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Leadership Gold

Lessons I've Learned from a Lifetime of Leading

John C. Maxwell • HarperCollins Leadership © 2008 • 272 pages

Leadership

Take-Aways

- Leadership is not a solitary pursuit. Strong relationships are essential to your success.
- Be a “connector” as well as a “climber.” Ascend the corporate ladder, but demonstrate “appreciation, sensitivity, consistency, security” and “humor” along the way.
- How you respond to major decisions or crises reveals your true character.
- These “defining moments” present opportunities to chart a new course, re-examine your priorities, reach new heights, or clarify a goal or purpose.
- Your decisions shape your identity, so make “three critical choices” as a leader:
- First, expect more from yourself than others expect from you; second, prioritize helping people over pleasing them and, third, concentrate on the present, not the past.
- Learn how to accept criticism and keep an open attitude. Realize that sometimes people are criticizing your position, not you personally.
- Be an attentive listener and an avid learner. Show passion for your work.
- Improve your weak areas, but play to your strengths – and help others develop theirs.
- The power you wield as a leader comes with the responsibility of helping people. Use your influence to speak up for others or to develop future leaders.

Recommendation

After years of writing and lecturing about leadership, and after decades of practicing it, John C. Maxwell created this book as a reflection on all he has learned about guiding others. He shares leadership lessons he experienced firsthand as well as those culled from other experts. His 26 “gold nuggets” address various aspects of leadership, such as developing relationships, nurturing tomorrow’s leaders, and recognizing and responding to “defining moments.” At the end of each chapter, Maxwell offers “Application Exercises” to show readers how to put the lessons to practical use, and “Mentoring Moments” to help them teach the principles to others. As in most of Maxwell’s books, his strength lies not in his originality but in his ability to distill offerings from many different sources into pithy quotes and simple, easy-to-learn portions. Maxwell readers will encounter much familiar wisdom but, nonetheless, *getAbstract* finds that this is a warm and helpful text for emerging and current leaders in every field.

Summary

“Harnessing the Power of Many”

Leadership takes effort, dedication and a commitment to improve and learn. What does it mean to be a leader? It means readily “putting oneself at risk” and being willing to “stand out in a crowd.” Leaders aren’t content with the status quo; they are driven to create meaningful change. While others fixate on limitations, leaders perceive opportunities. They are responsible yet daring, humble yet inspiring. By caring about those around them, they “liberate the ideas, energy and capacities of others.”

“Truths About the Top”

Contrary to the popular saying “It’s lonely at the top,” good leadership is not a solitary pursuit. If you separate yourself from your team members, you’ll lose sight of their needs, dreams and ambitions. You can’t help them if you don’t know them. To stay connected, do away with “positional thinking.” Don’t use your authority to push others into doing what you want. Instead, develop relationships so you can pursue shared goals. When people feel that you care about them, they will show interest in what you have to say. Scrambling up the corporate ladder without developing relationships along the way puts you in danger of managing people’s minds and actions without winning their hearts. Such emotionless leadership is often short-lived.

“Good leaders don’t belittle people – they enlarge them.”

Are you a positional leader, a “climber”? Or are you more relational, a “connector”? Climbers focus on hierarchy; they define people by their higher or lower position on the corporate ladder. From this perspective, everyone becomes a competitor, rather than a collaborator with a common goal. In contrast, connectors seek partners and draw strength from a team effort. Good leadership requires both climbing and connecting. To become a better climber, establish a clear purpose, improve your ability to focus and push yourself to work faster. To become a more effective connector, nurture your self-confidence, so you don’t always feel the need to be the “top dog.” Develop your “appreciation, sensitivity, consistency” and humor.

“As a leader, you will never get ahead until your people are behind you.”

The most challenging person to lead is yourself. While you might judge others fairly, maintaining a realistic self-image is difficult. If you learn how to lead yourself, leading others will follow more naturally. First, understand what it takes to be a good follower so you can be an empathetic, humble leader. Second, take ownership of your actions and decisions, and exercise self-discipline. Third, recognize that achievements take time. Be patient and keep your long-term goals in sight. And fourth, avoid developing “a false sense of security” about your ability to lead ethically. Distrust yourself. Make yourself accountable to someone else.

“Defining Moments”

Winston Churchill once said, “In every age there comes a time when a leader must come forward to meet the needs of the hour.” Such “defining moments” determine what kind of leader you truly are. Indeed, how you respond at critical junctures reveals your character. When handled well, a defining moment can cement your positive reputation. If handled poorly, it can irreparably damage your credibility. Consider President George W. Bush’s vastly different approaches to two defining moments: On September 11, 2001, when terrorists attacked the World Trade Center, President Bush’s reaction touched the hearts of Americans. However, the “leadership vacuum” they perceived after Hurricane Katrina caused them to view Bush negatively.

“Good leaders understand that people do not care how much you know until they know how much you care.”

The unseen benefit of any major decision or crisis is that it presents a chance to redefine yourself. Prepare for these moments. Evaluate the defining moments you experienced in the past. What did you learn from them? Then, plan for future defining moments. Watch for any that might be emerging. Leaders face four types of defining moments; each kind contains a different risk – and a different opportunity. “Ground Breakers” nudge people to chart a new course, “Heart Breakers” remind them to re-examine their priorities, “Cloud Breakers” help them clarify a goal or purpose and “Chart Breakers” push them to reach new heights.

“If you are leading others and you’re lonely, then you’re not doing it right.”

John Wooden, the late renowned basketball coach, said, “There is a choice you have to make in everything you do. So keep in mind that in the end, the choice you make, makes you.” Your decisions, especially in dicey situations, shape your identity. Make “three critical choices” to become a stronger leader:

1. Expect more of yourself than others expect of you.
2. Prioritize helping people over pleasing them.
3. Concentrate on the present, not the past.

“If we are honest with ourselves, we’ll admit that the toughest person to lead is ourselves.”

Leaders cannot escape criticism, but they can choose to handle it well. Understand the positive and negative facets of your nature, so feedback won’t wound you so deeply. Realize that sometimes people are criticizing your position, not you personally. Cultivate an open attitude and keep your defensiveness at bay, so you can

learn from criticism. If feedback is on target, use it to grow and improve. Focusing your attention on others, rather than on yourself, may help you maintain a sense of perspective.

Leadership Basics

Almost all good leaders are passionate about their work – to the point where it doesn't even feel like work. Skill, opportunity, experience and expertise are not enough; neither are hiring and collaborating with great people. Unless you have passion, you will fall short of excellence.

“Only a leader who has followed well knows how to lead others well.”

Top leaders know that the *l* in “leadership” stands for “listen.” Often, the higher people advance, the less likely they are to heed input. However, leaders who don't connect to their team members won't be able to spot potential problems, develop trusting relationships or learn from others. Hear what your people have to say. Keep an open mind and heart. Be a committed learner. If you stop reaching and growing, your organization will plateau as well. Continually strive to improve, even after you feel you've reached the top. You can never learn all there is to know, so stay open, curious and inquisitive. To encourage your peers and employees to learn, create a “growing environment.” Remember that “experience is the best teacher” only if you are willing to learn from it. To benefit from your experience, take the time to reflect, assess and learn.

“Following your passion is the key to finding your potential.”

Inevitably, you will err. Make the most of your missteps by following a five-step “recipe for successful failure.” First, take responsibility for your mistakes and your limitations. Second, understand that mistakes are “the price of progress.” As psychologist Joyce Brothers explains, “The person interested in success has to learn how to view failure as a healthy, inevitable part of the process of getting to the top.” Third, glean an important lesson from each mistake. Fourth, ask, “What are we missing?” to ensure that you aren't headed for future pitfalls. Fifth, encourage people to question and even oppose your ideas and suggestions. If your employees are afraid to speak up, they won't be able to stop you from pursuing an unsound or potentially damaging strategy.

“Leadership makes every endeavor either better or worse.”

Finally, always manage your time well. Viewing time management through the lens of the Pareto principle helps you see why this skill is so crucial to leadership. Simply put, the principle says that 20% of your activities are “16 times more productive than the remaining 80%.” This means that you waste 80% of your time on less productive tasks. Focusing on the top 20%, delegating less important duties and getting good administrative help will allow you to become much more productive.

Get in the “Strength Zone”

Strive to improve your weak areas, but play to your strengths. Identify your natural talent, and work on making it better. This is called “finding and remaining in your strength zone.” To discover where you're especially gifted, ask yourself, “What am I doing well?” Be specific in your answer. Consider the activities you perform that earn praise. Don't misplace your energies by focusing on tasks that others do better. In

the words of former General Electric CEO Jack Welch, “If you don’t have a competitive advantage, don’t compete.” In his book, *Jack: Straight from the Gut*, Welch defines five other tenets of great leadership:

1. “Control your destiny, or someone else will.”
2. “Face reality as it is, not as it was or as you wish it were.”
3. “Be candid with everyone.”
4. “Don’t manage, lead.”
5. “Change before you have to.”

“As a leader, you should always challenge people to move out of their comfort zone, but never out of their strength zone.”

Welch says successful leaders don’t wear rose-colored glasses. They may be optimists, but they are also good at “defining reality” so they can deal with it head-on. These leaders accurately assess the current situation and foresee the consequences of their actions more clearly than those around them.

“As long as people are following you, they will be able to go only as far as you go.”

To be an effective leader, identify and develop other people’s strengths as well as your own. Don’t try to make “ducks into eagles.” In other words, don’t put people in the wrong jobs, or they won’t succeed. Understand the importance of helping everyone reach his or her potential, and bring out the best in your teammates. This will increase the accomplishments of each individual and team and lift the organization to new heights. Become an “agent of change” by fostering a workplace where people are excited about trying something new.

“Who Do People Quit?”

Losing talented employees is very hard on an organization. Research shows that 65% of people who leave their jobs depart because of issues with their managers. What kinds of leaders drive away good workers? Leaders erode trust when they are inconsistent, when they put their own needs ahead of the organization’s or when they manipulate the truth. People quit when they feel unappreciated or, even worse, devalued – or when they lose trust in their supervisors. Staffers also leave when they feel that their managers are making poor decisions or are generally incompetent. Lastly, people don’t like to work for managers who second-guess themselves, become defensive or show their insecurities.

“Influence Should Be Loaned but Never Given”

The power you wield as a leader comes with the responsibility of helping others. Use your influence to speak up for those whose voices are not being heard or to develop people who show leadership potential. Or draw upon it to connect with other important leaders and increase the reach of your message exponentially. Think of influence as a resource you lend, with expectations of a return, rather than an outright gift. Share it with people who appreciate it and use it correctly.

“The greatest obstacle to discovery isn’t ignorance or lack of intelligence. It’s the illusion of knowledge.”

You didn't reach your position of leadership without the help of "mentors and supporters" along the way. Mentors are the people who provided a model for your success. They shared their knowledge and influence and pulled you up to their level in the organization. Supporters pushed you to the top by making you feel acknowledged and appreciated. Several types of people will help you continue along your career path. They include:

- **"Time Relievers"** – The employees who "save [you] time."
- **"Team Players"** – Those who make meaningful contributions to your team.
- **"Creative Thinkers"** – The people who resolve issues and generate options for you.
- **"Door Closers"** – The workers who finish projects "with excellence."
- **"Mind Stretchers"** – The people who help you broaden "your thinking and your spirit."
- **"Relational Networkers"** – The staffers who help you connect with other people.

"Experience teaches nothing, but evaluated experience teaches everything."

"Unconditional Lovers" – The people who are aware of your limitations, but still love you anyway.

About the Author

John C. Maxwell is an internationally respected leadership expert, speaker and author who has sold more than 19 million books. Dr. Maxwell is the founder of EQUIP, a nonprofit organization that has trained more than 5 million leaders in 126 countries worldwide. Each year he speaks to the leaders of diverse organizations, such as *Fortune* 500 companies, foreign governments, the National Football League, the United States Military Academy at West Point and the United Nations. A *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal* and *BusinessWeek* best-selling author, Maxwell has written three books that have sold more than a million copies: *The 21 Irrefutable Laws of Leadership*, *Developing the Leader Within You* and *The 21 Indispensable Qualities of a Leader*. He regularly posts new content on his website, JohnMaxwellonLeadership.com.



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