

The 21 Indispensable Qualities of a Leader

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About the Author John C. Maxwell

John C. Maxwell, known as America's expert on leadership, is founder of the INJOY Group, an organization dedicated to helping people maximize their personal and leadership potential. Each year Maxwell speaks in person to more than 250,000 people and influences the lives of more than one million people through seminars, books, and tapes. He is the author of twenty-four books, including *The 21 Irrefutable Laws of Leadership*, *Becoming a Person of Influence*, *The Success Journey*, *Developing the Leader Within You*, and *Developing the Leaders Around You*. (From the sleeve of John Maxwell's book)

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Maxwell's book is not to tell you how to be a good leader or to give you ideas that will improve your leadership skills, but rather to give you an opportunity to try to adopt some of these attributes and qualities and make them a part of your everyday life. The book itself is not terribly long and could be read in a couple of hours but Maxwell encourages his readers not to do this. He suggests to his readers that you read one section at a time and spend some time trying to implement that particular quality into your life, whether it takes a day or a month as long as you're improving yourself then the purpose of the book has been accomplished. To quote from Maxwell, the purpose of the book "is to help you recognize, develop, and refine the personal characteristics needed to be a truly effective leader, the kind of people *want* to follow." (Maxwell, p.IX)

Leadership is the capacity and will to rally men and women to a common purpose and the character which inspires confidence

Individual Highlights:

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Developing excellent communication skills is absolutely essential to effective leadership. The leader must be able to share knowledge and ideas to transmit a sense of urgency and enthusiasm to others. If a leader can't get a message across clearly and motivate others to act on it, then having a message doesn't even matter.

- Gilbert Amelio, President and CEO of National Semiconductor Corp.

What are the Qualities of a Leader?

In his book the 21 Indispensable Qualities of a Leader; Becoming the person others will want to follow, Maxwell outlines what he feels are the key qualities that a leader must have in order to be truly effective. These qualities are as follows: Character, Charisma, Commitment, Communication, Competence, Courage, Discernment, Focus, Generosity, Initiative, Listening, Passion, Positive Attitude, Problem Solving, Relationships, Responsibility, Security, Self-Discipline, Servanthood, Teachability, and Vision.

Quality	Examples	Self-Evaluation	Homework
Character	Bill Lear – Creator of the Lear Jet. He lost money and suffered negative publicity in order to fix a fatal flaw in his original jet design because he didn't want to risk peoples lives. He also risked his own life in order to fix the problem.	Examine your character and see if what you say and what you do match. Do you follow through with what you promised to do.	Search for the cracks i.e. identify areas in your life where you may have cut corners, compromised, or let people down. Look for patterns. Face the music and apologize if needed. Rebuild
Charisma	Benjamin Disraeli – Served twice as the prime minister of Great Britain and had a nack for making people feel good about themselves.	Do you possess any of these “roadblocks” to charisma; pride, insecurity, moodiness, perfectionism, or cynicism.	Change your focus: when interacting with others focus on them and not you. Play the first impression game, always try to make a good first impression by treating people well. Share yourself by sharing your resources.
Commitment	Michelangelo – When painting the sistine chapel he permanently damaged his eyesight and physically wore himself down but he continued painting even in dark corners because God would see even if no one else did.	There are four types of people: cop-outs – people who have no goals and don't commit, holdouts – people who are afraid to commit because they are not sure if they can reach their goal, dropouts – people who start but quit when it gets difficult, all-outs – people who set goals are committed and work hard to achieve it.	Measure commitment and see where you can improve. Know what's worth sacrificing yourself for. Make you plans public to ensure that you follow through.
Communication	Ronald Reagan – It didn't matter who Reagan was speaking to be it a debate or one on one, he was able to communicate with maximum effectiveness. He was able to put others at ease.	Ask yourself where communication rates as a priority, are you able to inspire and motivate others? When talking about your vision do people understand?	When writing make sure your intent is clear, focus your attention on your audience and live what you say.

Competence	Benjamin Franklin – a very talented jack of all trades.	If you want to be competent be responsible, keep asking why, follow through, and perform at a high level. Give more than what was expected and inspire others to do the same.	Rededicate yourself to your job. Reexamine your standards and always look for things to improve.
Courage	Eddie Rickenbacker – set the world speed record at daytona in 1914. Pilot who recorded the highest number of victories in arial combat against the Germans in WW1. Survived a plane crash and 22 days on a raft in the pacific ocean during WW2	Do you handle fear by embracing it or do you run from it? How can you change in order to develop a more courageous spirit in your life?	Do something scary just for the sake of growing. Talk to someone who intimidates you. Make a career move that you've been looking into.
Discernment	Marya Sklodowska aka Marie Curie – 15 Gold medals, 19 degrees, and two Nobel Prizes all for her research.	When faced with difficult choices, can you find the center of the problem? Do you need all the information or can you figure “root causes (p. 49)” without it? Do you trust your intuition? If not, you need to work on embracing nontraditional thought.	Look back and see what worked for you in the past. Research leaders that you admire and study their strategies. Learn to trust your intuition.
Focus	Tony Gwynn- San Diego Padres player. Amazingly focused in the job he loves. He studies constantly to be the best hitter he can.	Maxwell states that the keys to focus as a leader are: “priorities and concentration. (p. 53) Work on yourself, your priorities, your strengths, and with your contemporaries.	Dedicate 70% of your time to things that you do well. Hire effective people to help with the areas of your job you do not do well. Find out how you can turn your strengths into a competitive edge.
Generosity	Elisabeth Elliot: a missionary in Ecuador who stayed and taught thr tribe that murdered her husband	Are you grateful? Do you put others first? How do you view money? As a resource, or the highest prize?	Give away something that you value. Give your money to someone with vision. Mentor others.
Initiative	Kemmons Wilson- worked his way from a magazine seller to creator of the Holiday Inn hotel line.	Do you seek out opportunities or wait? Are you willing to trust your instincts and make a move? Do you have to sit and analyze everything?	Determine what it is that makes you hesitate and work to change it. Seek opportunities, and then do something about those opportunities.

Listening	Oprah Winfrey- Television mogul who made a name for herself by listening to people	Who do you listen to? Are you paying attention to your customers, your mentors, your competitors, or your staff? These are the people you should listen to.	Free up your schedule so that you have more time to listen to people. Find common ground with those around you (i.e. your staff), and pay attention to the emotions as well as the facts in a conversation.
Passion	John Schnatter- Creator of Papa John's Pizza. Still visits his franchises and tosses pizzas when he comes. He will do what needs done, because he loves it.	Are you excited at the start of a new day? Do new ideas keep you awake at night? Are others drawn to ideas because of your enthusiasm about them?	Ask others to rate your passion for your job. Go back to the beginning and rediscover what made you want to do what it is that you are doing. Find others who are passionate like you.
Positive Attitude	Thomas Edison- Extreme genius. No negative result was a failure, it was simply another way to not do something.	Are you negative right from the beginning of a new association? Do you think that decisions will have positive outcomes or do you tend to be pessimistic?	Read, watch, and do things that breed positivity. Set realistic daily goals and achieve them. Remind yourself of past successes by placing momentos of them around you.
Problem Solving	Sam Walton – creator of Walmart and Sam's Club. Took a small business and made it something more accessible by continually solving difficult situations.	How do you react when facing a problem? Do you give up, or work hard to figure things out?	Look for problems before they find you. Develop a method to deal with problems when they come up. Have support that excel in problem solving.
Relationships	William Osler- doctor, professor, and author. He was a compassionate man who always had time for people and went the extra mile for everyone.	How well do you mix with others, especially strangers? Can you find the common ground quickly, or does it take a while for you to warm up?	Read books on understanding others. Do service to others to make yourself more caring. Repair a relationship that has been suffering.
Responsibility	Remember the Alamo! : the small American stronghold of volunteers all died defending the fort, including James Bonham, a young man who rode off to get help. Finding no one, he came back to help anyway and died also.	Do you get the job done, and go the extra mile? Do you strive to be excellent? Do things get done, even when times are hard and situations arise?	Keep working even when it seems like the you can not win. Admit when something is poorly done and make it better. Improve your skills.

Security	Margaret Thatcher- British Prime Minister, "Iron Lady." Secure in who she was, despite constant criticism for being in a "man's" position.	Do you respect and understand yourself? Have you acknowledged both your strengths and weaknesses? Do you celebrate other's vicotries, or only your own?	Be self-aware. Give others the credit. Get professional help if you cannot deal with your insecurities.
Self-Discipline	Jerry Rice- amazingly talented wide receiver. Never a quitter, even when tough physical injuries should have kept him down.	How do you prioritize your day? Do you stick to your schedule?Are you working to grow personally and professionally?	Write out what you want to do and how you need to discipline yourself to get it done. Then DO it. Get rid of excuses.
Servanthood	H. Norman Schwarzkopf- U.S Army General, hero, rescued numerous wounded soldiers via helicopter. Risked his own life saving a fellow soldier in the middle of a minefield.	What is your motivation? Do you want to improve the lives of others, or simply get ahead in life?	Do small acts of kindness for those around you. Pay attention to everyone you meet and note how you could help them. Serve others.
Teachability	Charlie Chaplin- performer. Constantly working and learning how he could be better at his craft. Refused to settle, always striving for higher.	Are you seemingly stuck in a rut, without improving year, after year? Do you ever try anything new? Do you ever make yourself vulnerable to learn something new?	Admit your mistakes. Try not to get defensive. Challenge yourself. Learn more about the areas you are strong in.
Vision	Walt Disney- cartoon creating icon. Founder of every child's dream vacation, Disneyland.	Do you listen to your inner voice? Can you see what does not work, and use it to make something that does? Do you have a mentor? Do you recognize a power larger than yourself?	Evaluate how you are doing with any recognized vision. Make improvements where necessary. Write down your vision to make it tangible. Revisit your vision regularly.

Critical Evaluation

Smart Leaders believe only half of what they hear. Discerning leaders know which half to believe.
 - John C. Maxwell

Don't Step in the Leadership
 - Scott Adams, Creator of Dilbert

This book attempts to outline ways that the reader can become a better leader. It does this by outlining what the author believes to be the indispensable qualities of a leader. The author uses a chapter for each of the 21 qualities in order to differential one from another. In order to humanize each characteristic, Maxwell uses examples of people he feels embody that characteristic. For example, when introducing initiative, Maxwell uses the life of Kemmons Wilson, the man who was responsible for the Holiday Inn line of hotels. He presents a man who was constantly striving for something better and saw an opening and worked to fill it. (Maxwell, p.67-8)

Maxwell then takes this example and extrapolates it in order to better develop the readers understanding of the leadership quality. In this section of each chapter he outlines how a leader uses this quality effectively, often in a multi-point form. He will often site further examples or pull quotations from other leaders to further illustrate his point.

Critical Evaluation Continued

An example of this is the quote by Oscar Levant “Once I make up my mind, I’m full of indecision” (Maxwell, p.69) when he is discussing how people with initiative know what they want and how to get it.

Maxwell then provides the opportunity for self-evaluation and reflection. He asks thought provoking questions in order to guide the reader through a process of self-discovery. This section of each chapter always concludes with a statement of how better to embody the quality. An example of this is when Maxwell states in his chapter on passion, “If passion is not a quality in your life, you’re in trouble as a leader. The truth is that you can never lead something you don’t care passionately about.” (Maxwell, p. 86)

The next section in each chapter is a section for homework or things you can work on to better develop each quality. These are written in point form and are very clear and easy to follow. Like the previous section there is the opportunity for self reflection and discovery.

Maxwell ends as he began, using a real life example to sum up each quality with a conclusive take home message. In this way he more effectively wraps up one quality before he introduces another. This was an effective way to really drive home the significance of each quality.

Maxwell’s style is easy to read and very approachable in terms of the language used and technique for improving the reader’s leadership qualities. He uses interesting examples and anecdotes to keep the reader engaged in what could have been tedious material. His informal writing style makes the book seem more welcoming. One potential negative of this book is that it seems to be geared towards people already holding positions of authority, rather than those aspiring to those positions, though the advice is generally suitable for most readers. I would recommend this book to anyone seeking to improve their interpersonal relationships as the information presented would apply to anyone who interacts regularly with others.

Questions for Discussion or Reflection

- Are you achieving everything you feel you can achieve?
- Are there any qualities you feel Maxwell may have overlooked?
- Do you think improving on any qualities which may be deficient will help you become a better person and a better leader?
- Is being a good person important for becoming a good leader?

The true leader serves. Serves people. Serves their best interests, and in so doing will not always be popular, may not always impress. But because true leaders are motivated by loving concern rather than a desire for personal glory, they are willing to pay the price.
- Eugene B. Habecker

Of all the things a leader should fear, complacency should head the list.

- John C. Maxwell

A successful man is the one who can lay a firm foundation with the bricks others have thrown at him.

- David Brinkley