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The 17 Essential Qualities of a Team Player

Becoming the Kind of Person Every Team Wants

John C. Maxwell • Thomas Nelson © 2002 • 176 pages

Leadership / Leading Teams

Take-Aways

- Teams win when they have good players.
- To find great team players, develop them or recruit them.
- On a collaborative team, each member has a talent that strengthens the whole team.
- Communication works best when people are candid, inclusive and cooperative.
- Team members should be committed to doing exceptional work together and to raising their individual standards.
- Good team members are disciplined in their thinking, emotions and actions.
- They are also focused, adaptable, communicative, purposeful and goal-oriented.
- Strong bonds between team members can overcome other deficiencies.
- Team members must put others first, and be selfless, generous and loyal.
- To be a better team player, take time for self-assessment and self-improvement.

Recommendation

This brief, inspirational book uses a now-classic formula for texts on selling and leadership, although its focus on cooperation and following the leader is unusual. Each chapter starts with a short anecdote about a historic figure's accomplishments, and his or her triumph over adversity. The vignettes demonstrate the lessons that author John C. Maxwell then briefly discusses in the rest of the chapter. The "laws" the author promulgates benefit from the stories' afterglow and are less important than the stories themselves. Memorable quotations and sidebars that support the author's main points round off each lesson. Maxwell is an expert at wielding this formula, perhaps because he helped make it a classic, and a star in the inspirational self-help genre. *getAbstract* recommends his book as a pick-me-up for team members and aspiring leaders.

Summary

The Best Players

Although a team can lose if it has great players, it can't win without them. Yet individual talent alone does not guarantee success. Once you've attracted the right people to your team, you must help them mature into team players. How do you accomplish this? In fact, you have two choices: You can either develop these people yourself or you can recruit new people who are already top-notch team members.

"All people can choose to become better teammates."

True team players have 17 key traits, as exemplified by well-known personalities from history or contemporary society. They are:

1. "Adaptable"

Quincy Jones is one of the biggest names in the music industry. He has performed, composed, arranged, produced, collaborated, directed and founded businesses. He excelled in each area because he was able to adapt to working with many different kinds of groups. His emotional confidence and creativity enabled him to transfer prior knowledge seamlessly to new endeavors. "I take everybody one-on-one and I'm happy," Jones explains. He exemplifies the adaptable team member, someone creative who can learn, has a sense of security and knows how to be flexible.

"Any time you make choices based on solid life values, then you are in a better position to sustain your level of commitment."

Napoleon Bonaparte once explained to an adversary that he – that is, Napoleon's opponent – had been defeated because he drew up his plans before the battle and did not adjust them to meet changing field conditions. According to the Duke of Wellington, Napoleon's flexibility and presence on the battlefield was worth 40,000 soldiers.

2. “Collaborative”

On March 24, 1944, 220 Allied prisoners escaped from a Nazi prisoner-of-war camp through a tunnel they had worked on together surreptitiously for more than a year. They accomplished this huge secret effort, under the most difficult and dangerous circumstances, through collaboration – an intense focus on working as an ensemble. On a collaborative team, each member contributes a talent that makes the whole team stronger. Good team members see others as co-workers, not competitors. They put aside suspicion, focus on the group and celebrate collective victories.

3. “Committed”

In 1952, after eight years of work, Dr. Jonas Salk and his team at the University of Pittsburgh developed a polio vaccine. By 1957, the vaccine had nearly eradicated the terrifying disease in the U.S. Salk and his team succeeded because they were dedicated and believed in the value of their work. In fact, most people increase their level of commitment when they face a challenging task. Confronting a difficult problem increases their determination; the more difficult the problem, the less likely they are to give up. Even team members of different abilities share the drive to reach the team’s mutual goal.

4. “Communicative”

Communication is an essential part of team-building. Without it, teams cannot sustain their growth or accomplishments. Team members should communicate candidly with each other as directly as possible. When a problem arises, they should get the word out and resolve it within 24 hours. Pay extra attention to tense relationships and don’t let them fester. As the team’s work becomes more complicated, using written instructions and setting priorities become increasingly important. All the members should understand and remember their assignments. That’s why football teams have playbooks and businesses have contracts.

5. “Competent”

The team as a whole should make a commitment to excellent performance. Members should consciously choose not to be content with average work. Team members should strive to do exceptional work together while also raising their individual standards. Each member should develop his or her own area of specialization.

6. “Dependable”

Teams operate well when members meet their responsibilities, show good judgment and contribute steadily. Consistency helps to build trust among team members. If you can’t count on the people on your team, you can’t be effective. Ask your team to hold you accountable, in return. Live up to your obligations as an individual and as a team member.

“You will never develop common ground with your teammates unless you share common experiences.”

In the mid-1800s, the U.S. was in an economic depression. To keep the state of Pennsylvania financially stable, its legislature voted to renege on its debts. Ohio's leaders considered a similar tactic, but when Stephen Douglas – a state legislator who later ran for president – heard about this proposal, he insisted on being in the legislative chamber to argue against it, even though he was seriously ill at the time. He convinced the legislature to pay its bills. Ohio's decision to meet its financial obligations helped it return to prosperity in the future.

7. “Disciplined”

Discipline is cultivating the ability to do the things life demands of you, whether you wish to do them or not. Team members should practice discipline in three areas:

- **Thinking** – Don't walk through life like a zombie. Playwright George Bernard Shaw said, “Few people think more than two or three times a year; I have made an international reputation for myself by thinking once or twice a week.”
- **Emotions** – Strive for self-mastery. Bobby Jones was a golf prodigy, but when he competed in a national event at age 14, and lost, he couldn't keep his temper. He even flung his golf club, earning the nickname “club thrower.” His coach suggested he work on anger management. As he developed discipline, he started to win consistently. By the time he was 21, he was on his way to being a precedent-setting champion.
- **Actions** – Take responsibility for making things happen.

8. “Enlarging”

Hall of Fame basketball player Bill Russell measured his personal success in any game by how much he had encouraged his teammates to excel. Give others the “spirit of approval” and encourage them to move ahead. To make your teammates feel more empowered, “believe in them” and “serve them,” even if they haven't yet served you or shown their belief in you.

9. “Enthusiastic”

Enthusiasm is contagious. It affects your productivity and success level. When the Harley-Davidson motorcycle company started in 1903, it hand-built three different motorcycle models. By World War I, the company was providing 20,000 motorcycles to the war effort, and by the early 1970s it had 80% of the market. But the company moved and shifted focus. Quality dropped and people became demoralized. In 1980, it lost money for the first time. Then, 13 executives who had a passion for the firm and its motorcycles purchased the company and began to turn it around. They created the Harley Owners Group (HOG), which now has more than 600,000 members. Dedicated employees and customers saved the company with their zeal for the mystique of its motorcycle.

10. “Intentional”

Successful people define their priorities based on their long-term goals. Having a sense of purpose makes you conscious of time and its value. Pleasant Rowland, a former teacher, envisioned a company that combined dolls and books. She created American Girl dolls. Each model of her high-quality doll represents

a historic period, and is marketed with related storybooks and historically accurate costumes. The dolls became wildly popular. When Mattel acquired American Girl, it named Rowland its vice chairman.

11. “Mission-Conscious”

A team with a shared mission knows where it is going, follows the directions of its leader and places the good of the team ahead of benefiting individual members. Members strive to accomplish the team’s goal. During the American Revolution, Mary Hays, or “Molly Pitcher,” followed her husband’s army unit and watched his gunnery crew in action. When he was killed, she took his position and kept the gun operating during a long artillery battle. Her actions helped the Continental army win the Battle of Monmouth.

12. “Prepared”

Team members should prepare themselves thoroughly, based on their assignments and their working conditions. Part of that preparation is a positive attitude. World War I soldier Alvin York was once a conscientious objector. When he was required to go through the U.S. Army’s basic training, he became a crack shot, even at 200 yards. After seeing the consequences of the war in Europe, he re-examined his beliefs and decided to participate in the fighting. During the Battle of the Argonne, his eight-man unit was pinned down by German machine guns. York shot 25 men with 25 shots, and his unit captured 132 prisoners. York earned international recognition as the greatest soldier of the war.

13. “Relational”

President Ronald Reagan had opponents who vigorously objected to his politics, but genuinely liked him as a person because he interacted with everyone equally, regardless of their social position or political opinions. If you can build strong personal bonds, you can transcend other problems. Solid relationships among team members require respect, trust and shared experiences. Demonstrate to others that you respect them, but understand that you’ll have to gain their respect.

14. “Self-Improving”

Jorma Ollila has a background in finance and banking. In 1992, he became president of Finland’s Nokia company. Nokia began as a lumber company in the 1800s, but by 1990 it was heavily invested in rubber and paper production. Ollila reinvented the company, shedding those operations and focusing on communication technology. Today, Nokia is the world’s largest cell phone company. In addition to transforming his company, Ollila was also interested in individual self-improvement, which he envisioned as a lifelong goal for his employees. Team members who want to improve themselves should take advantage of all opportunities to learn new things. Self-improvement also requires analysis of your current situation, self-assessment and contemplation.

15. “Selfless”

Team members must learn to put others first. They must be generous and loyal, and avoid political squabbles, which can derail united efforts. When the Japanese captured Philip Toosey’s British army unit in

the Philippines during WWII, the Japanese made the soldiers build bridges, including one over the Kwae Yai River.

“No problems can withstand the assault of sustained thinking.”

Toosey agreed to have his men build the bridge, although he knew that the Japanese order to do so violated international agreements. He steadfastly insisted on good treatment and increased rations for the soldiers – even when he was beaten for his actions. His loyalty became the basis of the movie, *The Bridge on the River Kwai*. Toosey hated the film, although he never complained about it publicly.

16. “Solution-Oriented”

How you handle problems can determine your success as a team member. First, analyze them. Then, solve them. Often, refocusing your thinking and persevering to find a solution can build character. John Walsh, the founder of the TV show *America’s Most Wanted*, lost his six-year-old son to a murderer in 1981. In response, he formed the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children. The center now has 125 employees and has handled 73,000 cases. Walsh turned his grief into a solution, and in the process helped thousands of other distraught parents.

17. “Tenacious”

Even if you lack talent, you can succeed through persistence, since success often depends not on luck or destiny but on willpower. During the U.S. Revolutionary War, George Washington won only three battles – but they were the crucial ones that determined the course of the war. When the British surrendered, General Cornwallis expressed his admiration for Washington, whom he considered a great leader and tenacious fighter. To make tenacity worthwhile, pursue your real purpose.

About the Author

John C. Maxwell is a leadership expert, speaker and the author of *The 21 Irrefutable Laws of Leadership* and *Developing the Leader Within You*.



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