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# The Leadership Handbook

26 Critical Lessons Every Leader Needs

John C. Maxwell • Thomas Nelson © 2015 • 272 pages

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## Leadership

Human Resources / Learning & Development / Leadership Development

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## Take-Aways

- Becoming a worthy leader requires focus and hard work.
- Everyone makes mistakes. Smart leaders don't make the same mistake twice.
- Leaders must learn constantly. Often they learn from experience, an excellent teacher. What counts are not your experiences themselves, but how you deal with them.
- Leaders must determine the appropriate action and carry it out.
- Leadership demands being ready, willing and able to make tough choices and trade-offs at challenging times and under difficult circumstances.
- Leaders need people skills. Listen carefully to learn what matters to your team members.
- Leaders don't get to the top alone. They need help. When you reach the top, help others make the climb.
- No one can manage time; you can manage yourself and how you use time.
- Evaluate your goals objectively to develop self-discipline, patience and accountability.
- Don't judge your leadership ability by judging your performance. What matters is the performance of those you lead.

## Recommendation

Leadership expert and prolific author John Maxwell offers 26 perceptive lessons for both new and experienced leaders. Maxwell peppers his book with great quotations from famous leaders and with warm personal anecdotes that illustrate his leadership lessons. He explains why leaders should learn from their experiences and from other people, why they need to understand people to lead them, and what leadership demands. He offers easy, practical formulas, tools and aphorisms. Maxwell's encouraging advice, while not innovative, is reliably solid. *getAbstract* recommends his worthy lessons to seasoned leaders and up-and-comers alike.

## Summary

### Become a Strong Leader

Anyone can lead, but becoming a quality leader requires a lifetime of learning. Some leadership discoveries will come from your mistakes, which often provide valuable lessons. Absorb these lessons and your errors, no matter how difficult that may seem at the time. As poet Archibald MacLeish said, "There's only one thing more painful than learning from experience, and that is not learning from experience."

### Leadership Lessons

To be a leader, you must be courageous, take risks and accept responsibility. Put the following 26 leadership lessons to work, not as theory but as practical and appropriate action.

1. **"If it's lonely at the top, you're not doing something right"** – Leaders don't reach the top of the mountain on their own; they need help. Leaders should reciprocate and help those they lead climb as well. The focus of leadership is people, so develop your people skills. Routinely stroll through your office to interact personally with your staff members.
2. **"The toughest person to lead is always yourself"** – Leaders cannot always see themselves objectively. To gain an honest appraisal, list your primary goals and grade each as accomplished or not accomplished. Take your list to people you admire, tell them you are evaluating job applicants and ask them to rate the person you've graded. Do their ratings correspond to how you judge yourself? This exercise helps you develop self-discipline, patience and accountability.
3. **"Defining moments define your leadership"** – Winston Churchill, prime minister of the United Kingdom during World War II, rallied his country against the Nazis. Defining moments in life demonstrate who people are – to themselves and to others. How you handle yourself during these moments depends on the choices you make in less dramatic times. Choose the right attitude, priorities and relationships.
4. **"When you get kicked in the rear, you know you're out in front"** – When you lead, criticism comes with the territory. To deal with criticism, you need to know who you are. Separate yourself from your position as leader. Many people automatically criticize leaders, no matter who they are or what they do. Develop a thick hide. As a leader, you have responsibilities and work to do. Stop defending yourself and get on about your business.

5. **“Never work a day in your life”** – Achieve this exalted state by being passionate about how you make a living. As General Electric CEO, Jack Welch taught that passion and enthusiasm drive strong leaders and inspire their followers. If you are not that passionate about your job at least half the time, find a new one.
6. **“The best leaders are listeners”** – Most people believe they are good listeners, but sadly, they’re not. Listening is tough for anyone, but particularly for leaders. You can’t lead people if you don’t understand them. Understanding requires listening. Great leaders must be great learners. Listening is the ideal way to gain new information. Make a point of listening and learning from others. Seek the ideas and opinions of those around you, including other leaders in your organization.
7. **“Get in the zone and stay there”** – Smart leaders operate from their strengths. To improve, concentrate your efforts on your most outstanding abilities. Perform an informal audit to determine your primary strengths. Focus on those specific abilities and on what you are doing right. As you conduct your audit, consider whether your job fully uses your special talents. List three tasks at which you excel. Are you spending more or less time on them? If you can’t focus on your core abilities, seek a change to spend more time working from your strengths.
8. **“A leader’s first responsibility is to define reality”** – Make sure you keep your feet on the ground and stay in touch with reality. To ensure you view work and life with clarity, probe for the reality at the core of each dilemma. Determine whether others see things as you do. If problems exist, can you fix them? Can you tell problems you can fix from those you can’t? Ask others – outsiders you trust – for their independent analyses of the situation.
9. **“To see how the leader is doing, look at the people”** – Your individual performance as a leader does not matter nearly as much as how the people you lead perform. Leaders are responsible for what their teams achieve or fail to achieve. Many factors account for how organizations perform, including chance, the state of the market, employees, cooperation, means, assets and serendipity. The one characteristic that typifies top organizations is quality leadership. Do your people believe in you as their leader? If not, you are not really leading. In that case, you must turn this situation around immediately. Work on developing strong relationships with the members of your team, and gain their trust.
10. **“Don’t send your ducks to eagle school”** – Just as leaders need to work according to their individual strengths, so must the people they lead. Do not place employees in leadership jobs that don’t suit them. If you try to change ducks into eagles, you’re sure to experience frustration – and so will your ducks and eagles. When you need to fill a management position, select an apt candidate for leadership, someone known for the right qualities: adaptability, discernment, perspective, servanthood, resourcefulness, maturity, endurance and accountability.
11. **“Keep your mind on the main thing”** – The Pareto principle states that 80% of the effects derive from 20% of the causes. To operate more efficiently, make sure you focus your efforts on your most important concerns. Let sideline issues stay on the sidelines. Perform a personal audit to see how you spend your time. Review your schedule and priority lists with an eye toward doing the most important things first and delegating the least important. Leverage your time to work from your strengths, not from your weaknesses.
12. **“Your biggest mistake is not asking what mistake you’re making”** – Mistakes are integral to life. Every mistake you make can be a valuable lesson. Expect to goof occasionally. When you do, figure out what you did wrong and how to avoid ever doing it again. To avoid errors, ask if you’re missing some

crucial element of the situation and be alert to factors that could go awry. Don't worry about what you know; worry about what you don't know, and do all you can to discover your missing knowledge.

13. **“Don't manage your time – manage your life”** – Don't think you can manage time. What you can do is manage yourself and how you use your time. Use this formula to decide which tasks to do: Rate the importance of each task from one to five, with one being unimportant and five being crucial. Rate each task's urgency from one (end of year) to five (this month). Multiply importance by urgency – for example, “5 (critical urgency) x 4 (next month) = 20.” Tackle each task in the order of its score. First do the task with the highest score and work on down.
14. **“Keep learning to keep leading”** – Every leader needs a formal plan for his or her personal growth. Read widely from books and periodicals within and outside of your field. Attend professional conferences. Make learning your lifetime endeavor. Making your company a place that encourages learning and growth is a core responsibility of leadership.
15. **“Leaders distinguish themselves during tough times”** – Challenging events offer special opportunities to make your mark as a respected, credible leader, someone willing to make the tough calls and take calculated risks. You will be better able to handle those tough calls if you practice making deliberate decisions, even difficult ones, about the smaller matters that you confront daily. Playing it safe is not a leader's job. Knowing when to put everything on the line is an important aspect of leadership.
16. **“People quit people, not companies”** – Up to 65% of employees leave their firms because they dislike their managers. These supposed leaders hurt those around them. They devalue their team members. Or they are untrustworthy, incompetent or insecure. Don't be the leader others have to dodge. Work hard to make your relationships with your employees as fulfilling as possible. Every day, prove to the people on your team that you are worthy of their trust as a mature leader and can lead them responsibly.
17. **“Experience is not the best teacher”** – What counts most are not your experiences, but how you deal with them. For some people, experience is valuable because it provides new knowledge and insights. Others learn nothing from their experiences. What separates those who learn from those who don't is how much they try to understand and reflect on what they have been through. This vital step – thoughtful analysis – transforms experience into new understanding. Become a true student of experience. When something noteworthy happens, record the event and what you learned from it. Think carefully about the significance of each step.
18. **“The secret to a good meeting is the meeting before the meeting”** – Get together in advance with the important people who will attend a pivotal meeting to make sure that everyone will be working from the same page. The purpose of any meeting is to accomplish a goal. When you meet with the primary participants in advance, you get a chance to secure buy-in for what the main meeting will get done. Such pre-meetings also help enhance your influence.
19. **“Be a connector, not just a climber”** – Leaders are natural climbers who are ambitious, aggressive and competitive. Advising up-and-coming leaders not to climb the ladder is a waste of time. Instead, explain how leaders should work their way to the top by doing great work and establishing meaningful connections along the way. Such connections secure the allegiance of those whose help you'll need to lead effectively.
20. **“The choices you make, make you”** – Choosing one thing over another is a calculated exercise of power. The choices you make define who you are, what's important to you and the values you represent. Your choices are momentous. After your decision, your outcomes will depend totally on the path you

selected and all of its good or bad consequences. Every choice changes you. Author C. S. Lewis wrote that each choice makes your innermost self either more angelic or more devilish. Make your decisions with care and avoid those devilish deals that contradict your values.

21. **“Influence should be loaned but never given”** – Leaders earn influence over time. Influence is a valuable commodity. Leverage your influence to help those who have none, as Martin Luther King Jr. did during the civil rights era. Be careful how you expend your influence. Treat this intangible commodity as something you loan, not give away. Make sure you get a good return from this transaction.
22. **“For everything you gain, you give up something”** – Leadership requires tough trade-offs. During the US Civil War, President Abraham Lincoln’s advisers warned him not to add another 500,000 soldiers to the Union Army. They said that it would make his re-election impossible. Lincoln responded that the additional troops were crucial for the success of the war. Lincoln said, “If I go down under the act, I will go down with my colors flying.” Make this your motto. Bravely follow your chosen course.
23. **“Those who start the journey with you seldom finish with you”** – As a leader, your relationships with the members of your team should be important to you. Nevertheless, do not take it personally when people leave. That is life. Remain secure in your leadership.
24. **“Few leaders are successful unless a lot of people want them to be”** – The next time you watch a movie, pay attention to the credits at the end of the film. Dozens of names will roll by; each person contributed something to the movie in his or her own way. Without those contributions, the film would not exist. Leadership follows the same dynamic. You can’t be an effective leader without the help of other people. These include those who use time efficiently, those who love to collaborate, those who inspire your thinking, and many more.
25. **“You only get answers to the questions you ask”** – Often, people are reluctant to ask questions because they don’t want to appear poorly informed. In fact, those in the know respect you when you ask intelligent questions. Ask for the answers you need to do your job. Asking the right questions and learning the right answers are crucial to your success. Before you can use questions to get information you need, consider your framework. Ask yourself if you’re doing what you should be doing to be a good leader. Remember, first things first.
26. **“People will summarize your life in one sentence – pick it now”** – After you’re gone, what will be your legacy? Start thinking about that now. You only get one chance to create your legacy daily through your actions. Absorb and live these lessons to ensure you follow the right course. Choose how people will remember you.

## Practical Application

For novice leaders: Now that you’ve studied the 26 leadership lessons, put them to work in your life. This is vital to your leadership development. Be fully intentional about this process. Work hard at it. Always keep learning. For experienced leaders: Many of these lessons reflect what you already know. Pass it on to help young leaders realize their full potential.

## About the Author

**John C. Maxwell** is a best-selling author, coach and speaker. He also wrote *Good Leaders Ask Great Questions*, *Sometimes You Win – Sometimes You Learn*, and many other popular books.



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