

JOHN C.
MAXWELL

#1 New York Times BESTSELLING AUTHOR

THE

LEADER'S

GREATEST

RETURN

ATTRACTING, DEVELOPING,
AND MULTIPLYING LEADERS

THE
LEADER'S
GREATEST
RETURN

ALSO BY JOHN C. MAXWELL

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Winning with People

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INTRODUCTION:

Everyone Wins When You Develop Leaders

Why should you develop leaders? Why should you dedicate the time, effort, energy, and resources to help other people rise up and lead? Is it worth it? Can it really make a difference? Does the return warrant all the effort that's required?

Absolutely! Everywhere you look, there is a leadership deficit. In countries all around the world, there are not enough good leaders. That is certainly true in the United States. I think Americans of every party would agree that there are not enough good leaders. The same is true at the state and local levels: we need more and better leaders. And in businesses, nonprofits, and families—there are not enough good leaders!

The good news is that leaders can be developed, and everyone wins when leaders develop other good leaders. If you are a leader—at any level or of any capacity—your organization will benefit when you start developing leaders. And you can do that beginning today.

I want to help you develop leaders. I want to show you the pathway to receiving the leader's greatest return. There is nothing in this world that gives a greater ROI to a leader than attracting, developing, and multiplying leaders. It's the key to success for any country, family, organization, or institution.

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT DEVELOPING LEADERS

It's taken me decades to learn what I know about developing leaders. I've had my failures, as well as my successes. I've poured my life into people only to have them walk away or disqualify themselves. I've seen potential in people who couldn't see it in themselves, and as a result, never grew to be who they could be. I've been disappointed and discouraged in the process. But I will never give up. There is no better investment than developing leaders.

As you prepare to take this leadership journey, there are some things you need to prepare yourself for:

1. Developing Leaders Is Going to Be Difficult but Worthwhile

If you've ever led people in any capacity, I think you'll agree that leadership is hard work. There are no two consecutive easy days in the life of leaders. If today is easy, you know how tomorrow will probably go. But everything worthwhile is uphill. If the purpose of life was ease and comfort, no sensible person would ever take on the demands of leadership.

Developing leaders is even harder. It's like herding cats. That is why so many people who lead let themselves become comfortable attracting and leading followers instead of seeking out and developing leaders. Followers usually follow. Leaders, not so much.

However, the work of investing your life in developing other leaders has a high return. As my friend Art Williams is apt to say, "I don't promise you it will be easy. I do promise you it will be worthwhile."¹

As I think about developing people, I can't help smiling. For forty-seven years I have given my heart and soul to helping people learn to lead. My journey began with the desire to train a few leaders, and it has taken me far beyond my wildest dreams. Today, I have seen millions of men and women trained as leaders. When I first started, I couldn't imagine writing

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a book on leadership. Once I gained enough experience to write about it, I thought I would write a total of two books on the subject. Now I've written dozens. In the beginning, I started out developing just a few leaders in my community. Now my organizations have developed leaders in every country in the world.

I'm smiling, not because of the size of the numbers, but because each number represents a person. I may not know all of their names, but each person the people in my organizations have trained lives a better life because another leader lifted him or her up. And these developed leaders are in a better position to make the lives of the people around them better and to make a difference.

At age twenty-five, I discovered that everything rises and falls on leadership. I believed that truth with great certainty, and it propelled me to develop myself as a leader. Today my conviction is even greater, and it drives me to develop other leaders. That task is worthy of my best efforts, it adds the greatest value to others, and it gives me great joy. Developing leaders is the one activity that compounds a leader's time, influence, energy, vision, culture, finances, and mission.

2. Developing Leaders Is a Job That Never Comes to an End

When I realized the importance of leadership at age twenty-one, I began my intentional development as a leader. As I got started, I thought that at some point I would become a leadership expert. I wondered how long it would take, when I would reach the finish line. In five years? Ten years? Certainly by fifteen years I'd know what I needed to know, right? Today in my early seventies, I finally have the answer. There is no finish line! The more I know about leadership, the more I know that I don't know. I am hungrier now to learn about leadership than I have ever been.

Gayle Beebe, the president of Westmont College, has studied

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—ART WILLIAMS

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leadership development extensively. In *The Shaping of an Effective Leader*, he wrote:

Our understanding of leadership does not come to us all at once. It takes time. In our instant-oriented culture we often want to short-circuit the thinking, reflecting and acting that mark our progressive development as leaders. Understanding how leaders develop and why they matter requires discernment, wisdom and insight.²

It also requires time. If developing ourselves as leaders is a lifelong process, then we should also expect the development of others in leadership to be an ongoing process that never ends. Just as individuals never arrive, neither do organizations. In all my years helping organizations find, raise up, and develop leaders—and I've helped more than I can count—not once has a company spokesperson said, “Don't help us. We have too many good leaders.” There is always a leadership shortage.

This is true in every organization. My companies and nonprofits all focus on leadership development, and for several years I've been called a leadership expert.³ Yet what do all of my organizations need? More good leaders. The organizations have leadership cultures, leadership vision, and leadership mentoring, yet we still need more and better leaders. Why? Because everything rises and falls on leadership. When an organization stops growing leaders, it stops growing.

Recently, I visited a Napa Valley vineyard with friends, and the vineyard's third-generation owner pointed out a stone wall. He explained that his grandfather, the founder, had started building the wall. Later, the founder's son had added to it, as had his son, the current owner. Listening to him speak and show us the different sections of the wall, I could sense his pride and the respect for his father and grandfather. There was a sense of tradition and a shared vision that had crossed the generations. There was a strong sense of legacy, which is something that cannot be rushed.

If you desire to fulfill a bold vision or do something great, you have to let go of a microwave mind-set for leadership. The process can't be done

instantly. It's slow, like a Crock-Pot. Anything worthwhile takes time. You must give up looking to cross a finish line and instead find your own internal fulfillment line. That's something you can cross every day when you embrace the process of developing leaders.

3. Developing Leaders Is the Best Way to Grow Any Organization

When conducting leadership conferences, I am often asked about how to improve and grow an organization. The answer is straightforward. Grow a leader—grow the organization. A company cannot grow throughout until its leaders grow within.

I am often amazed at the amount of money and energy organizations spend on activities that will not produce growth. They pour money into marketing, yet they don't train their employees in how to treat customers when they show up. You can say customers are your priority, but they know the difference between good service and hollow promises. Slick advertising and catchy slogans will never overcome incompetent leadership.

Or they reorganize, hoping that shuffling people around or renaming departments will produce growth. That doesn't work. The strength of any organization is a direct result of the strength of its leaders. Weak leaders equal weak organizations. Strong leaders equal strong organizations. Leadership makes the determination.

If you want to grow or strengthen your organization or department, start by developing those closest to you, because they will determine the level of success your team will achieve. The first law of leadership I wrote about in *The 21 Irrefutable Laws of Leadership* is called the Law of the Lid, and it says leadership ability determines a person's level of

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effectiveness.⁴ In other words, how well you lead determines how well you succeed. That's true not just for an individual, but also for a group. How well they lead will determine how well the organization succeeds. A group of average leaders cannot build an above-average company. The potential leaders on your team are either an asset or a liability. As management expert Peter Drucker said, "No executive has ever suffered because his subordinates were strong and effective."⁵

People too often overvalue their dream and undervalue their team. They think, *If I believe it, I can achieve it*. But that's simply not true. Belief alone is not enough to achieve anything. It takes more than that. Your team will determine the reality of your dream. A big dream with a bad team is a nightmare.

4. Developing Leaders Is the Only Way to Create a Leadership Culture

In the past decade, people have begun to realize the importance of culture in their organizations. Culture impacts every aspect of how organizations function. A negative culture creates a terrible environment. It's like a fire that spreads, creating destruction.

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When I became the leader of an organization that had stopped growing and didn't possess a leadership culture, one of the first things I taught my leaders was the lesson of the two buckets. When there are problems in the organization, they're like sparks and fires. Leaders are often the first people to arrive on the scene, and when they do, they always have two buckets in their hands. One contains water and the other gasoline. The spark they encounter will either become a raging fire because they pour gasoline on it, or it can be

extinguished because they pour water on it. I wanted to train them to use the water, not the gasoline.

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As a leader, you get the culture you create, and the nature of the culture affects what you can or cannot do in your organization. If you want to develop leaders, it's certainly easier to do when you have a leadership culture. And that kind of culture can only be created by the leaders within the organization.

Mark Miller, Chick-fil-A's vice president of high-performance leadership, has trained leaders at Chick-fil-A for years, and he's written extensively about it. In his book *Leaders Made Here*, he wrote:

How do you ensure you'll have the needed leaders to fuel your future success?

The answer, in short: Build a leadership culture.

Let's be clear on terms from the beginning. A leadership culture exists when leaders are routinely and systematically developed, *and* you have a surplus of leaders ready for the next opportunity or challenge.⁶

Miller says that the existing leaders most often hold back weak organizations from developing a leadership culture. They rationalize that they're already doing well enough, or they think they're too busy to develop leaders. But that creates a cycle of mediocrity.

If you're a leader in an organization, only you can create a positive leadership culture, and you can do it only by developing leaders. In his book, Miller described the best ways to do that:

1. *Define it*—Forge a consensus regarding our organization's working definition of leadership.
2. *Teach it*—Ensure everyone knows our leadership point of view and leaders have the skills required to succeed.
3. *Practice it*—Create opportunities for leaders and emerging leaders to lead; stretch assignments prove and improve leaders.
4. *Measure it*—Track the progress of our leadership development efforts, adjusting strategies and tactics accordingly.

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5. *Model it*—Walk the talk and lead by example—people always watch the leader.⁷

If the organization doesn't already possess a leadership culture, creating one is a slow process. But it's worth it. Why? Because developing leaders is the only way to grow, improve, create momentum, and achieve greater success.

One of my favorite quotes is by nineteenth-century steel magnate and philanthropist Andrew Carnegie. He said, "I think a fit epitaph for me would be, 'Here lies a man who knew how to get around men much cleverer than himself.'"⁸ The only surefire way to achieve something like that is to develop more leaders so that they reach their potential, and that's not something any leader can afford to delegate or abdicate. It takes a leader to show and grow another leader.

My desire in this book is to take you through the entire process, step-by-step. If you desire to improve your team and achieve your dream, you will need to learn how to take each of the following steps:

1. **IDENTIFYING LEADERS:** Find Them So You Can Develop Them
2. **ATTRACTING LEADERS:** Invite Them to the Leadership Table
3. **UNDERSTANDING LEADERS:** Connect with Them Before You Lead Them
4. **MOTIVATING LEADERS:** Encourage Them to Give Their Best
5. **EQUIPPING LEADERS:** Train Them to Be Great at Their Job
6. **EMPOWERING LEADERS:** Release Them to Reach Their Potential
7. **POSITIONING LEADERS:** Team Them Up to Multiply Their Impact
8. **MENTORING LEADERS:** Coach Them to the Next Level

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9. **REPRODUCING LEADERS:** Show Them How to Develop Leaders
10. **COMPOUNDING LEADERS:** Receive the Highest Return of Developing Leaders

My friend Zig Ziglar used to say, “Success is the maximum utilization of the ability that you have.”⁹ I love that definition, and I believe it applies to an individual. But for a leader, success requires something more. Success for leaders can be defined as the maximum utilization of the abilities of those working with them. There’s only one way for a leader to help people maximize their abilities and reach their potential, and that’s to help them develop as leaders. It is my desire that the following pages help you do exactly that.

CHAPTER 1

IDENTIFYING LEADERS

Find Them So You Can Develop Them

One of my favorite activities when I speak is answering specific questions from the leaders in the audience. Recently, at a conference put on by Chick-fil-A, someone asked how I developed good leaders. “First,” I responded, “you need to know what a good leader looks like.”

I know that may sound simplistic, but it’s true. And I’ve found that most people have a difficult time describing what a good leader—or good potential leader—looks like. Leadership experts and authors James M. Kouzes and Barry Z. Posner said, “Our images of who’s a leader and who’s not are all mixed up in our preconceived notions about what leadership is and isn’t.”¹ How can people find something they can’t identify?

As a speaker, I do a lot of traveling. And often my host will send a driver to pick me up from the airport. Over the years, I’ve found there are two types of people who look for me. The first stands near baggage claim, holding a sign or iPad showing my name. I have to go over and find that person and identify myself. The second type of person comes over and finds me as I step off the escalator and says, “Hi, Mr. Maxwell. I’m here to take you to your hotel.”

I’ve never met either of these people, yet the second type is able to find

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me. How? They recognize me from a photograph they've found in one of my books or on a website. They took the time to be proactive and know who they're looking for.

As you prepare to develop leaders, which type of person do you want to be? Do you want to know what you're looking for in potential leaders and be able to find them? Or do you want to hold up a sign and hope somebody comes and finds you? It's your choice.

For many years I've been friends with Bob Taylor, cofounder of Taylor Guitars. Bob makes some of the finest guitars in the world. What's his secret? He'll tell you it's the design and manufacturing process. He can make a guitar out of anything, and to prove it, he even once made a guitar out of scrap wood from an oak pallet. But that's not the norm. He uses the finest woods he can find, and buying them has become more and more difficult, as many of the best exotic woods are on the endangered species list or disappearing altogether. Bob says, "I'm living in the era where you cross the threshold of 'there's all the wood in the world' to 'there's not any more.'"²

In an interview he gave to the *New York Times* more than ten years ago, Bob said, "I used to buy Brazilian rosewood back in the 1970s at the lumber yard for \$2 a square foot. Now it's impossible for us to make a guitar out of it and ship it outside the US. If we do get a little bit of it, it's extremely expensive. The cutting of it has all but halted. Adirondack spruce is unavailable. Mahogany was so plentiful it was a commodity. Now only specialty cutters are getting it and the prices have gone through the roof. All these things happened just in my lifetime."³

That's been such a concern of his that he's dedicating the next twenty years of his life to initiatives to ensure that wood is sourced responsibly and to growing trees for the future—not his future, but the future of others—sixty, eighty, and a hundred years from now. Bob says, "We no longer live in a world of new frontiers and of wasteful use of our natural resources."⁴

Bob knows what he's looking for when it comes to potential guitar wood. If you want to be successful developing leaders, you need to know

IDENTIFYING LEADERS

what potential leaders look like, and you need to be as tenacious as Bob Taylor is when he's sourcing wood for guitars. Every person you bring onto your team will make you either better or worse. And every leader you develop will do the same. Maybe that's why Amazon founder Jeff Bezos remarked, "I'd rather interview 50 people and not hire anyone than hire the wrong person."⁵

THE SIX AS OF IDENTIFICATION

For a leader who develops leaders, there is something scarcer and much more important than ability. It is the ability to recognize ability. One of the primary responsibilities of any successful leader is to identify potential leaders. Peter Drucker observed:

Making the right people decisions is the ultimate means of controlling an organization well. Such decisions reveal how competent management is, what its values are, and whether it takes its job seriously. No matter how hard managers try to keep their decisions a secret—and some still try hard—people decisions cannot be hidden. They are eminently visible. . . .

Executives who do not make the effort to get their people decisions right do more than risk poor performance. They risk losing their organization's respect.⁶

So, how do you do it? How do you identify good potential leaders, people you want to develop? As I said, you need to have a picture of that person, and I want to paint that picture for you. Take a look at these six areas of

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identification and answer each of the corresponding questions, and you'll know what you're looking for.

1. Assessment of Needs: "What Is Needed?"

Who are you looking for? If the mission of your organization were to climb trees, which would you rather do: hire a squirrel or train a horse to do the job? That answer is obvious. What is your organization trying to do? Do you possess a clear target? Do you know what you're going after? That will tell you what kind of leaders you need to find to improve your organization. You'll never hit a target that you haven't identified.

Chick-fil-A's Mark Miller, whom I quoted in the introduction, has vast experience finding and training leaders. He said:

I'm wondering how often, as a leader, we fail to clearly define the target. I think about all the times my leadership efforts have fallen short . . . how many of those failures can be attributed, directly or indirectly, to an unclear target or goal?

There are many things leaders CANNOT do for their people. However, clarity regarding intent should never be in short supply. People must always know what they are trying to accomplish.⁷

If you never defined your target, or you have not revisited it lately, I encourage you to do so now, before you start identifying potential leaders. Answer these questions:

- What is your vision?
- What is your mission?
- Who do you need on your team to accomplish your vision and mission?
- What resources will you need to accomplish your vision and mission?

Knowing what you need and who you are looking for is essential to

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success. You can't be haphazard in selecting people to develop and expect to succeed.

2. Assets on Hand: “Who Has Leadership Potential Within the Organization?”

Where is the best place to begin looking for potential leaders to develop? In your own organization or on your team. It just makes sense for so many reasons:

They Are a Known Quantity

Unlike when you interview people from outside, you don't have to imagine how insiders will perform. You don't have to rely on what they say about themselves. You're not limited to hearing the opinions of their handpicked references. You can look at their actual performance to see what they can do. You can observe their strengths. You can personally talk to everyone who works with them to find out about them.

They Already Fit the Culture

Anytime you bring in someone from outside, you have to guess whether that person will really fit your culture and be able to work well with the people in your organization. When someone has already been working in the organization for any length of time, you know if he or she fits. And that individual is already a part of the community.

They Have Already Established Influence

Good leaders, even those with little training or experience, influence other people. When you're trying to identify potential leaders to develop, look for influence. It's a qualification that must be present in someone you wish to develop as a leader, because leadership is influence, nothing more, nothing less. If people can't influence others, they can't lead. And if they already have some degree of influence in your organization, they already possess an asset that they will be able to use in the future to get things done. It's like having a running head start in a race. When you give

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them tasks, they will be able to mobilize the people they already influence more quickly.

How do you measure their influence? I recommend you use the 5 Levels of Leadership. Here they are in order from lowest to highest levels of influence:

1. **POSITION:** People follow because of title.
2. **PERMISSION:** People follow because of relationships.
3. **PRODUCTION:** People follow because of results.
4. **PEOPLE DEVELOPMENT:** People follow because of personal life change.
5. **PINNACLE:** People follow because of respect from earned reputation.

Andrew Carnegie was a master at identifying potential leaders. Once asked by a reporter how he had managed to hire forty-three millionaires, Carnegie responded that the men had not been millionaires when they started working for him. They had become millionaires as a result. The reporter next wanted to know how he had developed these men to become such valuable leaders. Carnegie replied, “Men are developed the same way gold is mined. . . . Several tons of dirt must be moved to get an ounce of gold; but you don’t go into the mine looking for dirt,” he added. “You go in looking for the gold.”⁸

I wouldn’t call the people who can’t lead *dirt*, but I would definitely call the people who can *gold*. Where do you put your focus? On those who can’t lead or on those who can—the *gold* within your organization?

One of the best leaders I know is my friend Chris Hodges, the founder of Church of the Highlands in Birmingham, Alabama. He started the church in 2001. It has a weekly attendance of fifty-five thousand people on twenty-two campuses, more than \$260 million in assets, with no debt, and more than twenty-two thousand active volunteers on what he calls his dream team. If you don’t know anything about the church world, then let me tell you: that’s extraordinary!

IDENTIFYING LEADERS

I love meeting with Chris periodically to talk leadership. On one of those recent occasions, I asked Chris how he identified and developed thousands of leaders. He shared with me his two principles, and I want to share them with you.⁹

First, Gather Many to Find One

Chris starts by taking a broad approach. He told me, “I never know who the next leader will be or where they are going to come from within my organization.” So, he developed a leadership farm team, similar to the way Major League Baseball does. Professional baseball teams have farm teams at multiple levels. The players they sign are put on one of those teams according to their current performance level, and they have a chance to work their way up. Their big dream is to make it from the minors to the major-league team.

Chris follows a similar model, except that instead of having single, double, and triple A minor-league teams, he has eighteen campuses. Each one is a farm team where volunteers are recruited, trained, and given a chance to serve. The potential leaders naturally rise to the top and have places to practice and hone their leadership skills.

Second, See and Speak to People’s Leadership Potential

All eighteen of Chris’s campuses are farm teams for leaders, but not all campuses perform equally in that process. Certain campuses identify and develop leaders at a much higher rate than the rest. I asked Chris why, and he said that when he discovered this, he asked why too. It took some research to figure it out, but Chris learned that the successful campuses were led by leaders who not only saw the potential in leaders, but as Chris said, “spoke leadership potential to them.”

My friend speaker and author Mark Sanborn says, “Great leaders help people have a larger vision of themselves.”¹⁰ That’s what Chris’s best campus leaders do. That’s what all good developers of leaders do, because people often become what the most important influencers in their lives think and say they will become. If people you care about tell you how

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terrible you are, you're going to have a difficult time rising up to a better life. If you're told every day that you can't lead, you probably won't even try.

“GREAT LEADERS
HELP PEOPLE HAVE
A LARGER VISION
OF THEMSELVES.”

—MARK SANBORN

But when people believe in you and communicate it repeatedly, you gain confidence and try harder. Nothing erases self-doubt quicker than when a person of influence speaks belief into your life. No wonder Abraham Lincoln said, “I’m a success today because I had a friend who believed in me and I didn’t have the heart to let him down.”¹¹

Stop reading for a moment and think of someone you look up to who believes in you, who believes you are a person with potential. Is there someone in your life like that? Now think of how you behave around that person. Doesn't his or her confidence bring out the best in you?

Here is what I know: we will do everything in our power to measure up to the spoken belief we have received. That's why as a leader who develops people, I recognize the importance of my words. I look for opportunities to speak potential into the lives of people, especially leaders. Why? Because when I look back at the high points of my life, I recognize that most of them came when someone important to me spoke words of encouragement into me. Encouragement is oxygen to the soul for the leader, and if you're a leader who wants to develop other leaders, you need to encourage them and help them breathe.

Do you have a way to “farm” talent in your organization, in your department, or on your team? If not, can you start one? People need a place where they can rise up and practice leadership. And are you speaking positively into the lives of people, especially potential leaders? If not, start doing it today.

3. Assets Not on Hand: “Who Has Leadership Potential Outside of the Organization?”

As much as I advocate identifying leaders in your own organization, sometimes you can't find who you're looking for. But bringing in outsiders can create challenges because of the unknowns. I think the greatest challenge is cultural compatibility.

I read an article in *Inc.* magazine by David Walker, CEO and cofounder of Triplemint real estate brokerage in New York City.¹² Walker said, “If there's one thing that keeps every founder up at night, it's hiring. Hiring the best talent is a massive and never-ending challenge. . . .

. . . While every company has a different culture, there are four questions that will help you identify if a candidate is a good fit, no matter where your company falls on the culture spectrum.” Here are his four questions:

1. How did the culture at your last company empower or disempower you?
2. What were the characteristics of the best boss you've ever had?
3. Describe how you handled a conflict with one of your coworkers.
4. What kind of feedback do you expect to receive in this role and how often do you expect to receive it?

Here's what I love about Walker's approach. Asking the first question helps you understand the culture candidates come from. Asking the second question helps you understand their view of leadership. Asking the third question helps you understand their relational skills. And asking the fourth question helps you understand their expectations regarding feedback.

Walker said, “I've made great hires who were a near-perfect culture fit, and I've made less-than-stellar hires who ultimately didn't work out.

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There is no such thing as batting a thousand with hiring. You're going to make mistakes no matter how good you are at it."

When you bring an outsider into your organization, I think it's important to set expectations with that new hire up front. In my book *Leadershift*, I wrote about the expectations we set for people who join our team. We tell them:

- "It's not about me—it's not about you—it's about the big picture."
- "You are expected to keep growing."
- "You must value other people."
- "Always take responsibility."
- "We will not avoid tough conversations."¹³

The more we're on the same page, the better chance we all have of success.

4. Attitude of the Potential Leaders: "Are They Willing?"

Recently, I was having a conversation about hiring with my friend Ed Bastian, the CEO of Delta Airlines. Ed told me, "At Delta, we hire

"AT DELTA, WE HIRE
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—ED BASTIAN, CEO,
DELTA AIRLINES

for attitude but train for aptitude. Always start with attitude." He continued, "Bring people on the team that the other members will enjoy working with."¹⁴

Attitude is a choice, and at the heart of a good attitude is willingness—willingness to learn, to improve, to serve, to think of others, to add value, to do the right thing, and to make sacrifices for the team. Leadership skill may come from the head, but leadership attitude comes from the heart.

Good leaders want more *for* the people they lead than they want *from* them. For

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years I've taught potential leaders that people do not care about how much you know until they know how much you care. That requires leaders to get to know the people they lead and have empathy for them. And as Jeffrey Cohn and Jay Morgan said, "Empathy is critical for leadership for many reasons. Combined with integrity, it drives trust. It gives followers a sense that their interests are being looked after, and this creates positive energy. Followers who sense that a leader appreciates them are motivated to carry out their duties in a more committed way."¹⁵

When potential leaders have the right attitude, you can sense it. When their hearts are right, they have passion that spills out. They have energy. They're positive. They're like the chairman and CEO of Berkshire Hathaway, Warren Buffett, who loves what he does so much that he says, "I tap dance to work [every day]."¹⁶ Or like longtime manager of the Los Angeles Dodgers Tommy Lasorda, who won two World Series titles. One night, after a crushing loss to Houston in the 1981 playoffs, Lasorda was undaunted and enthusiastic. When asked about his upbeat attitude, he said, "The best day of my life is when I manage a winning game. The second-best day of my life is when I manage a losing game."¹⁷ That's the kind of attitude you want to see in the potential leaders you select. They believe they can succeed. They're willing to put in the time and effort. Even in the face of defeat, they cheerfully keep working and trying to move forward.

I admire that kind of positive attitude, and I teach it too. But sometimes even the attitude guy needs a little help. In November 2018, I participated in the Rock 'n' Roll Las Vegas Marathon and Half Marathon with my CEO, Mark Cole. Mark is a runner who has completed several marathons, but I'm not. I haven't done much running since I gave up playing basketball in my thirties, and I've had replacement surgeries on both of my knees. But I decided I wanted to take on this race with Mark, but as a walker.

This was my first experience in a marathon. I was excited as we got started. If you've ever participated in a big race like this, you know how exhilarating they can be. Tens of thousands of people at the starting line,

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raring to go. Music playing. Some people dressed in costumes. And the race was at night!

As excited as I was, I have to admit that at about mile ten, my attitude wasn't great. I was physically finished, and I wanted to stop. But I didn't. Why? Because Mark was with me, encouraging me, helping me to keep my attitude positive even when my body was done and my willpower was fleeting. And it was worth it. When we crossed the finish line, I was proud of my accomplishment. I'm guessing not many seventy-one-year-olds were participating in that race. I couldn't have done it without Mark's help.

Let me say one more thing about attitude. Good character is what holds together all the positive attitude traits I've mentioned—willingness to serve, selflessness, empathy, growth, and sacrifice. Character keeps

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everything secure. Without it, things can break down fast. Character is about managing your life well, so you can lead others well. As Gayle Beebe said, "The formation of our character creates predictability to our leadership. Predictability, dependability and consistency: these three qualities ensure that our leadership is reliable and motivates people to place their confidence in us. Our effectiveness as leaders is built on trust."¹⁸

When potential leaders have the right heart for people, choose to be positive every day, and maintain the good character to help them keep making the right choices, they possess the willingness needed to become better leaders. And they are worth choosing to develop.

5. Ability of the Potential Leaders: "Are They Able?"

I already told you that Ed Bastian says at Delta they believe in hiring for attitude. But that doesn't mean he ignores talent. As he also told me, "We look for talent because talent lifts us." I'd say leadership talent lifts organizations the most.¹⁹

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Excellence is impossible in any endeavor without talent. No highly successful organization got to where it is without talent. It isn't possible. Finding good leaders is like finding a good high jumper. It does you no good to find seven people who can jump one foot. You need one person who can jump seven feet. Leadership is too difficult and complex to be done by a committee of average people. The more difficult the situation, the higher the leaders must be able to "jump."

There is a saying that a person's gift makes room for him or her. Poet Ralph Waldo Emerson expressed a similar idea when he wrote, "Each man has his own vocation. The talent is the call. There is one direction in which all space is open to him."²⁰ The direction that has space for each of us is in our area of talent and giftedness. Not only are we able in that area—we are capable of more.

How do you know potential leaders are gifted in a particular area?

- They will be good at it—that displays excellence.
- They will have opportunities to use it—that creates expansion.
- They will draw other people to them—that shows attraction.
- They will enjoy doing it—that brings fulfillment.

Potential leaders with talent have the potential to lift the whole organization through excellence and expand the organization through opportunity. That is a powerful combination, because, as Nobel laureate Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn observed, "Talent is always conscious of its own abundance and does not object to sharing."²¹

6. Accomplishments of the Potential Leaders: "Have They Produced Results?"

The final area you need to examine when it comes to potential leaders has to do with their accomplishments. You need to look at whether they have produced results in the past. What have they achieved? When given a task, do they complete it with excellence? Do they meet and exceed goals? Do they deliver? If they can produce results for themselves, they have the

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—ALEKSANDR
SOLZHENITSYN

potential to help other people succeed. They can't lead others to success if they've never led themselves there.

Good leaders come in all sizes, shapes, ages, and backgrounds. Their personalities are different, and they don't all lead the same way. However, people with the most leadership potential stand out from other people who are average because they know how to win. They are able to build something of value with the help of others.

When I talk about builders, I mean people who share five characteristics:

Builders Love Results

Thomas Edison is reputed to have said, “There ain't no rules around here. We are trying to accomplish something.”²² That's the mind-set of a builder!

Paul Martinelli, president of the John Maxwell Team, is a builder. He has taken the idea of training people to be coaches and speakers and built it into an organization that has trained more than twenty thousand men and women in more than 140 countries. And he keeps building. His favorite time of year comes when he hosts a year-end meeting with his staff so they can examine the past year, plan the next, and improve everything they do. Builders are producers.

Builders Are Seldom Satisfied

Builders don't get comfortable. They live the Law of the Rubber Band, which I taught in *The 15 Invaluable Laws of Growth*.²³ It says growth stops when you lose the tension between where you are and where you could be. Builders like to be stretched. Or as former Indy race car driver Mario Andretti said, “If everything seems under control, you're just not going fast enough.”²⁴

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Builders Are Comfortable with Uncertainty

Change is constant and essential to progress, and change brings uncertainty. Builders make themselves comfortable with that. They know there are times when they must take steps forward without knowing all the answers or with limited information. But they move forward just the same, believing there is an answer, they can figure it out, and progress will result. After all, uncertainty is a leadership opportunity. The more uncertainty there is, the greater the need for good leaders to find the way and take others with them. Builders constantly seek ways to open doors and keep growing. They recognize that when nothing is 100 percent certain, anything is possible.

Builders Are Impatient

There are two kinds of progress in our world. There are things you have to work for and things you have to wait for. Builders excel in the progress that comes from working. Like me, they see patience as a minor form of despair, disguised as a virtue. I know I need more patience. Do you know where I might be able to take a crash course to get it?

Maybe I come by impatience naturally. My father, Melvin Maxwell, who's in his nineties, has always been a builder and shows few signs of patience. Not long ago my sister Trish took my dad and his car to get an oil change. The place was very busy, and it was taking longer than he expected. Trish told me that for the first thirty minutes, Dad was fine. But then he began pacing, and soon he was repeatedly asking, "How much longer will this take?" Finally, when he could handle it no more, he took Trish's arm and said, "Come on. Let's go *buy* a car. That will be faster!"

My friend Chris Hodges says that the vision gap is the space between what we *are* doing and what we *could* do. Builders are impatient to close that gap.

Builders Are Contagious

Recently the John Maxwell Team committed to begin training people in Poland, and Iwona, one of our coaches from Poland, set up a launch call.

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A few minutes before the call, she and I were talking, and she told me there would be more than a thousand people on the call. I was impressed

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and congratulated her, but Iwona was not impressed. She said, "It's a start. You know there are forty-nine million people in Poland." That got me excited, and I could see that Iwona was going to spread the word in her country about how the training could add value to people.

Builders are passionate about what they are doing and where they are going. And their passion inspires others to join them. Their can-do spirit spreads. Is there not enough time? They will find the time. Is there not enough money? They will find the money. Are there not enough people? They will find the people. How do they

do it? By inspiring others to join and help them.

The bottom line for builders is that they always *build* something. They don't just talk about it. They are accomplished, and their track record is a great indicator of their future performance—and it qualifies them to try to lead others successfully.

NO TEAM CAN WIN WITHOUT GREAT PLAYERS

Red Auerbach, who was the longtime president of the NBA's Boston Celtics, said, "How you select people is more important than how you manage them once they're on the job. If you start with the right people, you won't have problems later on. If you hire the wrong people, for whatever reason, you're in serious trouble and all the revolutionary management techniques in the world won't bail you out."²⁵ The only way to have a great team is to identify and find the right players.

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In the beginning of this chapter, I mentioned that my friend Bob Taylor has a particular skill for identifying the best wood for his guitars. It's something he developed as he grew from a hobbyist guitar builder in high school to a full-time builder in his twenties to the cofounder of a company that now manufactures 40 percent of all acoustic guitars in the United States. But Bob is also an excellent leader. He couldn't have built the company he has if he weren't. And a few years ago, as Bob entered his late fifties, he realized he needed to start looking for a successor. His longtime guitar codesigner, Larry Breedlove, had retired, and Bob realized that without someone to take over for him, Taylor Guitars would not be able to keep growing and improving and building guitars for future generations.

Bob's desire was to find someone better than he was at building guitars—and he is the guy who revolutionized the way acoustic guitars are made and amplified. That meant he couldn't promote somebody from within the Taylor factory. He needed someone who could be innovative and come up with ideas better than his. Bob believes that someone who has done the work to figure out something all on his own understands it much more deeply than someone who has been taught.²⁶

So, one day Bob sat down and wrote out who he was looking for. During an interview with Tony Polecastro, here's what Bob said he wrote:

“Dear God, I need one guitar maker who is a better guitar builder than me, who's self-taught, that didn't learn how to do it by working in another factory, who's a pro player and can play with anybody at the drop of a hat, you know, could be onstage with the best of them, who's a great person, who won't get into this fifteen years and then screw up his life and we have to start all over, you know, who knows the history of guitars, knows how to make guitars”—I mean, I wrote all these things down. . . . “He needs to have twenty years of experience and be less than thirty years old. . . . Oh, yeah, and he's gotta be from San Diego.”²⁷

Bob admitted that his list was impossible. The person didn't exist. Yet

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Bob found him. His name is Andy Powers. Bob met him because Andy was playing guitar for professional recording artist Jason Mraz at the Taylor Guitars booth at the NAMM show, the world's largest trade show in the music industry. Bob soon got to know Andy, and one day, after spending an afternoon with him, Bob's list, which had sat in a drawer for more than a year, popped into his head as he was driving home. And Bob realized that Andy met *every* criterion on his list, right down to living in northern San Diego County. And, remarkably, even though Andy was only twenty-eight, he had been building real guitars since the age of eight. Bob calls it a modern-day miracle. He had found the leader of the future for Taylor Guitars.

Andy recounted what Bob soon told him. Bob said:

"So here's the deal." He's like, "I won't be here forever, and I want Taylor to be a guitar company that's still guitar-maker driven, and I want it to be a first-generation company. . . . Once I'm gone, who's the guitar maker here?" So, he kind of just said, "Look, I've looked the world over and it's like, you're my guitar maker. So, you can take as much time, take two weeks to decide, take two years. I don't care. It's like it's either you or nobody."²⁸

Andy accepted Bob's offer, closed his high-end custom guitar-building shop, and became a part of Taylor Guitars in 2011. And he is Bob's heir apparent. "I'm completely confident in turning everything over to him," said Bob. "Andy Powers is the best guitar maker I've ever met in my life."²⁹

Not only has Andy's entrance into Taylor Guitars set up the future of the organization, but it has already monumentally improved the guitars Taylor makes. "To me, the thing that I can offer the customers we have and the new customers that are coming is someone who, as much as they love guitars, Andy loves them more. I feel like the next generation is going to see some of the best guitars that the guitar industry has ever made, and that Andy is going to be one of the most important guitar figures in the

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history of guitars.”³⁰ On top of everything else, having Andy as a leader at Taylor has freed up Bob to travel the world to promote old-forest conservation and new forest cultivation.

“I’m not into the ‘name it and claim it’ type of philosophy,” said Bob, “but I am into ‘if you write down some of the things you want sometimes, you see it when it’s standing right in front of you.’ Otherwise, you might not even notice that.”³¹

How did Bob do it? First, he started by knowing *exactly* who he was looking for. And he followed the same pattern I outlined in this chapter:

1. **ASSESSMENT OF NEEDS:** “What is needed?”
2. **ASSETS ON HAND:** “Who has leadership potential within our organization?”
3. **ASSETS NOT ON HAND:** “Who has leadership potential outside our organization?”
4. **ATTITUDE OF THE POTENTIAL LEADERS:** “Are they willing?”
5. **ABILITY OF THE POTENTIAL LEADERS:** “Are they able?”
6. **ACCOMPLISHMENTS OF THE POTENTIAL LEADERS:** “Have they produced results?”

You cannot find something or someone when you don’t know what you’re looking for. People often say, “I’ll know it when I see it.” That’s not a good strategy. I say, *Know it and you’ll see it!* Bob knew exactly what he needed, even to the point of writing it down in detail. And when he found the person, he made him a part of Taylor Guitars.

No matter what kind of team, department, or organization you lead, you can follow this same process. You *need* to follow this same

PEOPLE OFTEN SAY, “I’LL KNOW IT WHEN I SEE IT.” THAT’S NOT A GOOD STRATEGY. I SAY, *KNOW IT AND YOU’LL SEE IT!*

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process because everything rises and falls on leadership. If you're not identifying the leaders of tomorrow whom you will train up, your potential and your future will always be limited.

CHAPTER 2

ATTRACTING LEADERS

Invite Them to the Leadership Table

I've always loved words and playing word games. Maybe that's because I've been a communicator and writer for more than forty years. One of my favorite words is *table*. It's a simple word, but it has a lot of positive connotations to me. The reason? Many of the richest experiences I have enjoyed in my life occurred around a table. That started when I was a kid and my parents, brother, sister, and I ate dinner around the table at home. That was always a gathering place of joy in my life. And as I've gotten older, tables have been places where transformation occurs for myself and others.

Take, for example, the *meal table*. That can be used as a great *community of learning*. There is nothing I love more than good food and good conversation—and believe me: I want both. I love choosing a good restaurant, inviting people to join me around the table, and then asking them questions to create in-depth conversation. It can be magical. When it is, I find out a lot about the people around the table, and I learn new things that improve my life.

Another example is a *roundtable*. That can create a *community of helping*. The two nonprofit organizations I founded, EQUIP and the John

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Maxwell Foundation, are focused on being catalysts of transformation for communities and countries. Our efforts are accomplished by teaching values and leadership to people in roundtables—where small groups of men and women come together and discuss their experiences, apply values-based lessons to their lives, and hold one another accountable for positive change. As roundtable members get to know each other, they build trust and start opening up about their lives. It doesn't take long for them to genuinely care about one another and embrace genuine change.

My favorite is the *leadership table* because it can be a *community of growth* for future leaders. Obviously in this case, the leadership table doesn't have to be a literal table. Having a leadership table means creating a place in your organization or on your team where people have a place to learn, an opportunity to practice leadership with its successes and failures, and a chance to shine.

Having a leadership table with open seats is perhaps the best way to attract leaders, not only within an organization, but also from outside. Why? Because nothing is more attractive to a potential leader than to be asked to sit at the leadership table. The Law of Magnetism in my book *The 21 Irrefutable Laws of Leadership* states that who you are is who you attract.¹ People with leadership potential want to spend time with leaders. They want to observe good leadership. They want to talk about it. They want to experience it. It fires them up. A true leadership table is a place where anyone with the desire to lead and the willingness to learn can sit and become part of your leadership team.

AN INVITATION TO THE TABLE

I remember an early experience where I was invited to a leadership table. It was in 1981, soon after I moved to San Diego. I was in my early thirties, and I had been leading in organizations for about a decade, but my experience was fairly limited. I received an invitation to attend a conference of leaders in Los Angeles. I felt as if I was being called up to the major

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leagues, because many of the leaders I respected were going to be at that meeting.

I can still remember feeling that I would be out of my league because the other leaders who had been invited were so much more experienced and successful than I was. Every doubt I had about myself intensified. Would I fit in? Would they accept me? Would I be able to contribute anything?

The day of the meeting, I walked into the room, and my fears disappeared immediately. What happened? Chuck Swindoll, who was the most influential leader in the group and someone I had admired for years, spotted me and came right over to me.

“John, we’re so glad you came. Come sit beside me,” he said, walking me over to his table. “Here. Sit next to me so I can introduce you to the other leaders.”

Being invited to that leadership table was huge for me, because it was the first time I remember being invited to join a group of leaders who were developers of other leaders. It really opened my eyes to greater possibilities for my leadership.

No matter what level you occupy in leadership, you can create a leadership table, a place where people not yet leading at your level can come, be welcomed, and *try on* leadership. A leadership table shouldn’t be an elite invitation to exclusivity; it should be an open invitation to opportunity. Anyone with potential can be given a chance. We can often be surprised by who is able to rise up and lead effectively.

In his book *Too Many Bosses, Too Few Leaders*, business leadership and strategy consultant Rajeev Peshawaria, who is CEO of the Iclif Leadership and Governance Centre, said:

The question is, in today’s rapidly changing world, does it still make sense to identify a few, anoint them as high potentials, and invest disproportionately in their development?

What if the world changes in ways that require a totally different type of potential in five years compared with the benchmarks used to

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identify today's high potentials? What about late bloomers—those who may not show early brilliance, but might become very valuable later on? And what about the negative impact on the morale of those not chosen as high potentials?

For all of those reasons, it might be time to rethink the “best practice” of identifying and developing a pool of high potentials. Given the uncertainties of business today and the powerful forces shaping our lives . . . it is impossible to tell who will be the thought leaders of tomorrow. Instead of putting all their eggs in one basket of early-anointed high potentials, companies should expand their chances of producing future leaders by giving everyone a similar development diet and letting the cream rise to the top on its own.²

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Not everyone invited to the table will become an effective leader. And inviting someone to the leadership table does not mean that her or she will always remain there. The table is meant to attract potential leaders and find out if they will become leaders. For that reason, you should make the table as large as you can manage so that it will accommodate many potential players. And don't worry: no matter the size of the bottle, the cream always rises to the top.

WHAT HAPPENS AT THE LEADERSHIP TABLE

To make your leadership and your organization attractive to potential leaders, here's what you need to make sure happens at your leadership tables.

1. People at the Table Can Experience a Leadership Culture

In an article in *Harvard Business Review*, Bryan Walker and Sarah A. Soule said, “Culture is like the wind. It is invisible, yet its effect can be seen and felt. When it is blowing in your direction, it makes for smooth sailing. When it is blowing against you, everything is more difficult.”³ If you desire to attract and develop leaders, you need to have the wind blowing with you, not against you. That means you must create and maintain a leadership culture.

My friend Tim Elmore, founder and president of Growing Leaders, has written about culture in the workplace. He said:

You realize that the better the organizational culture, the less policies and corporate processes are required to enforce behavior. When the culture is strong, it’s like the tide that raises all the boats on the water. Think about organizations that seem to get this:

- Zappos
- Starbucks
- Chick-fil-A
- Netflix

This works in reverse, as well. The weaker the culture, the more leaders must rely on policies and procedures to make people behave in a certain way. *What you lack in culture, you must make up for in legislation.* Colin Angle, cofounder of iRobot said it this way: “Culture is the magic start-up ingredient.”⁴

What Tim described in particular is a *leadership* culture. Organizations with a strong leadership culture depend on people for guidance and direction, not rules and policies.

The first thing we look for at the leadership table of my organizations is a match in values. We want the people we develop to have our values. The largest leadership table in my world is the John Maxwell Team,

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an organization that trains coaches, leaders, and speakers. The whole organization is like one giant table, because it's open to the broadest cross section of people you can imagine. Twice a year, we hold a training conference for new coaches as well as established ones, where we pour into them and then give them a chance to grow, rise up, and lead. One of the things I do at every conference is teach them the values that are important to me and that must be important to them if they are to succeed. I want them to be people of value who value people. What does that mean? This is what I say to them:

- “I value you. Do you value you?”
- “I value others. Do you value others?”
- “I add value to others. Do you want to add value to others?”
- “I make myself more valuable. Do you want to make yourself more valuable?”

If they can't or won't answer yes to those questions, then we don't match up. And that's all right. It just means we should not work together. In our conferences, I tell them that we'll gladly return their registration fee if they can't embrace our values, and we bless them as they go their own way. Most people we attract are on the same page with me, and they stay. So far, we've certified more than twenty-eight thousand John Maxwell Team members. The entire organization is like a giant leadership table, which is one of the things that makes it unique. Everyone in it gets the same training, and all of them get a chance to shine. As you might expect, the best rise to the top like cream.

One of the organizations I greatly admire is Chick-fil-A. It has an outstanding culture, and people line up not only for the food, but for jobs as operators and employees. Mack Story, a successful John Maxwell Team member, wrote of Chick-fil-A (CFA):

How would you like to be able to select the “right” person from 250 applications when you fill a position? Would you be more likely to have

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a better, stronger team when picking from a handful of applicants or 250? There's a reason CFA has this many applicants. It's because of who they are.

Anyone with money can buy the same equipment and build the same type of building in the same great location. And, many do. But, they don't get the same results. Why? Because most are not in the people development business. They are in the fast food business. CFA develops people that serve other people. Therefore, they attract people that value developing and serving other people. Sure, they have the privilege of turning away a lot people that do not qualify, but they get to pick those that share their values.

It's been my observation that many organizations are in the "profit" business. They operate much differently than those in the people development business. Ironically, those in the people development business tend to make a lot more profit because, in the end, the people are responsible for the profit. Typically, these organizations that value profit over people pay the least while demanding the most. That doesn't even make sense, but they do it day after day. Their turnover is high and because of who they are, they just can't seem to find any good people. Wonder why? They are all working someplace else.⁵

A company's culture is the expression of the values of the people within the organization. It is the sum of the behavior of the people, not a reflection of what you want it to be. People do what people see—and they keep doing it. What people do on an ongoing, habitual basis creates culture.

If you already possess a leadership culture, that's fantastic. Keep emphasizing the importance of leadership. However, if the people in your organization don't value, practice, and reward good leadership, it won't become part of your culture. And you'll have a tough time attracting

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leaders. If that's your situation, then take responsibility for promoting leadership in your sphere of influence. And create a leadership table, because it will help you to start changing the culture you have.

2. People at the Table Participate in the Dynamics of the Table

I've had the pleasure of vacationing several times in Florence, Italy, and every time I visit, I make sure to go to the Academia Gallery to see Michelangelo's *David*. When questioned about his masterpiece, Michelangelo is alleged to have said that the sculpture already exists within the stone; he must simply chisel away the rock around it.⁶

That's what leaders do. They see the future leader within the person, and they help that leader emerge. Maybe that's why professor and best-selling author Brené Brown defines a leader as "anyone who takes responsibility for finding the potential in people . . . and who has the courage to develop that potential."⁷

Creating a leadership roundtable allows you to provide a good environment for your team members to grow, learn, and begin embracing the dynamics of leadership. It can be a fantastic tool for shaping leaders. In the last several years, my organizations have discovered the power of roundtables for promoting personal growth as well as leadership development in people. The dynamics of small group gatherings where everyone is asked to participate are powerful. People discover new ideas, have their thinking challenged, are prompted to apply what they learn, and hold each other accountable for making positive change in their lives.

My nonprofit organization, the John Maxwell Foundation, trains tens of thousands of leaders internationally in how to host values roundtables in small groups. They have helped hundreds of thousands of people grow in character, leadership, and intentional living. During the weeks that groups are together, people embrace the dynamic of the group and leaders begin to emerge, and at the end of the training, they are offered the opportunity to start and lead their own groups. The positive impact on people's lives has been profound.

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In the John Maxwell Team, every member receives intentional leadership training using my book *Developing the Leader Within You 2.0*. They participate in a leadership roundtable where they read and discuss chapters, challenge one another to grow, and hold each other accountable. And because they are being encouraged to start or improve their coaching and speaking businesses at the same time, they have opportunities to apply what they learn in a real-life context.

If you haven't yet created your own leadership table—or you have already begun developing leaders, but you want to find a way to hand-pick some leaders for greater development—why not lead a leadership roundtable? Here's how you can do it:

Set Up-Front Expectations with Invitees

The first thing you need to do the first time you meet with your group is establish expectations. Here's what you need to tell them:

- The format of the group is honest discussion, not teaching.
- The environment is one of encouragement.
- Everyone in the group must participate.
- There are no bad questions.
- Everyone's aim should be to add value to what's shared.
- The purpose of the roundtable is application, not information.
- We hold each other accountable for following through with our commitments.

Lose Yourself and Focus on Your People

As the leader of a roundtable, you are not to teach anything. Your goal is to ask questions and facilitate discussion. Be open and authentic about yourself and your journey, but focus on others, giving them 100 percent of your attention. Place a high value on everyone, and whenever possible, validate what they say.

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Expect Them to Add Value to the Table

Adding value is what leaders do for others. As the leader of a group, you need to model it by doing your best to add value to people at the table, and you should encourage it from others. Whenever possible, allow people to team up to share what has been most helpful to them with one another. This increases learning and gives people experience adding value to others.

Encourage Everyone to ACT

Knowledge isn't the key to success. Applying knowledge is. That's how people grow. And for that reason, action must always be the goal of every leadership roundtable session.

For many years, I've taught something I call ACT, which stands for *apply, change, teach*. Anytime I am in a growth setting, whether it's a roundtable, a conference, or a meeting, I listen for things I can ACT upon. I encourage you to use this and to help people in your group. At the end of every session, ask people, based on what was discussed,

- “What can you *apply* to your life?”
- “What can you *change* about yourself?”
- “What can you *teach* to someone else to help them?”

Then at the beginning of the next session, ask individuals what they committed to ACT upon in the previous session and to share how they followed through. You'll be amazed at how quickly people begin applying what they learn when they know others will ask about it and hold them accountable.

Watch the Eyes at the Table

One of the greatest benefits of facilitating a leadership roundtable is that you see potential leaders rise up at the table. You learn how people think and solve problems. You observe how they communicate with others. You learn about their character and follow-through. And you see how

others respond to them. The people who see more and before others in the group start to emerge as leaders. Others intuitively sense it and respect them. When you ask questions, you'll begin to see their influence because others will start looking at them for answers.

This last dynamic is perhaps the most valuable to you as a leader who develops leaders. This is where you see the cream rise to the top. The leadership roundtable will help everyone who participates, but you'll find the best leaders if you pay attention and don't try to dominate the discussion. You need to give people room to rise up, and when they do, tag them for more personalized development.

3. People at the Table Benefit from the Power of Proximity

There was a time in history when most people learned a trade or profession by apprenticing under a master craftsman. The apprentice would follow the craftsman everywhere, observing his work, assisting him, asking questions after learning the basics, and eventually practicing the craft under his watchful eye. But how does the learning process usually happen today? People attend lectures in a classroom, watch videos, or read books. As someone who writes books and teaches to audiences, I value these processes, but they're not the same as a close, hands-on experience with leaders "at the table."

I recently saw some interesting statistics about how people learn:

- Learners that will transfer a new skill into their practice as a result of learning a theory = 5 percent
- Learners that will transfer a new skill into their practice as a result of learning a theory and seeing a demonstration = 10 percent
- Learners that will transfer a new skill into their practice as a result of learning a theory, demonstration and practice during training = 20 percent
- Learners that will transfer a new skill into their practice as a result of learning a theory, demonstration, practice and corrective feedback during the training = 25 percent

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- Learners that will transfer a new skill into their practice as a result of learning a theory, demonstration, practice and corrective feedback during training and in-situation coaching or mentoring = 90 percent⁸

As a learner, there's no substitute for participating and having access to people who know what they're doing, can direct you, and give you feedback. That requires proximity.

Leadership is more caught than taught. That's why one of the best ways for potential leaders to learn how leaders think, problem-solve, and act is to spend time with them at the table. Getting the opportunity to be present in a strategy meeting is eye-opening. Listening to leaders wrestle through issues, seeing how they make choices, and watching how they interact with one another are some of the best gifts a potential leader can receive from you. Meeting rooms can be classrooms for potential leaders. But you have to be intentional about it. Before I bring potential leaders into a meeting, I ask myself,

- “Do I have questions to ask? And do they have a question to ask?”
- “Do I have experiences to share? And do they have experiences to share?”
- “Do I have lessons to teach? And do they have a lesson to teach?”
- “Is there application to give them? Do they have applications to give me?”

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CAUGHT
THAN
TAUGHT.

When I've asked myself these questions and thought through the process, the potential leaders are more likely to benefit from being at the table.

Of course, there are other intentional ways to bring leaders and potential leaders together to learn from one another. For example, every year I host an event with the John Maxwell Company where we take 120 leaders to a different city for a leadership experience. This

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event, called Exchange, is highly desired and always sells out. Why? The proximity of leaders to one another. For three days leaders from a variety of businesses and with diverse backgrounds come together to discuss leadership and experience growth. It's like show-and-tell on steroids. Many of the attendees forge lifetime friendships at Exchange and are impacted by lessons that change the course of their lives.

I wish I could do more events like Exchange every year, but it's simply not possible because of my busy schedule. What I can do is participate in phone calls with different groups of leaders every month to teach, answer questions, and promote discussion. Technology allows me to develop a kind of proximity to people around the world, and convey the spirit of leadership to everyone who was on the call.

As I sit at my desk, writing this, I am looking at a painting that has been on my office wall for years. It's a picture of two boys seated at the table together. The older boy is showing the younger one how to draw. The face of the older is focused on his task, while the younger is watching what's he's drawing intently. That painting inspires me every time I look at it. It reminds me that every day I should be sitting at a table, in either role. I should always be adding value to someone or learning from someone.

When a good leader who develops others brings people together, the environment can sometimes produce extraordinary results. For example, in the 1990s, Matthew Syed was Britain's number-one-ranked table-tennis player. He was the Commonwealth champion three times and participated twice in the Olympics. How he became such a fantastic Ping-Pong player is a lesson in proximity. In 1978, his parents bought a deluxe Ping-Pong table and put it in their garage. Matthew and his brother spent countless hours on it, playing against each other and any of their friends willing to take them on. They put in hours of play—learning, experimenting, improving. But what took Syed to the next level was crossing paths with Peter Charters.

Charters was a teacher at Aldryngton Primary School who coached

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all of the after-school sports. But Charters's passion was Ping-Pong. In his book *Bounce*, Syed said:

Charters cared about one thing above all: table tennis. He was the nation's top coach and a senior figure in the English Table Tennis Association. The other sports were just a front; an opportunity to scout sporting talent wherever it emerged so he could focus it—ruthlessly and exclusively—upon table tennis. No child who passed through Aldryngton School in Reading was not given a tryout by Charters. And such was his zeal, energy, and dedication to table tennis that anybody who showed potential was persuaded to take their skills forward at the local club, Omega.⁹

Omega was where all the best players in the area practiced. It was open twenty-four hours a day. In the 1980s, this one club produced more top table tennis players than all of the rest of Britain. Why? Syed said, “All of the sporting talent was focused ruthlessly on table tennis, and all the aspiring players were nurtured by an outstanding coach.”¹⁰

What was Charters doing? He was continually attracting potential players, gathering them together, and inviting them to the table, where they could spend time with him and each other. He invited them to a Ping-Pong table to develop into great players. Imagine what you could do if you had a similar focus on attracting people with leadership talent, inviting them to the leadership table, and developing them as leaders.

Before we move on, I want to say one more thing about the power of proximity. It creates “who luck.” You are probably wondering, what is who luck? That's a term coined by author Jim Collins. He told me about it over dinner once. He said that there are many kinds of luck in this world, but the best luck is who luck. Simply stated, it's who you know. It's valuable to you as a leader, and it can become an incredible asset to the leaders you invite to the table.

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Show Them the Value of Who Luck

My friend Harvey MacKay is the king of networkers. He shared with me, “If your house is on fire, forget the china, silver, and wedding album. Grab the Rolodex.” Harvey’s old like me, so I’ll translate that for you: grab your smartphone with all your contacts.

Why would Harvey say that? Because he recognizes the value of knowing people and having a connection with them. When you possess who luck, in any challenging situation, instead of asking yourself, “What should I do?” you ask yourself, “Who do I know who can help me?” You don’t need to know everything. You just need to know enough people who between them know everything. I’m no rocket scientist, but guess what? If I need to know something only rocket scientists know, I’ll call my friend Patrick Eggers. He used to be a rocket scientist, and he can help me.

Put Them in a Position to Have Who Luck

My mother used to tell me that birds of a feather flock together. If you want to improve yourself, find a flock that’s better than you are at leadership, and join their flock.

As you attract leaders, put them in groups with people smarter, more experienced, and better than they are. If their potential is high, they will rise to the occasion. It’s good to remember that if someone is always at the head of the class, he or she is in the wrong class.

Teach Them to Ask Others for Help with Who Luck

Who luck is about constantly expanding the pool of people you’re connected with. One of the best ways to expand that pool is to ask the people you already know to introduce you to people they know. I’ve done this for years by asking, “Who do you know that I should know?” To help your leaders increase their who luck, teach them to ask the same question. But I have to give a word of caution. It only works when the person

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you ask knows and trusts you. I never ask that question before I've developed credibility because I don't want the answer to be, "I don't know who because I don't know you." The relationship has to be built first.

Help Them to Become Worthy of Who Luck

The better you get at your profession or craft, the better your odds of meeting high-level people. You've probably heard people say that you make your own luck. By that they mean that if you work hard and keep improving, you have new opportunities and you're ready to seize them. You earn your way through excellence.

Every time you help your leaders get better, you make them stronger candidates for who luck. If someone's skill level is a 2 (on a 10-point scale with 10 as the highest), people whose skill is an 8 probably won't connect with them. People tend to gravitate to others of a similar caliber. So, what can they do? Don't let them give up; help them get better.

Coach Them in How to Up Their Who Luck

When I get to connect with someone I really admire and from whom I want to learn, I have one goal. To have a second meeting with that individual. But you can't just ask for that and expect to get it. You have to earn it. I try to do that by coming to the initial meeting over-prepared. I spend hours or even days thinking about the coming meeting. I do my homework and research the person. If he or she has written books, I read all of them. I carefully think through the questions I want to ask, and I write all of them down. In fact, I write more than I know I will have time to ask.

When we meet, I let my enthusiasm for our meeting show, as well as my passion for the interests we have in common. And at the end of the meeting, I express my gratitude. I want everything I do to set me apart so that I have a chance to learn more from this person.

Recently, I was invited to speak at a conference in Toronto by leadership expert and author Robin Sharma. For years I have admired his work, but I had never met him. I knew I was going to get some time with him, so I prepared for it, hoping it could lead to an ongoing friendship

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with him. I was already familiar with his teaching because I had read his books. So, I quoted him in my lecture. I let the audience know how much his work had added value to me. And then I stayed after my talk and signed books for anyone in the audience who asked me to. I did everything I could to go above and beyond what was expected. When we met, I could tell that Robin was grateful. And I'm glad to say that it wasn't our last time together.

If you teach the leaders and potential leaders at your table to go above and beyond for the people they want to connect with and learn from, it will help them greatly. They will benefit from proximity to other good leaders, and they will learn how to increase their proximity to others on their own.

4. People at the Table Get to Practice Leadership

In the end, the only way for any person to learn leadership is to lead. Leading isn't a theoretical exercise. *Lead* is a verb, and to get better at leadership, people have to lead, whether they're leading as a businessperson, a volunteer, an employee, a parent, or a coach. Everybody has to start somewhere. Why not let your potential leaders start practicing at the table with you and other leaders who can help them?

In his book *Bounce*, Michael Syed also wrote about the power of practice over talent. He cited a study performed in 1991 by psychologist Anders Ericsson and two colleagues. They studied violinists at the Music Academy of West Berlin. They divided the boys and girls into three groups based on their perceived level of ability:

- students capable of careers as international star soloists
- students capable of careers in the world's best orchestras

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- students capable of careers teaching music

These ratings were based on the opinions of the school professors and the students' performance in open competitions.

What Ericsson discovered was that biographies of the students in all three groups were remarkably similar. Most began practice at age eight, decided to become musicians right before they turned fifteen, had studied under about four teachers, and had on average studied 1.8 other instruments in addition to the violin. There was no remarkable difference in talent between them when they started. So, what was the difference? Practice time! By age twenty, the bottom group had practiced four thousand fewer hours than the middle group, and the middle group had practiced two thousand fewer hours than the top group, which had practiced ten thousand hours. "There were no exceptions to this pattern," said Syed of Ericsson's findings. "Purposeful practice was the only factor distinguishing the best from the rest."¹¹

If you want to develop leaders, you need to encourage them to practice their leadership and give them a place to do it. And there are few better places for them to do that than the leadership table.

A LEADER AT THE TABLE SETTING TABLES FOR OTHERS

My greatest joy as a leader has been developing other leaders. Today, at age seventy-three, I am still as excited about it as I've ever been. One of the leaders who came to one of my tables twenty years ago is now creating leadership tables that have attracted hundreds of thousands of people and made them better leaders. His name is John Vereecken, and he oversees the leadership transformation projects of my nonprofit organizations in Latin America.

I first met John back in 2000, when he was thirty-five. He is originally from Michigan, but he and his wife, Karla, have lived and worked

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in Mexico since 1985. John started out by helping a man serve the indigenous people who live in the rural mountains of Mexico. Together they would travel by foot from village to village, to help people plant crops. While they served the people, they also shared their faith. Later, John opened several Bible schools and helped plant churches.

The more John was doing, the more he realized that the leadership culture of Latin America was very different from what he grew up with in the United States. While North Americans from the US have a can-do attitude and believe they can accomplish anything, the people of Latin America tend to be more tentative. And those who want to lead do so by working to attain positions of power where they can try to, as John says, “control the masses.” Their model of leadership is telling others what to do. John wanted to try to do something to change that.

At that same time, I was doing a lot of speaking for Promise Keepers, and I got to know Marcos Witt, the most popular Christian recording artist in Latin America. Marcos introduced me to John. That’s when I learned that the two of them had a dream of helping people in Mexico and the rest of Latin America to embrace a model of leadership where leaders add value to people, encourage and empower them, and help them grow and succeed.

John said he had read *The 21 Irrefutable Laws of Leadership* and *The 17 Indisputable Laws of Teamwork*, and those books had made him realize he could become a better leader, and anyone can learn to lead. Just by talking with John, I could see such great potential in him. He was already doing a lot, and I wanted to help him. So, I said, “You have my permission to take those two books, translate them into Spanish, and teach them anywhere you want in Latin America.” I also told them that if they would bring together their best leaders once a year, I’d come and teach them leadership myself.

John later confessed that when I said he could use my materials to teach leadership, he thought, *He thinks we can do this?* He didn’t know what he was capable of, but he was willing. Not long after that, he was teaching the 21 Laws in San Pedro Sula, Honduras, and he began to see

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the light bulbs turn on for people from businesses, government, education, and churches. They realized that leadership wasn't position and power. It was influence, and it could be used to help people.

I watched as John successfully trained leaders all over Latin America. And when my nonprofit organization EQUIP was ready to start training leaders in Central and South America, you know who I called on to help me: John. His organization, Lidere, facilitated the training of half a million people in leadership with EQUIP. And I continue to work with him. He's been a vital contributor to the John Maxwell Foundation's initiatives in Guatemala, Paraguay, and Costa Rica.

I asked John to tell me his perspective on our interaction, and here's what he had to say:

You believed in me when I didn't even know what leadership was. I thought, *He knows what he's doing, and if he thinks I can, then I guess I can. I don't want to let him down.* Then, as I got to know you better, I saw how you modeled how adding value to people is the foundation of true leadership.

You developed me in so many ways. You loaned me your platform, which opened doors of opportunity that I never would have had. You invested in me in fully engaged moments through a mentoring phone call, at a dinner, on a flight, or backstage before an event. You answered questions, and shared leadership wisdom and practices. You gave me opportunities to lead. Being given the opportunity to lead several large initiatives in Latin America forced me to lift my leadership lid. Having the opportunity to translate for you when you speak with a country's president or translating onstage has been *the* greatest opportunity of accelerated development in my life. And just the opportunity to interact with people and work in a leadership culture of your companies has provided me with opportunities to grow in areas of my leadership and people skills.

What John Vereecken described is being invited to the leadership

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table. I don't want you to miss this. John came to the table with his skills and aspirations. He wanted and needed help. He experienced the dynamics of the table. He embraced the leadership culture. He benefited from proximity—even though he lived in Mexico and we only met in person occasionally. And he received opportunities to lead—which he *ran* with. He was excellent. But it all started because he was attracted to the prospect of being helped as a leader.

You may be thinking, *That's easy for you to say. You're famous. You've written books that John read. I can't do that.* My answer is, yes you can. You can start where I did. I began developing the people I had where I was. The first time I tried to develop someone, I was in my twenties, and though I did the best I could, I didn't do a very good job. But I didn't quit. I kept developing people. I started small and got better at it. I began developing more people. I just kept inviting people to the leadership table and working with them. After a while, people began seeking me out, *asking* to come to the table. It didn't happen overnight. But nothing worthwhile ever does.

What will it mean for you to create a *leadership table* in your organization or on your team? That will be as unique as you and your situation. Just as there are no one-size-fits-all leaders, there are no one-size-fits-all leadership tables. The main thing is to get started. Look for leaders and potential leaders, invite them to the table, and begin the process.

CHAPTER 3

UNDERSTANDING LEADERS

Connect with Them Before You Lead Them

In 2004, the Coca-Cola Company was in trouble. According to consultant Gregory Kesler, the company faced “health-conscious consumers who were saying ‘no’ to carbonated soft drinks, stagnant new product creation, years of cuts in direct marketing, a stock price that had been pummeled for more than four years, and a business press that had pronounced ‘the fizz was gone’ from the Coke formula.”¹

Seven years before, Coke chairman and CEO Roberto Goizueta died, ending his sixteen-year leadership of the organization. Under his leadership, the company had risen in market value from \$4 billion to more than \$150 billion. Goizueta had been only the ninth chairman since its founding. But after his death, Coke had not done nearly as well. And in the seven years leading up to 2004, two CEOs had failed to lead the company successfully, Douglas Ivester lasting two years and Douglas Daft lasting four.

On May 4, 2004, Coca-Cola announced that Neville Isdell would be its new chairman and CEO. Until then, Isdell had been living in Barbados, enjoying his retirement. Born in Northern Ireland and raised in Zambia, he had spent more than thirty years at Coke. His relationship with

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the organization began in 1966, when he worked for a Coke bottler in Zambia. Six years later, he was the general manager of Coca-Cola Bottling of Johannesburg, Coke's largest bottler in Africa. Over the years he had traveled the world and worked his way up in the organization, eventually becoming the chairman and chief executive of Coca-Cola Beverages in Britain, where he oversaw the formation of Coca-Cola Hellenic Bottling, the world's second-largest Coca-Cola bottler.²

Isdell had not expected to be recruited for the position. In all his years at Coke, despite his success, he had not been considered for the CEO position. But he accepted it as "the ultimate challenge."³ Experts, investors, and the *Wall Street Journal* were skeptical. They did not believe Isdell could return the company to consistent growth.⁴

But others who knew him well had confidence. "Neville knows the business backwards and forwards, inside and out, and he is the best person to run Coke, bar none," said Emanuel Goldman, a beverage industry consultant in Hillsborough, California. "And his interpersonal skills are fantastic, he makes everyone who meets him feel good."⁵

On his first day back at Coca-Cola headquarters in Atlanta, Isdell told the employees, "It's all about you. It's all about the people."⁶ They were glad to hear it, but he wasn't sure they believed it. In an interview several years later, Isdell said, "We had not been making our goals for a number of years. We had to deliver, but I needed to invest as well; I needed to regain the commitment of our people. I made it clear that I was here to take long-term action, and that I wanted to go out and listen and communicate before making a lot of changes."⁷

Isdell decided to go on a listening tour. In his autobiography, he wrote:

It is normal that the first one hundred days mark the clear enunciation of strategy and while I made a number of moves internally through major appointments, I declared that I would not speak to the media or the analysts during that period. I did not want to make declarations based on preconceived ideas I'd developed in Barbados as I watched events unfold, but wanted to learn more by traveling around the world

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visiting our operations and meeting with employees, customers, and other key individuals with whom the company had relationships.⁸

Isdell had been gone from Coke for only three years, but he was not going to take anything for granted. He wanted to connect with key leaders and understand them and their problems firsthand. He said, “We joked that the company had become a ‘feedback-free zone,’ and we knew that had to change.”⁹

The first thing he did was travel to Chicago to repair the relationship with McDonald’s, which another executive had damaged. He then flew to the West Coast to meet with Coca-Cola board member Peter Ueberroth to get his advice. He then flew to India and China. Then to Mexico City and Rio de Janeiro. Then to Spain. Most of what he heard wasn’t good. Relationships with bottlers and partners were not good. There were lawsuits. Coke’s reputation with the public was tarnished.

In August of that year, Isdell gathered his direct reports and the top 150 executives of Coca-Cola in London, determined to get their input for a plan to take the company forward. Isdell said:

We were going to develop a total growth plan for the company, not just new strategies and a mission statement. . . . It would be a road map for how to get the company growing again and sustain that growth over the long term. It would not be dictated from on high but developed organically by the company’s top leaders who had been disheartened by layoffs, lawsuits, a game of musical chairs in the CEO’s office, and a lingering slump in profits. . . . As the meetings progressed, and the executives began to realize that they really were able to shape the future of the company, the enthusiasm grew exponentially.¹⁰

Isdell went on to say, “A company can’t succeed unless it has its employees behind it. They have to be convinced that the leadership truly has their best interests at heart and can win for them.” After their meeting in London, Isdell said, “Now, we had that at Coca-Cola. . . . For the first

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time, our allies were the employees we needed most to achieve our goals. It became *their* plan; they owned it and believed in it.”¹¹

Isdell was able to get Coke going in the right direction again. And he actively worked to prepare his own successor, Muhtar Kent, to take his place. Gregory Kesler reported, “Isdell’s leadership, along with that of Muhtar Kent, the successor he helped identify and develop, has enabled the business to meet its growth targets 11 quarters in a row. The company delivered a 30 percent total return to shareholders in 2007. . . . CNBC recently described him as a transformational CEO.”¹² Isdell was sixty in 2004, when Coke asked him to lead the company. In 2008, his successor, Kent, stepped in as CEO. In 2009, Isdell retired a second time, allowing Kent to step into the role of chairman, which he successfully held until April 2019.

LEADERSHIP IS ALWAYS A PEOPLE BUSINESS

In *The 21 Irrefutable Laws of Leadership*, I wrote about the Law of Connection: leaders touch a heart before they ask for a hand.¹³ Neville Isdell did exactly that. Before he made changes, he made connections. Before he made major leadership decisions, he facilitated a lot of leadership discussions. Even with all his years of experience with Coca-Cola in so many countries at so many levels, he didn’t assume he knew enough to take action, or that the employees of Coke would trust him. He made it his mission to connect with people and understand them before making significant changes and before trying to win favor with Wall Street or the press. And after those first one hundred days, when he was ready to move, he included his people in the process.

Leaders need to learn a lesson from Isdell. Before you lead and develop people, you need to connect with them. You need to find common ground with potential leaders, which is less about ability and more a function of attitude. You need to possess a spirit similar to that of singer-songwriter Carole King, who said, “I want to connect with people. I want people

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to think, ‘Yeah, that’s how I feel.’”¹⁴ If you can do that, you have a much better chance of being able to develop them.

Soft skills, such as asking questions and listening, having empathy for people’s journeys, and understanding their perspectives, are crucial in today’s leadership environment. Karima Mariama-Arthur, founder and CEO of WordSmithRapport, said:

Experience and business acumen will only take a leader so far. High-touch experiences with stakeholders and employees and the ability to deftly maneuver in social settings have become the rule, rather than the exception. Because we are becoming more globally entrenched as a society, understanding, appreciating and leveraging differences each become critical to effective leadership.¹⁵

Why is it so important to touch a heart before you ask for a hand? Because people don’t automatically commit to you and follow you when they understand you. They commit to you and follow when they feel understood. I believe that will happen for you as a leader when you take the following actions:

- Value them
- Let them know you need them
- Include them in your journey
- Adopt a teachable spirit
- Ask questions
- Listen well and often
- Seek to know their perspective
- Give credit to those who help you
- Express gratitude to those who help you
- Replace *me* with *we*

Years ago, a mentor told me, “If you will sweat with your people, they can handle the heat.” I have found that to be true. When people

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understand that you're in it with them, they're more likely to hang in there with you. The best way to do that is to try to see the world from their perspective, always ask questions, and become a better listener. Let's take a look at each of these.

TRY TO SEE THE WORLD FROM THEIR PERSPECTIVE

Good leadership requires a perspective shift from *it's all about me* to *it's all about others*. That means we need to try to see things from others' points of view. Steffan Surdek, consulting principal, trainer, and coach

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at Pryxis Technologies, said, "Perspective is the way individuals see the world. It comes from their personal point of view and is shaped by life experiences, values, their current state of mind, the assumptions they bring into a situation, and a whole lot of other things. . . . We can easily say that my perspective is my reality. There is truth to that statement. When we look at the shared reality of an event, though, the more perspectives you get, the closer to reality you get."¹⁶

How do you get those perspectives?

1. Learn Perspective Thinking

I wish I had tried to think the way others do earlier in my leadership career. For too long I simply wanted others to think the way I did, and I couldn't understand why they didn't. So, I spent a lot of time and energy trying to persuade them to adopt my perspective. But that's not a good way to get people on board with your leadership.

Slowly I began to learn how others thought and to lead them from where they were, not from where I was. While people's hopes and dreams may be unique, they share many characteristics in common, and as leader,

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you can connect with them when you know those things. Here's what I discovered:

- All people are insecure. Give them confidence.
- All people want to feel special. Compliment them.
- All people want a bright future. Give them hope.
- All people need to be understood. Listen to them.
- All people want direction. Walk with them.
- All people are selfish. Speak to their needs first.
- All people get emotionally low. Encourage them.
- All people want to be included. Ask their opinion.
- All people want success. Help them win.
- All people want to be appreciated. Give them credit.

When you understand how people think and you meet them where they are instead of judging them, you're in a better position to work with them and lead them.

2. Practice Perspective Seeking

Frequently after a meeting, I will ask the leaders from my team who were present to give their perspective and takeaways on what happened. Their comments help me catch things I may have missed. They also give me insight into their understanding of the leadership dynamics that occurred in the room. Often when I'm developing someone, I'll get their perspective and then give them mine. Sometimes I'm able to teach them something and help them go further in their leadership journey.

3. Engage in Perspective Coordinating

Whenever I get together with my team, whether it's in a meeting to achieve an objective, a debriefing after we hold an event, or a meeting after the meeting with people from another organization, as I've already said, I seek out my team members' perspectives. But I don't stop there. The real value in the conversation comes from coordinating those perspectives

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with one another. I do that by pointing out how one team member's ideas relate to the others. I also tell them how those ideas relate to my thinking. And I try to tie all of it together to the vision of our organization.

What I'm trying to do is expand everyone's vision and perspective. I'm trying to help them sharpen their leadership thinking. And together we come up with a new shared perspective. I'll ask how this perspective can make us better. How it can benefit us individually. How it can improve our team. It prompts everyone to process ideas and think more broadly, not just from their own perspective. When the leaders you're developing become able to see things through the eyes of others, you'll know they're starting to develop maturity in their leadership.

ALWAYS ASK QUESTIONS

If you really want to understand other people, you need to ask questions. I'm a talker, so it took me a while to learn this, and ever since, I've been working to increase my skill in the area of questioning. As I've asked more questions, I made an important discovery. Asking questions has the opposite effect of giving direction. When you give direction to your team, you often confine them. When you ask questions, you create discovery room for them—room for articulation, communication, innovation, and problem-solving. Here's what questions do:

- Create space for open conversation
- Place value on others and their opinions
- Help people know one another better
- Invite everyone to participate
- Clear up assumptions
- Cause people to think
- Guide the conversation

When we face the fact that none of us knows all the answers and all of

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us will make mistakes, we create a culture where creativity can flourish, mistakes are acceptable, and people learn from setbacks.

Recently a leader expressed his frustration to me when I was encouraging him to ask more questions instead of giving more direction to his team. “If I ask questions,” he said, “I cannot control the response that is given.” But leadership isn’t control—it’s influence. I tried to help him understand that you don’t want to control people’s responses. You want to influence their thinking and actions. You do that by asking the right questions. The questions you ask guide the direction and the pace. The deeper the questions go, the deeper their understanding—and often, the deeper the connection with them. This can actually enhance your leadership, not undermine it.

Asking questions also helps leaders connect with others better. When I started asking questions, I did it to gain information. But in the process, I learned that when I asked questions, I got to know people better. Because I understood them better, I was able to lead them better. That realization made me even more intentional in the questions I asked and how I asked them.

Assumptions are the mother of all mess ups for leaders. In his book *Start with Why*, Simon Sinek said:

We make decisions based on what we *think* we know. It wasn’t too long ago that the majority of people believed the world was flat. This perceived truth impacted behavior. During this period, there was very little exploration. People feared that if they traveled too far they might fall off the edge of the earth. So, for the most part they stayed put. It wasn’t until that minor detail was revealed—the world is round—that behaviors changed on a massive scale. Upon this discovery, societies began to traverse the planet. Trade routes were established; spices were traded. New ideas, like mathematics, were shared between societies which unleashed all kinds of innovations and advancements. The correction of a simple false assumption moved the human race forward.¹⁷

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Too often as leaders we look at something that we know very little about, and we treat it as if we know everything about it. That's a recipe for leadership disaster. When I finally started asking questions instead of making assumptions, I quickly discovered a lot of what I was doing as a leader wasn't effective because the decisions I made weren't based on reality, but rather on false assumptions. So, I began challenging those assumptions. And my leadership improved.

As you prepare to develop a potential leader, I suggest that you start thinking of questions as bookends before you meet.

Front-End Questions

As a leader who develops leaders, you need to be looking ahead. You need to see more than others see and before others see. Then you will be able to form questions that make your time with potential leaders as productive as possible. Doing this will help you accomplish several key objectives:

- Set the direction of the conversation
- Draw out what they see and compare it to your perspective
- Discover their intuitive potential
- Learn how much they rely on assumptions
- Find out if you are both on the same page

The questions you ask will depend on the situation and the potential leader, but here are some examples of questions I ask before casting vision, working on a project, engaging in an experience, or having a mentoring conversation:

“What do you see in the vision we're proposing?”

“How do you think we should approach this project?”

“What do you expect to receive from this experience?”

“How do you think this conversation will play out?”

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As I've already mentioned, asking questions is more powerful than giving directions. If you want to be effective at developing leaders, lead the way with questions. You can always give direction later. The more open-ended the questions, the more you can learn about how the potential leader thinks. And the more difficult, intuitive, or abstract the subject, the more natural leadership talent is needed to answer it. In fact, I've found that if I ask questions that relate to the Law of Intuition or the Law of Timing (both from *The 21 Irrefutable Laws of Leadership*), the more skills are required to answer them. The Law of Intuition says that leaders evaluate everything with a leadership bias. The Law of Timing says that when you lead is as important as what to do and where to go.¹⁸ So if you ask potential leaders to evaluate the leadership dynamics of a situation, or if you ask them how they know when to take action, you'll discover a lot about them. And you'll be better able to evaluate how sophisticated their thinking is when it comes to leadership. The high-level leaders will stand out from everyone else.

Back-End Questions

I love asking questions that prompt leaders to evaluate and reflect on their experiences. I want to gauge their level of awareness. I want to know what they observed. I want to know how they felt. I want to know what they learned. I want to know how they will apply it. I want to find out what actions they plan to take next. Good questions asked on the back end can often prompt people to make discoveries and learn for themselves. And if they miss the lesson, you can always take a moment to teach them.

If you want to learn more about asking questions, I recommend my

FRONT-END QUESTIONS
SET THE AGENDA, WHILE
BACK-END QUESTIONS
MAXIMIZE THE
AGENDA. FRONT-END
QUESTIONS ENCOURAGE
PREPARATION, WHILE
BACK-END QUESTIONS
ENCOURAGE REFLECTION.

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book *Good Leaders Ask Great Questions*. But before we move on, I want to tell you this. Front-end questions set the agenda, while back-end questions *maximize* the agenda. Front-end questions encourage preparation, while back-end questions encourage reflection. Both kinds of questions increase understanding. And they pave the way for more effective leadership, and leadership development in others.

BECOME A BETTER LISTENER

In *The Contrarian's Guide to Leadership*, Steven B. Sample wrote, "The average person suffers from three delusions: (1) that he is a good driver, (2) that he has a good sense of humor, and (3) that he is a good listener. Most people, however, including many leaders, are terrible listeners; they actually think talking is more important than listening."¹⁹

I once heard a joke that said we hear half of what is being said, listen to half of what we hear, understand half of that, believe half of that, and remember only half of that. If you translate those assumptions into an eight-hour workday, here is what it would mean:

You spend about four hours listening.

You hear about two hours of what is said.

You actually listen to an hour of that.

You *understand* only thirty minutes of that.

You *believe* only fifteen minutes of that.

And you remember only seven and a half minutes of it.

No wonder so few people are getting anything done.

Psychiatrist and author David D. Burns observed, "The biggest mistake you can make in trying to talk convincingly is to put your highest priority on expressing your ideas and feelings. What most people really want is to be listened to, respected, and understood. The moment people

see that they are being understood, they become more motivated to understand your point of view.”²⁰

How many times have you heard people complain that their bosses don't listen? How many times have you heard children say their parents don't listen? People in authority usually prefer to talk. However, there is perhaps no better way to connect with people than to become a better listener.

1. Listening to People Leads to Understanding People

The biggest communication challenge is that most of the time we do not listen to understand. We listen to prepare our reply. Author and negotiation expert Herb Cohen said, “Effective listening requires more than hearing the words transmitted, it demands that you find meaning and understanding in what is being said. After all, meanings are not in words, but in people.”²¹

Understanding people is a value we hold high in all of my organizations. People who understand one another work better together. And leaders are always more effective leading people they understand and care about. That process starts with listening.

Eric Corona, one of the young leaders at the John Maxwell Company, was surprised by how that value played out when he was first hired by us. Eric said:

As a highly motivated sales professional, it was a bit of a shock on my first day at the John Maxwell Company when I was informed that as a part of the onboarding process, I would not be engaging in any sales activity for the first two weeks in the office. This caused me some major anxiety, as I was ready to hit the ground running and start closing sales and producing for the company. Instead, my schedule was filled with one-on-one meetings with all the people across the multiple departments that I would be working with in my role. They were called “Get to Know You” meetings and the objective was to learn about each person. While a small portion of these meetings was designed for me to

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learn about their roles at the company, the majority of the meeting was dedicated to learning about their stories: who they were, where they came from, their family, faith, hobbies, dreams, goals, etc. It was unlike anything I have ever experienced. I still had a small nagging feeling that I was falling behind on selling, but I was truly enjoying getting to learn about the people I would be working with—the whole person, not just who they were between nine and five at the office. (That doesn't mean I didn't log in to the Salesforce system those first two weeks to build prospect lists and sales strategy. What can I say: it's in my blood!)

What I later came to understand about those first two weeks is that although I wasn't fully engaged in my sales responsibilities, the relationships I formed with colleagues in other departments dramatically accelerated my ability to succeed in my role. I learned a lot about the culture and heartbeat of the organization and it not only gave me the ability to know who I needed to work with on specific tasks, but it also gave me the confidence to ask for help knowing they valued me and would do their best to help me succeed.

I've heard that during this “wet cement” stage, you have only about thirty days or so to put your company's “handprint” on new team members before the cement dries and their thinking patterns, attitude, and habits are hardened and difficult to change. I'm grateful that the John Maxwell Company believed in building relationships at these early stages.

Eric has become a very valuable member of our team. As a company, we know it is unfair to ask for the help of someone with whom we have not first connected. It is also ineffective. As my mentor, John Wooden, said to me, “Why is it so difficult to realize that others are more likely to listen to us if we first listen to them?”

2. Listening Is the Best Way to Learn

Television host Larry King said, “I remind myself every morning: nothing I say this day will teach me anything. So, if I'm going to learn, I

must do it by listening.”²² When we fail to listen, we shut off much of our learning potential.

The higher people go in leadership, the more isolated they often become. The day before Dwight Eisenhower became president of the United States, outgoing president Harry Truman is said to have told him, “This is the last day people will be honest with you.” He knew that with power and success, people too often tell you what you want to hear instead of what you need to hear. Worse, leaders begin to think they don’t *need* to listen anymore. They think everyone should listen to them. I’ve heard this referred to as the “bubble” presidents live in after they enter the White House.

If you want to be an effective leader, you must make learning by listening a top priority every day. You can’t become impatient just because you like to see results. What others have to say to you really must remain more important than what you have to say to them. Why? Because the higher leaders rise, the farther they get from the front lines, and the more they have to depend on what others tell them to know what’s really going on. Listening is still the best way to gather information, to learn, to understand people, and to connect with them.

3. Listening Engenders Trust and Connection

Billy Graham once said, “A suffering person does not need a lecture; he needs a listener.”²³ Having known Billy and gotten to spend time with him on multiple occasions, I know that he was a great listener. You could say that he listened so well it was almost tangible. I think that’s why his team stayed with him for so long. George Beverly Shea began working with Graham in 1947, and stayed with him until he died. He sang at the 2005 New York crusade when he was ninety-six years old. And Cliff Barrow was Graham’s director of music for more than sixty years. Art Bailey, who served as a crusade director and director of counseling, called himself “one of the shorter-term guys.” He worked with Graham *only* twenty years.²⁴

Leaders who genuinely listen and keep confidences gain the trust of

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the people they work with. As a young leader I didn't have trouble keeping confidences, but I did have trouble listening. I was more interested in moving my agenda forward than listening to the people on my team. Only when a team member confronted me for my poor listening did I finally understand I had a problem. Ironically, I probably would have understood it earlier if I'd been *listening* to people. Others had probably been trying to tell me for a long time, but I just didn't hear it. But when this team member finally got through to me, I realized what she was really telling me was that I wasn't trustworthy. She believed her ideas, opinions, and feelings were not safe with me. I had to earn her trust. That started with becoming a better listener.

Author and professor David Augsburger said, "Being heard is so close to being loved that for the average person, they are almost indistinguishable."²⁵ Listening draws people to you, which works much better than trying to push your leadership on them. Empathy builds trust.

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—DAVID AUGSBURGER

Listening also builds connection. In 2018 I was invited to Kenya to talk with some of their leaders about forming a partnership to help bring transformation to their country. My leadership team and I traveled there and spent days in discussions with top leaders.

My last session before departing turned out to be the highlight of my trip. One of my nonprofits had partnered with my friend Rob Hoskins and his organization, One Hope, to provide leadership curriculum based on my teachings to millions of young people in high school throughout Africa. Five hundred of these kids gathered together, and four of them shared the leadership lessons they had learned and applied to their lives.

I cannot express what a thrill it was as I met and listened to these young leaders. I sat in the front row and listened as they talked about the

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lessons they had learned. I was hearing my own concepts being taught back to me. As they spoke, I took notes. It was exhilarating.

When they finished, I was asked to speak to them. Now I could tell they were excited, because they wanted to hear from the guy whose materials they'd studied. I think they expected a leadership lecture. But that's not what I gave them. Instead, I shared what I had just heard from them. I wanted them to know that I had really listened to them and how wonderful it had been to hear how they were leading people. I talked about what I'd heard from each one of them, added my thoughts, and encouraged them.

At the end of the event, I asked to take a picture with them, which they loved. I did too. I keep that photo on my phone. It inspires me. I also told them, "When one of you becomes the president of Kenya, please ask me to come back to your country again." That brought the students to their feet, and they cheered. I had let them know I cared about them by listening to them, respecting them, and valuing them. They felt understood. I felt grateful. And we all felt connected.

James Brook, a joint founder of Strengths Partnership, said:

Research shows that the majority of leaders still use far more advocacy—putting forward arguments as a means of persuasion—when interacting with direct reports and other co-workers. This behavior is frequently reinforced by top leadership and the culture of the organization which encourage "tell" approaches to getting things done over active listening and questioning.²⁶

You can never get the best out of people if you don't know who they are, where they want to go, what they care about, how they think, and how they want to contribute. You can learn those things only if you listen. When that happens, people feel that they are at the very heart of things. They feel like partners, not just employees. They trust you more because you care about them.

As a leader, one of the most important things you can do with anyone

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you want to develop is to understand and connect with him or her. And it's important to remember that's a two-way street. Yes, you want to understand that potential leader. But you always want to offer that person opportunities to better understand you.

One of my early successes in leadership development was Barbara Brumagin. She became my assistant in 1981 and quickly emerged as a leader in her own right. Back then we were both young, and I made a lot of mistakes in trying to develop her, but she blossomed anyway. Her desire to grow as a young leader was greater than my skills in developing her.

While I was working on this book, I asked her to share some of her observations from those early days. I know including what she told me may come across as self-serving, but that's not my intention. My desire is to encourage you to connect with leaders and develop them, even if you're inexperienced, as I was back then. You don't need to be an expert or highly skilled to be successful. You just need to be understanding of others, and give them access so that they understand you. Here's what Barbara said about those experiences:

On day one of my employment, my desk in the office was arranged so I could see and hear you in your adjoining office. You had more than an open-door policy. I was able to observe how you worked at your desk—doing both the mundane and the critical, developing daily and long-term planning, and interacting with people. Any time you had a significant encounter, you took time to teach me your thought process, give me background, and tell me why and how you formed a decision; it helped me understand and prepared me for any related task assigned to me.

By hearing you interact with your family, I learned how to love, affirm, and encourage people with words and action. Regardless of how tight your schedule was, a phone call from Margaret or the children always moved to the top of your priorities.

At a time when assistants were not included in an organization's weekly planning meetings, you brought me into those meetings. That

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helped prepare me for new tasks, understand projects, and know what team members needed from you or me. And following these meetings, you always asked if I had any questions or feedback, or if I needed clarification. You asked what I observed and learned. You valued my thoughts and it provided me with an opportunity to understand your assessment process. Any time we met, I knew I would always have an opportunity to ask questions.

And you always thanked me. Nearly every conversation ended with your saying,

“Thank you for helping me.” To this day when we speak on the phone, your last words are “Is there anything I can do for you?”

Barbara was a great work partner with me. I can't tell you how much she helped me during the eleven years she worked with me. She started as my assistant, but she became so much more. She had a heart to serve me and to further the vision of the organization. Because I understood her, and I was open with her and intentional about helping her understand me, she took more and more on her shoulders. She could communicate for me and make decisions in my place. In the beginning, she would check with me to make sure she would be doing the right thing. But it wasn't long before she was taking action first, and then letting me know about it afterward to keep me informed. That was only possible because we knew each other so well.

If you are going to develop leaders, and you hope to eventually experience the leader's greatest return, you need to connect with your leaders and potential leaders. You need to learn who they are and do everything you can to understand them. And you need to be open enough to allow them to understand and learn from you. That's the only way you will be able to go to the highest level as a leader who develops leaders.

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