *model the way* for his followers. “He must, above all, in every way keep this rule in every particular” (RB 64: 20). The abbot “must always remember what his title [abba, ‘father’] signifies and act as a superior should. He is believed to hold the place of Christ in

the monastery, since he is addressed by a title of Christ.... Therefore, the abbot must never decree or command anything that would deviate from the Lord’s instructions” (RB 2: 1-2, 4). Benedict reminds the abbot that he is subject to judgment from Jesus Christ for the behaviour of his flock, and points out to the abbot that he “is to lead his disciples by a twofold teaching: he must point out to them all that is good and holy more by example than by words” (RB 2: 11). “Again, if he teaches his disciples that something is not to be done, then neither must he do it” (RB 2: 13).

Clearly the point has been made: Kouzes and Posner’s belief that the effective leader should *model the way* is certainly a primary theme of St. Benedict’s advice to the abbot about how to lead a monastery. If further evidence is needed, note this other clear instruction provided to the abbot in *The Rule*: “The abbot himself must fear God and keep the rule in everything he does; he can be sure beyond any doubt that he will have to give an account of all his judgments to God, the most just of all judges.” (RB 3:11)

There is no room for hypocrisy in the life of the abbot if he is truly to model the way of Jesus Christ to his flock of disciples.

Inspire a Shared Vision

Leaders inspire a shared vision. They gaze across the horizon of time, imagining the attractive opportunities that are in store when they and their constituents arrive at a distant destination.... Their clear image of the future pulls them forward.... To enlist people in a vision, leaders must know their constituents and speak their language.... [They] must have intimate knowledge of people’s dreams, hopes, aspirations, visions, and values.

Leaders breathe life {notice the biblical imagery being used here by Kouzes and Posner} into the hopes and dreams of others and enable them to see the exciting possibilities that the future holds. Leaders forge a unity of purpose by showing constituents how the dream is for the common good. Leaders ignite the flame of passion in others by expressing



►► *enthusiasm for the compelling vision of their group. (LC, pp. 17-18)*

Attend to the recommended commitments associated with this practice:

- Envision the future by imagining exciting and ennobling possibilities.
- Enlist others in a common vision by appealing to shared aspirations.

St. Benedict, before laying out his practical advice in the 73 chapters of *The Rule*, begins with a *prologue*. It is within this spiritual prologue that Benedict - quoting extensively from the Bible - provides for his readers a compelling vision of the destination toward which he - and they - are striving in common: the Kingdom of God.

To the Christian there is no nobler call than to give oneself wholly to the Lord, and to work alongside Him to reconcile the world to God through the grace of Jesus Christ. This is the thrilling vision St. Benedict offers to his readers:

What, dear brothers, is more delightful than this voice of the Lord calling to us? See how the Lord in his love shows us the way of life. Clothed then with faith and the performance of good works, let us set out on this way, with the Gospel for our guide, that we may deserve to see him who has called us to his kingdom (1 Thess 2: 12)... If we wish to reach eternal life, even as we avoid the torments of hell, then - while there is still time, while we are in this body and have time to accomplish all these things by the light of life - we must run and do now what will profit us forever. (RB Prologue: 19-21, 42-44)

Is this not a clear vision of exciting and ennobling possibilities held in common by devotees of Jesus Christ? Does it not appeal to shared aspirations and spur the abbot's flock into action? Clearly, St. Benedict subscribes to Kouzes and Posner's second practice, *inspire a shared vision*.

Challenge the Process

All leaders challenge the process. Leaders are pioneers - people who are willing to step out into the unknown. They search for opportunities to innovate, grow, and improve. But...innovation comes more from listening than from telling.... The leader's primary contribution is in the recognition of good ideas, the support of those ideas, and the willingness to challenge the system.... Leaders are early adopters of innovation. (LC, p. 17)

Here are the two commitments Kouzes and Posner associated with this practice:

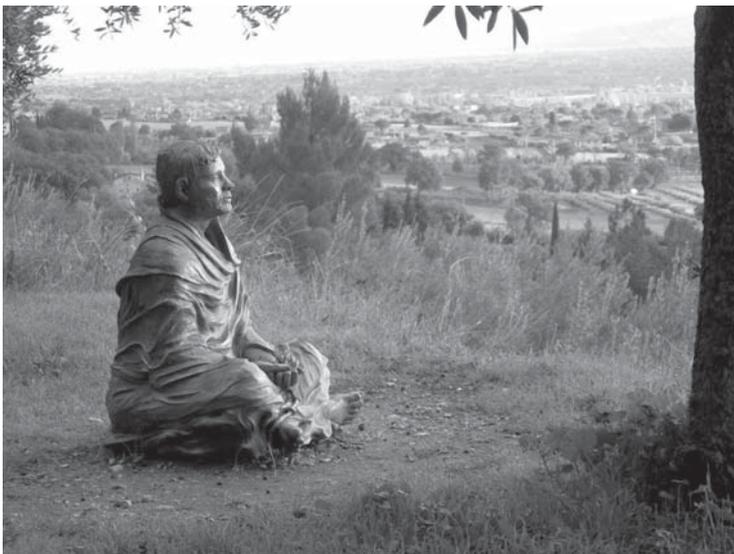
- Search for opportunities by seeking innovative ways to change, grow, and improve.
- Experiment and take risks by constantly generating small wins and learning from mistakes.



Saint Benedict

*Detail from a fresco (1441 - 1442)
in San Marco, Florence
by Fra Angelico (c. 1400-1455)*

▶▶ It appears - at first glance - that *The Rule* must stand in stark contrast to Kouzes and Posner's advice here, for *obedience*, not *challenge*, is prescribed for life in the monastery: "The first step of humility is unhesitating obedience, ...they carry out the superior's order as promptly as if the command came from God himself" (*RB* 5: 1, 4). A *Rule* meant to be followed obediently hardly seems to provide any opportunity to *challenge the process*. But does our first glance really do justice to *The Rule* in terms of St. Benedict's stance on searching for opportunities; seeking innovative ways to change, grow, and improve; experimenting and taking risks; learning from mistakes?



Listening to God

Statue of St. Francis outside the the church and cloister of San Damiano near Assisi, overlooking the valley

On deeper reflection, I believe our first glance does *not* do justice to *The Rule* in this regard. Notice that Kouzes and Posner stress, in their description of this their third of five practices, that *listening* is the key to innovation: "Innovation comes more from listening than from telling," they emphasize (*LC*, p. 17). The effective leader should listen for innovative ideas, then champion their implementation; this is the essence of *challenging the process*. But again we seem to have encountered a paradox, for "monks should diligently cultivate silence at all times, but especially at

night" (*RB* 42:1). In a monastery characterised by silence, to whom is one to listen? Whence the ideas for innovation and experimentation; for change, growth, and improvement; for learning from one's mistakes? The answer is astonishingly simple in Benedictine spirituality: *From God!* That is the underlying purpose of all this silence and obedience. It is not because Benedict prefers peace and quiet and no backtalk; no, the purpose is to open the ears of the entire monastic community - the abbot included - to listen for the creative Word of God.

Part and parcel of Benedictine spirituality is the concept of *lectio divina*, says Dysinger:

"listening to God" in text and prayer, and "speaking with the God who is heard."⁴ This is how monks - and their shepherd, the abbot - are to spend much of their life: reading the Bible, *The Rule*, the written works of the saints, and other Christian literature, then meditating, praying, and contemplating in conversation with God. In so doing, they will receive the guidance they need for change, growth, and improvement. In turn, by implementing this guidance - with the abbot as their champion - they will *challenge the process* indeed, for God's ways are decidedly *not* the 'ways of the world.' To become ready to live in the Kingdom of God, one must amend one's life in ways that clearly are at odds with the norms of a fallen world. When one seeks to follow the leadership

of Jesus Christ rather than the 'wisdom of the world,' one lives a life of obedience to God that is distinctly different from the norms of this world. Every day of such a life is a *challenge to the process!*

Enable Others to Act

Exemplary leaders enable others to act. They foster collaboration and build trust.... They engage all those who must make the project work - and in some way, all who must live with the results...., all those who have a



- ▶▶ *stake in the vision. Leaders make it possible for others to do good work. (LC, p. 18)*

The two commitments associated with this practice, according to Kouzes and Posner, are:

- Foster collaboration by promoting cooperative goals and building trust.
- Strengthen others by sharing power and discretion.

Now that we understand the shared vision, the elevating goals, and the purpose of monastic life, we can easily identify throughout *The Rule* important guidance for leaders to *enable others to act*. Rather than quote *The Rule* in detail, I will simply cite some of the relevant types of guidance provided by St. Benedict that correlate very well with 'best practices' for leaders touted by Kouzes and Posner and many other prominent modern leadership theorists. The abbot is instructed to teach his flock by word and deed (*RB 2: 11-15*), and to vary that teaching with the circumstances, "threatening and coaxing by turns, stern as a taskmaster, devoted and tender as only a father can be" (*RB 2: 24*). The abbot must "avoid all favoritism in the monastery," and "not...love one more than another unless he finds someone better in good actions and obedience" (*RB 2: 16, 17*). The abbot "is to show equal love to everyone and apply the same discipline to all according to their merits" (*RB 2: 22*). Discipline is to be provided "in due proportion" to the offence (*RB 24: 1*) and exercised with "the utmost care and concern" (*RB 27: 1*). When an important decision is to be made, "the abbot shall call the whole community together and himself explain what the business is; and after hearing the advice of the brothers," ponder it and render a decision (*RB 3: 1-2*). Chapter 21 of *The Rule* provides for delegation and empowerment, as does Chapter 65. Note, for example: "If possible, as we have already established, the whole operation of the monastery should be managed through deans under the abbot's direction" (*RB 65: 12*). In short, it is easy to find in *The Rule* an emphasis on most of the same techniques used by effective leaders today to foster collaboration, promote cooperative goals, build trust,

strengthen others, and share power and discretion - and thus, as Kouzes and Posner term it, *enable others to act*.

Encourage the Heart

This fifth of Kouzes and Posner's practices is perhaps my favourite, because it distinguishes so clearly their approach - which is based on love - from other approaches to leadership that emphasise personal success, perhaps even to the detriment of others. Listen to their important words for leaders:

The climb to the top is arduous and long. People become exhausted, frustrated, and disenchanted. They're often tempted to give up. Leaders encourage the heart of their constituents to carry on. Genuine acts of caring uplift the spirits and draw people forward. (LC, p. 19)



Encourage the heart

Note their emphasis on *genuine* acts of caring; this is not advice to manipulate others' emotions, but rather to express genuine love for those under the leader's care. Here are the two commitments associated with this practice:

- Recognise contributions by showing appreciation for individual excellence.
- Celebrate the values and victories by creating a spirit of community.



▶▶ The monastic community is characterised by humility (*RB* chapter 7), so St. Benedict does not stress the idea of singling out individuals for public praise, although the abbot may express love for a monk’s “good actions and obedience” (*RB* 2: 17). But as for creating a spirit of community by celebrating values and victories, this theme runs throughout *The Rule of Saint Benedict*. It is no coincidence that the services of Vigils, Lauds, and other Divine Offices are called *celebrations* by St. Benedict (*RB* chapters 11, 12, 13, 14, and 16), for this is indeed what they are - opportunities for the brothers to assemble together numerous times every day to commune with God, celebrate God’s victory over sin and death,



Benedictine community at prayer in St. Benedict’s Abbey, Benet Lake, Wisconsin, USA

and join together to do godly work through prayer. Perhaps in no other organisational setting in the world is there more emphasis placed on creating a spirit of community than in a monastery, and worshipping and praying as *one body* in celebration of common values and the victory of God is certainly a key to St. Benedict’s call to the abbots he instructs to *encourage the heart* and build community. Benedict suggests leaders focus special attention on encouraging the weak, for the abbot “should know that he has undertaken to care for weak souls, not to exercise tyranny over the strong” (*RB* 27: 6).⁵

Summary and Concluding Thoughts

When we begin to dig beneath the surface and explore the rich content of these two works,

their commonality becomes apparent. Though he does not use the words and phrases of Kouzes and Posner (whose book was written fifteen centuries after his own), St. Benedict incorporates all five practices from *The Leadership Challenge* into his *Rule*. To me, this is strong evidence for the timelessness and power of these five spiritual practices for Christian leadership: model the way, inspire a shared vision, challenge the process, enable others to act, and encourage the heart.

As a concluding thought I pose this question: How might a Christian leader use ideas from an explicitly Christian work like St. Benedict’s *Rule* to supplement the excellent advice from Kouzes and Posner’s book, which - though admittedly built on a spiritual base - is not aligned with any particular faith tradition? Let me offer five suggestions, one for each of Kouzes and Posner’s recommended five practices for effective leadership.

1. *Model the way.* A Christian business leader might build on this suggestion from Kouzes and Posner by heeding this important piece of advice from St. Benedict: “Never teach or decree or command anything that would deviate from the Lord’s instructions” (*RB* 2: 4). If the leader seeks to model the way of Jesus Christ in all that

he or she says and does - even though the leader will far short of the mark of perfection shown us by the Son of God - the leader will be providing the best possible guidance for his or her followers.



Contemporary Christian leaders can model the way by “*What would Jesus do?*” bracelet asking prayerfully, in every circumstance for decision-making, “*What would Jesus do?*”⁶ - then acting accordingly.

2. *Inspire a shared vision.* Kouzes and Posner provide in their book a number of excellent examples of shared visions, but there can be ▶▶

▶▶ no lovelier shared vision than that of spending eternity with God in Paradise. Listen to St. Benedict's words: "If we wish to reach eternal life...we must...do now what will profit us forever" (*RB* Prologue: 42, 44). The point is clear: The most effective leader will make certain his or her vision focuses on treasures in heaven, not treasures on earth, "*For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also*" says the Son of God (Mt 6: 21).

3. *Challenge the process.* This is excellent advice for any leader, and I appreciate Kouzes and Posner's recommendation to listen to the ideas of others. Most importantly, though, the Christian business leader should listen to God in prayer, for from the Holy Spirit of God the leader will receive the very best guidance of all. That is why St. Benedict advises: "Place your hope in God alone" (*RB* 4: 41), and guides his followers to "lay [their] petitions before the Lord God of all things with the utmost humility and sincere devotion" (*RB* 20: 2). When the leader comes to God in humility and devotion and listens in prayer, he or she will receive the guidance needed to challenge any process that is not aligned with the will of God.

4. *Enable others to act.* I have shown above how St. Benedict incorporates into his *Rule* many of the modern principles of leadership designed to empower others and enable them to act. How might Kouzes and Posner's excellent advice be complemented with respect to this principle? Note carefully this statement by Kouzes and Posner (*LC*, p. 18):

"[Leaders] engage all those who must make the project work - and in some way, all who must live with the results..., all those who have a stake in the vision." I applaud this advice, certainly, and hasten to add that sometimes those *who must live with the results* of organisational decisions include the least powerful members of society; they also must be acknowledged as stakeholders in the vision. Using Holy Scripture as his guide, St. Benedict does not hesitate to remind us of this fact: "You must relieve the lot of the poor, clothe the naked, visit the sick, and bury the dead. Go to help the troubled and console the sorrowing. Your way of acting should be different from the world's way; the love of Christ must come before all else" (*RB* 4: 14-21). Every decision made by the leader, and every action taken by those the leader has empowered, must derive from this principle. The least powerful members of society must not be harmed; instead, they should be aided through the leader's influence.

5. *Encourage the heart.* While encouraging the heart, the effective leader must be ever mindful of St. Benedict's advice with respect to humility (*RB* 7) and mutual respect (*RB* 72). These are enduring words: "No one is to pursue what he judges better for himself, but instead, what he judges better for someone else" (*RB* 72: 7). If all leaders (and their followers!) were to heed this excellent advice, we may all someday experience the ultimate 'encouragement of the heart' as St. Benedict prays for us all: "May [Christ] bring us all together to everlasting life" (*RB* 72: 12) ■

1 See William I. Sauser, Jr., *Characteristics and style of a leader: A comparison of guidance for leaders from The Rule of Saint Benedict and Kouzes and Posner's The Leadership Challenge*, 2010. This is an unpublished manuscript available from the author.

2 James M. Kouzes & Barry M. Posner's *The Leadership Challenge* was published by Jossey-Bass in 2002. Quotations from the book are cited as *LC* followed by the page nos. The version of *The Rule of St. Benedict* used is that edited by Timothy Fry, published by the Liturgical Press in 1981. Quotations are cited as *RB* followed by the chapter and verse numbers.

3 See Dermot Tredget, "Beyond the obvious: Benedictine spirituality in the workplace." *Faith in Business Quarterly*, Vol. 4, No. 1, Spring 2000, pp. 4-8.

4 Luke Dysinger, (trans.), *The Rule of Saint Benedict: Latin & English*. 1997, Sources Books, Santa Ana, CA, p.viii.

5 This is Dysinger's (op. cit.) translation.

6 This guiding question was popularized by Charles M. Sheldon in his book, *In His Steps*, originally published in serial form by the *Chicago Advance* in 1896, and now in the public domain.

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