Questions for:
Jim Kouzes

You've said that leaders who see their role as ‘serving others' leave the most lasting legacies. Why is that?
My wife and I were on vacation one time and we stopped in Truckee, California to have something to eat. We saw a structure there that used to be the train station and on the side of the building was a wooden sign that read: “This building is dedicated to the memory of Ignatius Joseph Firpo. What we have done for ourselves dies with us; what we have done for others remains and is immortal.” We were so struck by the truth of those words. People don’t remember us for what we do for ourselves — for the size of our bank account, the car we drive or how big our house is. They remember us for what we have done for them. Leadership, after all, is a relationship, and the quality of that relationship determines how effective we are and how we are remembered.

Why should we consider our legacy early on?
First-year students at Santa Clara University are required to take a leadership course, and in one of the first classes, we ask them, “Are you on this planet to do something, or are you here for something to do?” We ask the same thing of executives when we work with them. If you’re a young freshman just out of high school, your initial response is likely to be, “What is the right answer to that question?” But after some thinking, students understand that the answer is to do something. Then we say, “If you’re here to do something, what is it?”

We don’t expect an 18-year-old — or even most 50-year-olds — to have an immediate answer to this question because it’s not something we think about all the time, but it is an important question to consider. By asking ourselves how we want to be remembered, we plant a seed for living our lives in harmony with those ideals and for living our lives as if they truly matter. The fact is, the legacy you leave is also someone else’s future. Are you leaving your children and future generations the kind of world you would like them to grow up in? Because they will have to live with the consequences of your actions.
We tend to view legacies in terms of concrete achievements, as opposed to relationships built. Is this flawed? How should we think about legacy formation?

When we talk about legacy, people often think about what they are bequeathing to others, in terms of material goods. But, in fact, the legacy you leave is the life you lead: it’s what you are doing right now that determines how you will be remembered. Thinking of ‘life’ as an acronym is a helpful guideline for thinking about legacy:

• What are the Lessons that you want people to say you taught them?
• What are the Ideals you hope people will say that you stood for?
• What are the Feelings you hope people will say they had when you were around them?
• What are the tangible Expressions of your leadership? Not just your accomplishments, but the things you might have contributed. Maybe you worked every Saturday for 25 years for Habitat for Humanity, or you were active in the community as a volunteer for sports. What are some of those tangible achievements?

We find this framework useful for people to reflect on legacy, and to come back to it periodically and ask themselves, “Is there anything more I want to add, and am I living my life in harmony with these guidelines?”

Can being a mentor help to build a legacy?

When I was just beginning my career, I had dinner with one of my personal mentors, Fred Margolis. We were finishing up a meal in an Italian restaurant and Fred turned to me and said: “Jim, what is the best way to learn something?” I thought I had the answer to that question, and said confidently: “The best way to learn something is to experience it yourself.” Fred turned to me and said: “No, Jim, the best way to learn something is to teach it to someone else.”

I have remembered that for nearly 40 years, and I think about it every day. As a leader, or as a teacher at a university, when I am trying to pass on a lesson to somebody, I’m doing much more to learn it myself then I would if I was simply in conversation with you.

Interestingly enough, I was reading a story about Peter Drucker, and I found a similar comment from him. He said that people learn the most when teaching others, and he talked about his own experience of working in a bank early on. Once a week or so, the youngest of the three senior partners would sit him down and talk about the way he saw the world. Drucker said: “He used me as an audience and in the process, demonstrated how to think. In the end I think he learned more than I did from our little talks.”

One of the wonderful things about being a mentor is, it’s not just about passing on lessons—it really is a process of learning. Mentorship is as beneficial for the learner as it is for the teacher.

What is the role of family and community in shaping future leaders?

In our research we have found that the most important leaders in our lives are those who are closest to us, with family members being the most frequently-mentioned category of ‘most important leader/role model’. For young people, a teacher or coach comes next. Only seven per cent think of a business leader.

If it is true that role models for leadership come from these categories, the question is, how much attention are we paying to developing the leadership capabilities of family members, teachers, coaches or community leaders? Most resources go into developing the leadership competencies of business leaders, but not parents, because parents don’t typically think of themselves as leaders. Yet when people look back they say they learned their leadership lessons from them, so it’s important to start focusing on parents as leaders.

In addition, since we know that people are learning leadership lessons when they are young, isn’t it also important to provide direct leadership training to young people? Why do we wait to train people in leadership until they get their first supervisory job? They are just starting to learn and they’ll have 10 more years before they become an expert.

Why is it so important for a leader to be liked?

One of the chapters in my book is, “Leaders Should Be Liked,” and it was probably the most controversial chapter. People said to me: “What do you mean leaders should be liked? I’ve always heard it’s not whether they like you, it’s whether they respect you.” And I always ask, “Is this a binary question — do I have only that choice, I can either like you or respect you?”

I vividly remember Irwin Featherman coming to speak to the MBA class at Santa Clara. He was a very hard-nosed business person, and he said to the students, “You don’t love someone because of who they are, you love them because it’s what you are doing right now that determines how you will be remembered.”
of the way they make you feel. This axiom applies equally in a company setting.” Our students were a little taken aback; you don’t often hear words like that from the CEO of a high-tech company—or in most management books you read. He owned up to that observation; he said: “It may seem inappropriate to use words such as ‘love’ and ‘affection’ in relation to business, because conventional wisdom says it’s not a popularity contest” — I remember this so vividly — then he said, “I contend however, that all things being equal, we will work harder and more effectively for people we like, and we will like them in direct proportion to how they make us feel.”

It was one of those truths that you can’t escape, and again it goes back to the issue of legacy. How do you want people to feel when they are around you? One thing I can tell you is when I ask people how they would like to feel around their leader, no one says “I’d like to feel intimidated, scared, and put down.” We will not work harder or more effectively for those kinds of people.

You have found that leaders generally rank poorly when it comes to forward-thinking and vision-building. Why is that, and how might they do better?

According to our research, being forward-looking is the quality that differentiates leaders from individual contributors: 72 per cent of working professionals look for a leader who is forward-looking. However, when we assess leaders on what we call ‘inspiring a shared vision’, which is the ability to envision the future and enlist others in that vision, it’s the lowest scoring practice. So while it’s the quality that differentiates leaders from individual contributors, it is the practice with which most leaders struggle.

When we ask why this is, the single most common answer is, “I don’t have time. The pressure of the immediate is so strong that it prevents me from spending adequate time thinking ahead.” This is very similar to driving on the freeway in the fast lane, in the fog. And maybe one of the reasons some organizations simply crash and burn is because they can’t see very far ahead, and they are going so fast they can’t stop in time and take a different direction.

Senior executives, should be spending at least 25 per cent of their time dealing with three questions:

1) What are the external trends and realities that will be impacting my business five to 10 years down the road?
2) What might our business environment look like 10 years down the road if those come to be?
3) How can I communicate to others a shared vision of the future, so they are seeing what I am seeing?

How can readers best put into practice your ideas about enhancing legacy?

Many of these notions may sound like big ideas, and people may be unsure where to begin in executing them. I would add a wise observation from another one of those everyday leaders we interviewed, Sergey Nikiforov, who’s with CA Technologies now. He was pondering these ideas, wondering where to start in becoming a better leader, and he answered his own question when he said that every day he had an opportunity to make a small difference: “I could have coached someone better, I could have listened better, I could have been more positive towards people, I could have said thank you more often, I could have...” The list just went on.

Sergey reminds us that building the legacy we hope for can begin with very little things. We can find an opportunity to coach someone, we can find some time to listen; there are countless opportunities every day. 

Jim Kouzes is Dean’s Executive Fellow of Leadership at the Leavey School of Business, Santa Clara University and the co-author (with Barry Posner) of The Leadership Challenge: How to Make Extraordinary Things Happen in Organizations (Jossey Bass, 2012) and A Leader’s Legacy (Jossey-Bass, 2006). He has been heralded by The Wall Street Journal as one of the 12 best executive educators in the U.S.