

The 21 Irrefutable Laws of Leadership by John Maxwell

LAW #1 – THE LAW OF THE LID

Maxwell defines the **Law of the Lid** by saying “*leadership ability is the lid that determines a person’s level of effectiveness. The lower an individual’s ability to lead, the lower the lid on his potential.*” This idea is troubling for some people because it means that no matter how much you desire to be a 10 on the scale of leadership, there is a cap to your abilities based on a number of factors. Some of these factors are your people skills, planning abilities, vision, dedication to success, and your past results.

The truth is, there are very few 10’s in the world; however, when you leverage the *law of the lid* and assess your own leadership, then you will have a straightforward view of who your followers are, where they might land on the leadership scale, and areas in which you can grow in to raise your leadership lid. The reality is that if you are a 7 on the leadership scale, in most cases you won’t be able to lead someone who is an 8, 9, or 10. Yet your skills can still offer invaluable leadership to people who are at a level of a 5 or 6.

The good news is, the *law of the lid* has room for flexibility. It is unwise to think that where you are today as a leader is as good as you will ever be. Every leader can grow, but it takes a dedication to do so and a willingness to work for it.

LAW #2 - THE LAW OF INFLUENCE

Maxwell’s definition for the **Law of Influence** is that “*the true measure of leadership is influence nothing more, nothing less.*” This, of course, is one of John Maxwell’s most famous quotes heard around the world (and world-wide web). It’s a great quote, but how often do you take time to ask yourself the big question: who are you influencing?

Maybe a bigger question for us to ask is, what type of influence are we offering those who follow us? Insecure leaders often influence people in such a way that it keeps others down in order to protect their own position of leadership in the group. This is a shame. The best leaders realize that leadership is always about raising people up to their highest potential, even if it means they one day become better leaders than themselves.

Leadership is not determined by having a title. It doesn’t matter if you are CEO, Pastor, Director, Manager, or Man of the House, you are not a leader if people do not follow your lead. Maxwell says, “*True leadership cannot be awarded, appointed, or assigned. It comes only from influence, and that cannot be mandated. It must be earned.*” He goes on to say, “*When it comes to identifying a real leader... don’t listen to the claims of the person professing to be the leader. Don’t examine his*

credentials. Don't check his title. Check his influence. The proof of leadership is found in the followers." He ends the chapter with a famous leadership proverb, "*He who thinks he leads, but has no followers, is only taking a walk.*"

LAW #3 – THE LAW OF PROCESS

The subtitle for this chapter is, "Leadership Develops Daily, Not in a Day." This means that you can tell where a person will end up by watching their daily habits and priorities. It means that as a leader, we must have a personal plan for growth. Maxwell writes, "What can you see when you look at a person's daily agenda? Priorities, passion, abilities, relationships, attitude, personal disciplines, vision, and influence" All of those things contribute to the destination you will arrive at later on in your journey of life. Therefore, it doesn't matter at all where you hope to end up, if you do not first determine which road you ought to be traveling on to get there.

The law of process also comes into play as we set out to lead others. Maxwell says, "Just as you need a growth plan to improve, so do those who work for you." This means that as we lead others, we have to set them on a course for success as well.

LAW #4 – THE LAW OF NAVIGATION

This law follows closely after the law of process. Once you have determined the process to get where you are going personally, the next step is being able to navigate your business or organization through the challenges and obstacles to reach to success. Maxwell quotes Jack Welch, former CEO of General Electric, as saying, "*A good leader remains focused... Controlling your direction is better than being controlled by it.*"

The **Law of Navigation** is where leadership differentiates itself from other voices wanting to be heard. Leaders look back at past experiences, prior successes, and hurtful failures. They learn from those things and then look ahead to see where conflict and challenge may arise. With all of these in mind, leaders will preemptively respond according to those challenges as they move forward toward the goal. This is more than vision-casting. This is determining what it will take to fulfill the vision. Maxwell says it this way: "*Anyone can steer the ship, but it takes a leader to chart the course.*"

LAW #5 – THE LAW OF ADDITION

The **Law of Addition** law simply says, "*Leaders add value by serving others.*" Maxwell says that we add value to others when we truly value them and intentionally make ourselves valuable to them. He says, "*90 percent of all people who add value to others do so intentionally.*" The most helpful way we do this is to actually get to know the people we are leading, find out their priorities, goals, hopes, and dreams, and then figure out what we can do to assist them in getting where they need to go. Maxwell says, "*Inexperienced leaders are quick to lead before knowing anything about the people they intend to lead. But mature leaders listen, learn, and then lead.*"

LAW #6 – THE LAW OF SOLID GROUND

Maxwell defines **The Law of Solid Ground** by saying: “*trust is the foundation of leadership*” This is perhaps the greatest challenge leaders face in the 21st century, especially those of us expressly leading as Christians with the Kingdom of God in mind. Too many people are disillusioned with leaders because it has been too-often abused by self-serving leaders. This is especially true of politicians and television preachers. Trust, then, is the most important element in leadership. If you do not have trust, you have nothing to offer.

Maxwell says that we build trust “*by consistently exemplifying competence, connection, and character,*” and that we must “*treat trust as our most precious asset.*” He later writes, “*How do leaders earn respect? By making sound decisions, by admitting their mistakes, and by putting what’s best for their followers and the organization ahead of their personal agendas.*” This is because, “*no leader can break trust with his people and expect to keep influencing them,*” and, as we already know, “*leadership is influence, nothing more.*”

LAW #7 – THE LAW OF RESPECT

Similar to the high necessity of trust, is the necessity of respect. The **Law of Respect** reminds us that “*people naturally follow leaders stronger than themselves.*” Maxwell says, “*One of the greatest potential pitfalls for natural leaders is relying on talent alone... good leaders rely on respect. They understand that all leadership is voluntary.*” He says that “*when people respect you as a person, they admire you. When they respect you as a friend, they love you. When they respect you as a leader, they follow you.*” The opposite is true as well. As soon as people lose respect for you, your influence over them will disappear.

LAW #8 – THE LAW OF INTUITION

Maxwell says that “*every person possesses intuition*” and “*people are intuitive in their area of strength.*” Therefore this law says that using intuition, “*Leaders evaluate everything with a leadership bias.*” The **Law of Intuition** is based on facts and instinct as well as other ever-changing factors such as “*employee morale, organizational momentum, and relational dynamics.*” Out of all of the leadership skills one can develop over time, intuition may be the hardest because it relies on more than just leadership experience. It has a lot to do with your natural aptitude for seeing all of these factors at once and naturally discerning possible actions and probable outcomes. Maxwell says of intuitive leaders, “*they ‘tune in’ to leadership dynamics. Many leaders describe this as an ability to ‘smell’ things in their organization. They can sense people’s attitudes. They are able to detect the chemistry of a team... They don’t need to sift through stats, read reports, or examine a balance sheet. They know the situation before they have all the facts. That is the result of their leadership intuition.*” This ability is one that is either natural or must be nurtured, and for many people who refuse to grow as a leader, it means they will never have this ability. Developing this intuition through experience and growth is invaluable because, as Maxwell says, “*whenever leaders face a problem, they automatically measure it — and begin solving it — using the Law of Intuition.*”

LAW #9 – THE LAW OF MAGNETISM

The **Law of Magnetism** states, “*Who you are is who you attract,*” or more simply, you will attract people like yourself. This can be a good thing in many cases, but is also a call to action to know your weaknesses and seek to grow out of them. Maxwell says, “*Leaders help to shape the culture of their organizations based on who they are and what they do,*” and “*not only do people attract others with similar attitudes, but their attitudes tend to become alike.*”

I have heard it said before that in five years, the things you won’t like about your organization is what you don’t like about yourself today. Your personality, character traits, quirks, and mannerisms will both attract people like yourself to your organization as well as rub off on the existing people within. According to Maxwell, “*Like attracts like. That may seem pretty obvious. Yet I’ve met many leaders who expect highly talented people to follow them, even though they neither possess nor express value for those people’s giftedness.*” Therefore, “*if you want to grow an organization, grow the leader*” and “*if you want to attract better people, become the kind of person you desire to attract.*” Then, once you are attracting the people you want to have following you, then its time to take yourself and those people to the next level together.

LAW #10 – THE LAW OF CONNECTION

Maxwell summarizes **The Law of Connection** by saying, “*leaders touch a heart before they ask for a hand.*” Another way to say this is that people will not follow you until they are emotionally bought into the vision you are casting. There is also some tie in here with the famous quote, “*people don’t care how much you know, until they know how much you care.*” Maxwell says, “*You develop credibility with people when you connect with them and show that you genuinely care and want to help them.*”

To truly connect with people you have to value them, learn about them, and then adapt to who they are. Do not expect people to change themselves in order to follow you. You must change yourself in order to invite them in. Even the Apostle Paul understood this principle when, in his evangelistic efforts, he declared, “*For though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them. To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though not being myself under the law) that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (not being outside the law of God but under the law of Christ) that I might win those outside the law. To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some*” (1 Corinthians 9:19-22).

The law of connection means that we understand people’s self-identity, meet them where they are, and build connection with them first before we try to get them to follow us or buy into the vision of where we want to go.

LAW #11 – THE LAW OF THE INNER CIRCLE

The **Law of the Inner Circle** states that *“a leader’s potential is determined by those closest to him.”* This is similar in effect to the law of magnetism, which says your followers will look like you, except that this says you will begin to look like those with whom you surround yourself with. When I was in high school, the guidance counselor would say, *“you show me your friends, and I’ll show you your future.”* I hated that quote at the time since I wanted to be in control of my own destiny, yet because this law is universal, time has proven that statement true every time.

To leverage the law of the inner circle then, we must surround ourselves continually with people we admire and respect; people we want to become like as we grow. Unfortunately this is counter-intuitive to the leadership style of most. Insecure leaders feel threatened when they are not the smartest and most talented people in the room, so they surround themselves with people weaker than themselves. This, however, means that their potential for growth themselves is stunted by the capacity of those they keep near.

Maxwell says in order to leverage the law of the inner circle and *“to increase your capacity and maximize your potential as a leader, your first step is always to become the best leader you can. The next is to surround yourself with the best leaders you can find.”*

LAW #12 – THE LAW OF EMPOWERMENT

Following closely behind the law of the inner circle is the **Law of Empowerment**. This law states that *“only secure leaders give power to others.”* This means that secure leaders spend their time *“identifying leaders; building them up; giving them resources, authority, and responsibility; and then turning them loose to achieve…”* Insecure leaders, on the other hand, spend their time suspicious of those around them, and do everything they can to undermine people’s potential and growth.

Former U.S. President, Theodore Roosevelt said, *“The best executive is the one who has sense enough to pick good men to do what he wants done, and the self-restraint enough to keep from meddling with them while they do it.”* Maxwell says this is because, *“to keep others down, you have to go down with them. And when you do that, you lose any power to lift others up.”*

Maxwell says, *“The truth is that empowerment is powerful-not only for the person being developed but also for the mentor. Enlarging others makes you larger.”* Therefore, to take advantage of this law in our lives, we must come to understand that as we develop the leaders around us we not only inadvertently raise our own value as a leader, but our organizations are benefitted in the process as well.

LAW #13 – THE LAW OF THE PICTURE

The **Law of the Picture** says that *“people do what people see.”* This may be one of the highest laws in understanding that everything rises and falls on leadership. Character matters. Maxwell says, *“When the leaders show the way with the right actions, their followers copy them and succeed.”*

Corrupt leaders will turn every leader around them into corrupt leaders because their own lives demonstrate that it is good and acceptable.

From the Christian perspective as leaders, we must understand that integrity must come first in everything we do, because other people are watching us, and they will follow our example. One scripture that comes to mind here is the command in Hebrews 13:7, *“Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God. Consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith.”*

LAW #14 – THE LAW OF BUY-IN

The **Law of Buy-In** says, *“People buy into the leader, then the vision.”* Maxwell writes, *“Many people who approach the area of vision in leadership have it all backward. They believe that if the cause is good enough, people will automatically buy into it and follow. But that’s not how leadership really works. People don’t at first follow worthy causes. They follow worthy leaders who promote causes they can believe in.”* If we roll this back to the law of the picture, this means that if your credibility as a leader is questionable at best, you are not going to have people willing to follow the vision you are casting because they doubt you can get them there.

One of the biggest leadership lessons I took away from my own experiences in 2014 was that leadership is inevitably connected to the opportunities they present. Sometimes saying “no” to a bad leader means saying “no” to a good opportunity, and sometimes saying “no” to a bad opportunity means saying “no” to a good leader. This was my personal realization of the law of buy-in. Maxwell says it this way, *“You cannot separate leaders from the causes they promote. It cannot be done, no matter how hard you try. It’s not an either/or proposition. The two always go together.”*

As a leader, you cannot just promote your vision and the good work you are doing through websites and social media, and expect that people will jump on board to volunteer or give money. If they do not trust you, it does not matter what opportunity you put in front of them. From my own observation in global ministry, I think this may be the biggest issue those of us in the non-profit and humanitarian world need to learn.

LAW #15 – THE LAW OF VICTORY

The **Law of Victory** states that leaders find a way for the team to win. Maxwell writes, *“Every leadership station is different. Every crisis has its own challenges. But I think that victorious leaders have one thing in common: they share an unwillingness to accept defeat. The alternative to winning is totally unacceptable to them. As a result, they figure out what must be done to achieve victory.”*

Though not mentioned in the book, I think back to the 2009 movie (based on the 1960’s TV show) Star Trek, and the always-inspiring Captain James T. Kirk. In every situation Kirk refuses to accept defeat and always finds a way to accomplish the mission at hand. One of the storylines to build this characteristic in Kirk was featured during his time at Starfleet Academy when he took a virtual reality test which presented him with a “no-win” scenario. In order to beat the test scenario, Kirk

reprogrammed the simulation, and as he faced expulsion for cheating, he referred to the test itself as a cheat since there was no way to successfully complete the challenge. His mindset would not allow him to even accept the premise of a “no-win” scenario.

This is the way a leader thinks who embraces the law of victory. They take responsibility, get creative, and throw all of their experience and passion into reaching success. There is a no-quit attitude, and failure is not an option. These leaders are always inspiring to those behind them, even when the challenge gets difficult.

Maxwell quotes Lou Holtz, former Notre Dame head football coach, as saying, *“You’ve got to have great athletes to win, I don’t care who the coach is. You can’t win without good athletes, but you can lose with them. This is where coaching makes the difference.”* Good leaders take responsibility for the success of the team and do what it takes to lead the way to victory.

LAW #16 – THE LAW OF THE BIG MO

The **Law of the Big Mo** states that “momentum is a leader’s best friend.” Maxwell says this is *“because many times (momentum) is the only thing that makes the difference between losing and winning. When you have no momentum, even the simplest tasks seem impossible... On the other hand, when you have momentum on your side, the future looks bright, obstacles appear small, and troubles seem inconsequential.”*

This law comes into place when an organization is starting out. Everything is a challenge, and it seems to take forever to get anything done. However, just like a train slowly gaining speed, once that same organization gets moving, there is no stopping it. In physics this phenomenon is referred to as the law of inertia, which states in part that “an object in motion continues in motion with the same speed and in the same direction unless acted upon by an unbalanced force.”

This truth is the same when it comes to leadership. An organization with forward momentum is hard to slow down. The challenge is in getting that momentum built up in the first place (and making sure the momentum is in the direction you want the organization to go). Maxwell says, *“Creating momentum requires someone who has vision, can assemble a good team, and motivates others. If the leader is looking for someone to motivate him, then the organization is in trouble.”*

LAW #17 – THE LAW OF PRIORITIES

For almost two years now, the background image on my computer desktop has challenged me with the question, *“Are you being productive, or just being busy?”* This is at the heart of the **Law of Priorities**, which says, *“leaders understand that activity is not necessarily about accomplishment.”*

Maxwell says, *“When we are busy, we naturally believe that we are achieving. But business does not equal productivity. Activity is not necessarily accomplishment.”* This means prioritizing, which *“requires leaders to continually think ahead, to know what’s important, to see how everything relates to the overall vision.”* Sometimes what is highest on that priority list is not comfortable or easy.

Key to leveraging the law of priorities is called “*the Pareto Principle*” or more commonly “*the 80/20 principle*.” Maxwell says that if we will spend most of our time working on the things in the top 20% of importance, it will give us 80% of the return we are looking for. This means things like giving 80% of your time to your top 20% of employees.

The other factors Maxwell discusses in setting your priority list are his three R's: Requirement, Return, and Reward. These three things make us ask: “*what must I do that nobody can or should do for me?*” Is there anyone I can delegate this task to capable of getting the same return as I can? And what tasks will lead to the most satisfaction? “*Life is too short to not do some things you love.*” When we properly prioritize how we spend our time, it will always set us on course for success. When we don't prioritize our time, we will often look back wondering where it all went.

LAW #18 – THE LAW OF SACRIFICE

The **Law of Sacrifice** gives us a glimpse into the heart of a leader: “*a leader must give up to go up.*” Maxwell says, “*There is a common misperception among people who aren't leaders that leadership is all about the position, perks, and power that come from rising in an organization... The life of a leader can look glamorous to people on the outside. But the reality is that leadership requires sacrifice.*”

I have a friend who has invested thousands of hours of his time and thousands of dollars to receive leadership training from the best teachers our generation has to offer. He owns and runs a successful branch of the company for which he works, he has a healthy bank account, and is capable of enjoying many comforts that life has to offer. What impresses me the most about this friend, though, is not his success in the business world, but his willingness to put all of his success on the line to take his leadership to the next level and share with others. He has recently taken on a regional leadership position with his company that gives him the ability to take personal time to travel around the region without pay to meet with others in the company and help them develop their own branch of the business. He has also launched a community leadership networking group which is costing him personal time and money to develop leaders in our city for which he will receive little to no return. While many people see a white-collar business man and think, “*that must be nice to not have to work so hard,*” what I see in my friend is someone who works twice as hard as most to give other people a leg up in life and business.

Maxwell says, “*There is no success without sacrifice. Every person who has achieved any success in life has made sacrifices to do so.*” He adds, “*the heart of leadership is putting others ahead of yourself. It's doing what is best for the team.*” If you are pursuing leadership for personal gain or recognition, then you are not, in reality, a quality leader.

LAW #19 – THE LAW OF TIMING

For natural leaders, many of the principles discussed up to this point can be fairly easy to live by. Even those who may not be born-leaders, but who have invested time and effort to grow in this area,

may have a lot of success with them. Yet, when we come to the **Law of Timing**, I believe this is where many leaders can begin to struggle. This law teaches us that *“when to lead is as important as what to do and where to go.”*

Maxwell gives a few summary statements. He says, *“the wrong action at the wrong time leads to disaster.”* *“The right action at the wrong time brings resistance.”* *“The wrong action at the right time is a mistake.”* However, *“the right action at the right time results in success.”*

As we develop our leadership abilities, we have to go beyond simply knowing how to lead. We must also learn to discern when it is the right time to do so.

LAW #20 – THE LAW OF EXPLOSIVE GROWTH

At this stage in the book, Maxwell takes a turn from simply sharing laws vital to good leadership, and begins to teach how to take our leadership higher. The **Law of Explosive Growth** says, *“To add growth, lead followers,”* but, *“to multiply, lead leaders.”* Maxwell further explains this distinction by saying, *“if you develop yourself, you can experience personal success. If you develop a team, your organization can experience growth. (But) if you develop leaders, your organization can achieve explosive growth.”* He adds, *“You can grow by leading followers. But if you want to maximize your leadership and help your organization reach its potential, you need to develop leaders.”*

Some of the practical advice for leading leaders includes development of the top 20% of people around you, rather than spending your time playing catch up with the bottom 20%; focusing on strengths instead of weaknesses, and treating everyone differently, rather than acting like everyone must be treated the same. Determine what it takes to actually invest quality time into others rather than just spending time together.

To live by the law of explosive growth is definitely harder and takes more time and energy to do, yet when we do so the trickle-down effect of those leaders investing in those under them, and so forth, will lead to exponential multiplication. Maxwell summarizes this law by saying, *“leaders who develop leaders experience an incredible multiplication effect in their organizations that can be achieved in no other way — not by increasing resources, reducing costs, increasing profit margins, improving systems, implementing quality procedures, or doing anything else.”*

LAW #21 – THE LAW OF LEGACY

The final law in the book is the Law of Legacy which states, *“A leader’s lasting value is measured by succession.”* The chapter starts by asking, *“What do you want people to say at your funeral? That may seem like an odd question, but it may be the most important thing you can ask yourself as a leader.”*

A couple of years ago, I went through a practice in setting what Andy Stanley calls “Be-goals,” which are character qualities a person wants to be known for in life. Maybe goals are things like, God-seeking, holy (set apart for God/fighting sin and temptation), and humble. In walking through this

practice, determining these be-goals, which are the things I want said of me at my funeral, is in effect determining what success in life looks like for myself. However, this is an activity most people will never engage in. Maxwell says, "*most people simply accept their lives — they don't lead them.*" To be sure, my favorite statement made in this chapter, if not the entire book is, "*someday people will summarize your life in a single sentence. My advice: pick it now!*"

One day we will all be gone, and what remains of us will be the examples we set with our lives and the people we leave behind empowered to continue on. Maxwell summarizes the life of a leader by saying that "*achievement comes when they do big things by themselves. Success comes when they empower followers to do big things for them. Significance comes when they develop leaders to do great things with them. Legacy comes when they put leaders in position to do great things without them.*" He ends the chapter with the thought, "*our abilities as leaders will not be measured by the buildings we built, the institutions we established, or what our team accomplished during our tenure. You and I will be judged by how well the people we invested in carried on after we are gone.*" This is the greatest challenge a lifelong pursuit of leadership will face, but it is also the only thing that will matter in the end.