



SECOND EDITION, REVISED AND EXPANDED

# CO-ACTIVE LEADERSHIP

*FIVE WAYS TO LEAD*

**Karen and Henry Kimsey-House**

Authors of the international bestseller *Co-Active Coaching*

## Co-Active Leadership

AUTHORS OF THE INTERNATIONAL BEST SELLER

*Co-Active Coaching*

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SECOND EDITION

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Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc.

## Co-Active Leadership, Second Edition

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Dedicated to the Co-Active leaders who have touched  
our lives and the Co-Active leaders yet to come

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## Preface

**C***o-Active Leadership: Five Ways to Lead* is based on the simple and somewhat radical idea that leadership need not be confined to a select few people at the top of the pyramid. Instead, *everyone can be a leader* regardless of role or title by choosing any one of five different ways to lead: Leader in Front, Leader Behind, Leader Beside, Leader in the Field, and Leader Within.

On any given day, we all occupy one of these roles, and when leadership is applied more broadly, we are more effective and fulfilled because this inclusive understanding of leadership fosters connection and empowers people to live and work with shared ownership of whatever is being generated.

*Co-Active Leadership: Five Ways to Lead* offers a more inclusive leadership model that values and respects different expressions equally. As we operate in this broader context of leadership, we are more effective and fulfilled because this inclusive application of leadership fosters a sense of interconnection and empowers people to live and work with shared ownership of whatever is being generated.

In the six-plus years since we wrote the first edition of *Co-Active Leadership*, we've worked with this leadership model extensively with our private and organizational clients, in the programs we teach globally, and in all aspects of our own company. We've learned a great deal more about how to apply this model to every area of life, and this expanded second edition offers quite a lot of new material. There are two new chapters. Chapter 2, "Your Leadership Journey,"

offers examples of many different ways to utilize the Co-Active Leadership Model. Chapter 3, “What Is Co-Active?” provides a deep dive into the Co-Active philosophy, which guides this approach to leadership. The chapters illustrating each of the five different ways to lead have been updated significantly, with a number of suggestions for leadership development added at the end of each chapter.

We wrote *Co-Active Leadership: Five Ways to Lead* to offer a new model of leadership available as a choice to anyone. Organizational leaders and people who work in organizations, managers and those who report to them, community organizers and social advocates, parents and family members, team leaders and team members, teachers and students, business and life partners, and communities will all find this book invaluable. Most of all, we wrote this book for the dynamic and creative leader that lies within you, our reader.

Reading this book can be transformative, or it can be just an intellectual exercise. The key is your willingness to let go of what you believe leadership to be and to hold it in a completely new context that includes everyone, most particularly you. As you read *Co-Active Leadership*, we invite you to view each chapter as an invitation to claim different aspects of the compassionate, connected, creative leader within you.

The stories we share are from our own experience or the experience of students, clients, or colleagues. When others were involved, we have changed the names of the individuals to protect confidentiality.

If we are going to overcome the daunting challenges of our time, we must learn how to collaborate together in new ways that allow us to access the diverse talent and lived experiences of many. We hope that this book will prove to be both a practical guide and an inspiring journey and that it will support you in generating an experience of wholeness and success in your work and in your world.

# A New Leadership Story

On October 17, 1989, the workday in San Francisco was just coming to an end. South of the city in Candlestick Park, thousands had gathered to watch Game 3 of the World Series. At 5:04 p.m., the Loma Prieta earthquake struck, shaking the Earth, shattering windows, knocking down buildings, and kicking up huge clouds of dust. Electricity was out throughout the entire city of San Francisco, so none of the traffic lights were working. Thousands of anxious people flooded out of the Financial District, inching their way home through a confused tangle of automobiles, cable cars, and pedestrians.

At Kearny and Pine, however, traffic was flowing freely. A homeless man, well known for his presence on one of the corners of this particular intersection, was directing traffic. He had placed himself in the center of the intersection and was managing the flow with great care and panache. He stood tall as he waved cars forward from one direction and held his hand up firmly as he instructed others to stop and wait. Attorneys, stockbrokers, and other highly paid executives all followed his direction without question. People who just the day before had walked by him without a second glance now honked, waved, and blew him kisses.

No one had told the homeless fellow that he was the one to step up and lead. He didn't need to wait for the authorities to arrive and give him a title. He just saw the need and decided that he was the person for the job. Those who were following his directions did not need to see a résumé to determine whether he had the requisite training. They immediately became dedicated co-leaders, eager to serve and support in whatever way they could.

Amid the chaos and disruption of the earthquake, at the intersection of Kearny and Pine, leadership was flowing freely. There were no fancy titles, and no one was elected. Neither the man directing traffic nor those enthusiastically following his direction gave a great deal of thought to what was in it for them or if they were interested in being responsible. They just acted from their own humanity and heart, providing whatever was needed in the moment in a variety of different ways.

In general, our view of leadership tends to be very one-dimensional, with leadership being the responsibility of one or two select individuals at the top of a very broad pyramid. As the story above demonstrates, this viewpoint is not particularly accurate. In reality, leadership is multidimensional. In any system or initiative, there are many different leaders, each leading in different ways, with people changing roles fluidly. In any given day, each of us moves through a range of different roles and leadership dimensions. We are all leaders in one way or another, and when we choose to be responsible for what is happening around us, we are able to work together in a way that includes and utilizes the unique talents of everyone.

The purpose of this book is to offer a perspective on leadership based on a simple leadership model that can be accessed by anyone to generate more success and ownership of one's world and one's life. In this multidimensional view of leadership, everyone has the capacity to be a leader by moving fluidly through five different ways

or dimensions of leadership as the circumstances and the situation require. These dimensions are Leader Within, Leader in Front, Leader Behind, Leader Beside, and Leader in the Field. In each dimension, the key to success is combining an awareness of our interrelatedness and interdependence with a balance of essence and action, of being and doing. Thus the real foundation of Co-Active Leadership is conscious relationship with ourselves, with each other, and with our larger world.

## **Everyone Is a Leader**

In this multidimensional model of leadership, everyone has within them the capacity to lead, and any organization or community is most dynamic, most alive, and most productive when there is a commitment to leadership at every level. We all share full responsibility for the experiences we generate, and our sense of personal power and fulfillment is directly commensurate with the level of ownership we are able to take for the life story we are experiencing and creating.

We don't have a huge degree of agency over the opportunities, challenges, and disasters that come our way. It is also true that some of us have more opportunities than others. Many are subject to externally imposed systemic and structural limitations like racism and other forms of bigotry and prejudice. Still, even in the most disempowering and oppressive situations, we can choose how we view ourselves and the story we tell ourselves about who we are.

In this way, we have a kind of creative capacity that cannot be given to us and therefore cannot be taken away. Life is no longer just happening to us—we are cocreators of the story of our life, and we share in the challenge of shaping our experience to reflect our own values and purpose.

**We Create Our World.  
Together.  
Every Day.**

Although our ability and willingness to express this creative capacity vary wildly from person to person, choosing how we respond to the circumstances of our lives is available to everyone. We can react automatically from an adopted and patterned set of beliefs and assumptions, or we can do the internal work necessary to free ourselves from these automatic reactions and instead choose from a much wider palette of creative options.

## **A New Definition of Leadership**

*Leadership.* The word conjures up images of stalwart-looking people (mostly *men*, we notice), bravely leading a company, a country, a movement. In North America, these faces are usually white. Globally, they commonly feature the ruling class. Clear direction and inspirational speeches are offered by people who have the position and authority to make things happen.

But rarely do these leaders make things happen alone. If they are effective, they are surrounded by a wide range of talented people moving together in a common purpose. In a way, all of these people are leaders too, and the insight, dedication, and commitment they bring are essential to a successful outcome.

What if leadership were not defined by position or title but instead were measured by someone's willingness to respond and create solutions truly in the best interest of everyone? What if robust, engaged, committed followership were equally valued as an expression of leadership?

In order to make this vision a reality, we would need to allow more space for the many marginalized voices that exist in our

world today. We would need to bring balance to our current ferocious attachment to winning and instead allow room for inclusion, equity, and interrelatedness. And we would need to learn to hold both connection and action as equally important, critical parts of a whole.

Most important, we would need to stop thinking of leadership in terms of specific roles, such as teacher, manager, president, CEO, and parent. We would need to stop defining what is required according to the expectations that come with these roles.

Co-Active Leadership is not a role. It is a way of being in relationship with the world around us, and we can choose it from any role and in any given situation. Depending on the needs of the moment, we can step into any one of the five dimensions of Co-Active Leadership and move fluidly from one dimension to another far beyond the expectations of whatever role we occupy. This is one of the many things that make Co-Active Leadership such an adventure.

Co-Active Leadership can be expressed in *all* areas and moments of our life rather than being restricted to a specific role. Every interaction becomes an opportunity to lead in one way or another, and either we are being a leader in the moments of our life . . . or we are not.

As we move into the fullness of the twenty-first century, the challenges we face collectively are far too complex and planetary for any one person, or even any one group of people, to resolve in isolation.

How we relate to each other and the Earth matters now more than ever. It has never been clearer that we will thrive or die *together* because our fates are woven together in a web of interdependence that holds all of life on this Earth. And yet, even as it is crystal clear that we are unavoidably connected to each other, it is also clear that we have become divided from ourselves, from each other, and from the natural world that gives us life.



Western medicine is a wonderful tool that can heal all kinds of ills, and yet it teaches us to think of our body as a collection of parts rather than an integrated whole. It is important to love one's country, and yet nationalism has been used to turn us against one another. We say that justice is blind, and yet our systems of jurisprudence are rife with unconscious bias and systemic racism. A strong connection to Spirit is a vital foundation of a resonant life, and yet fundamentalism has blinded us to our shared humanity. Our very survival as a species is dependent upon the wellness of our planet, and yet we continue to live in ways that wreak irreparable harm. It is crucial at this time that we foster models and philosophies that support us in recovering the wholeness that is the birthright of all people.

Imagine, for a moment, what would become available if we were able to live and work with a profound sense of interrelatedness and interdependence, drawing insight and wisdom from the whole of our world rather than just the parts we thought belonged to us. From the micro of miscommunication and isolation in our individual relationships to the macro of global challenges like systemic oppression and climate change, it is essential that we learn to work together. We must learn to value and appreciate diverse perspectives and understand how to leverage a wide range of creative input because the challenges we face *require* that we do so.

We would like to offer a new definition of leadership, one that is spacious enough to celebrate the contributions of everyone rather than just the one person at the top. This definition can be applied to any relationship or challenge we might face.

***Leaders Are Those Who Are Responsible for Their World***

So, what do we mean by this? The word *responsibility* is often associated with burden, with something that is mandated. One of the dictionary definitions of *responsibility* is “a particular burden of obligation.”<sup>1</sup> Synonyms are *blame, fault, liability*.<sup>2</sup> Responsibility can feel heavy, significant, dutiful, and perhaps a bit terrifying.

What if responsibility existed outside the burden of the task, of getting the job done? What if we interpreted responsibility as a choice rather than a burden? What if the choice of responsibility generated a context of ownership and self-authorship beyond the immediate task at hand? In this new context, responsibility becomes expansive and nourishing rather than weighty and burdensome.

As we choose responsibility, we immediately have more internal freedom and creativity. We are able to shift from being a passenger with things happening to us to being open to the challenges of our lives and allowing them to shape and grow us. We are able to break free from our ego’s fears and need for approval and to meet our world with presence and love. Life is just more fun when we are choosing to be responsible. We open to the possibility of experiencing our life as an unfolding adventure rather than merely something to be endured. The difference is as dramatic as the difference between eating the white pith of an orange and savoring a burst of the sweet juice.

In Co-Active Leadership, responsibility has two important parts:

1. Being response-able: *able* to *respond* by having the awareness to notice what is needed in the moment and the agility to respond from a wide palette of creative choices rather than from an entrenched system of patterned and predictable reactions.

2. Being responsible: taking responsibility as a cocreator of our life story.

The circumstances of life will come and go, from birth to death with the full range of human experience in between. These ups and downs are a given in our human journey. However, we have everything to say about how we respond to these circumstances. We have the choice to react in a patterned way, blaming someone else for what is happening, or to create from those same circumstances, using whatever happens as an opportunity to evolve and grow ourselves and the people around us. This includes actively standing up for what is fair and in the best interest of all.

When we choose to be responsible and creative rather than reactive, we cease to feel as if we are running down a hill after our life trying to catch up. Instead, the choice of responsibility puts us squarely in the driver's seat of our life. We become a coauthor of our life rather than merely a passenger. When we are self-aware enough to respond rather than to react to the events of our life, we have enough self-authority to be creative and expand our range by consciously choosing to act from a full menu of options.

When viewed through this new lens, leadership development is not about acquiring new skills. Instead, the focus of leadership development is about growing the scope of the world for which one is able to be responsible. Sometimes this scope is very small. Some people are not able to be consistently responsible for the world of themselves, and they move through life unconsciously, bumping into different people and experiences without self-awareness.

This understandably creates concern about the concept of anyone being capable of choosing leadership. What about the people who are unconscious, who don't want to be responsible and choose instead to hide from responsibility? Don't these people have to be prodded and controlled and told what to do?

And what about all those other people who are selfish and domineering and don't care at all about other people? Don't we need to guard against these people? How can we possibly hold these people to be capable of leadership? Doesn't that just lower the bar and weaken the power of leadership for everyone else?

We maintain that the capacity to grow our self-awareness and our ability to be responsible is available to anyone. The advantages of choosing to grow in this way are numerous, ranging from greater success and effectiveness to a deeper sense of fulfillment and happiness. Most important, as we come to understand that we are not isolated and alone, we begin to connect to a sense of purpose. We realize that our day-to-day choices have an impact on our world. In our experience, this is what people are longing for most of all: to know that they had an impact and made a difference during their time here on Earth. So, as we open to our response-ability and our responsibility, this offers us a deep sense of meaning and purpose.

It is important to note that everyone being responsible for their world doesn't mean that everyone should weigh in on all decisions or that everyone must be happy with the decisions that are made. In a family system, parents must make some decisions that their children do not like. In an organization, executives must make unpopular decisions to serve the good of the whole. In any decision, it's useful to be clear about whose input will be helpful and who will be the final decision maker.

Instead, the kind of responsibility we are talking about is contextual. We always have a choice in how we respond to decisions and events. Are we straightforward and courageous, or do we take the easy way out and just go along? Do we try to find value in decisions we don't agree with, or do we just complain?

It's also true that our world is not necessarily fair, carefully measuring out the same proportion of opportunity to all. There are many