

JOHN C.  
MAXWELL

#1 *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHOR

HOW  
SUCCESSFUL  
PEOPLE  
LEAD



TAKING YOUR INFLUENCE  
TO THE NEXT LEVEL

HOW  

---

SUCCESSFUL  
PEOPLE  

---

LEAD

TAKING YOUR INFLUENCE  
TO THE NEXT LEVEL

JOHN C. MAXWELL



CENTER  
STREET

NEW YORK BOSTON NASHVILLE

# Introduction

If your vision of success includes starting an organization, owning a company, or putting together a team, you need to become good at leadership. If you cannot lead well, you will not be successful.

When I discovered this, leadership became one of my passions. I love learning about it. I also enjoy teaching it. I've dedicated more than thirty years of my life to helping others learn what I know about leading. In fact, I spend about eighty days every year teaching leadership. In the last several years, I've taught it on six continents. The subject is inexhaustible. Why? Because everything rises and falls on leadership. If you want to make a positive impact on the world, learning to lead better will help you do it.

In all the years that I've taught leadership, there has been one lecture that I have been asked to give more often than any other—from West Point to Microsoft headquarters and in countries all around the world. Why is it so popular? That lecture explains how successful people lead and provides a game plan for learning how to become a leader. It's titled "The 5 Levels of Leadership," and it has been used to train leaders in companies of every size and configuration, from small businesses to Fortune 100 companies. It has been used

## 2 HOW SUCCESSFUL PEOPLE LEAD

to help nonprofit organizations understand how to lead volunteers. And taught in more than 120 countries around the world. The concept is tested and proven. It also instructs people in the use of several tried-and-true techniques that will help them become successful at leadership.

Looking at leadership as a series of levels that can be gained through targeted actions has many benefits. Here are just a few:

### **It Creates a Clear Picture of Leadership**

For those who are not naturally gifted at it, leadership can be a mystery. For them, leading people is like walking down a dark corridor. They have a sense of where they want to go, but they can't see ahead and they don't know where the problems and pitfalls are going to lie. For many people in the academic world, leadership is a theoretical exercise, an equation whose variables are worthy of research, study, and rigorous debate. In contrast, the 5 Levels of Leadership is visually straightforward, so anyone can learn it.

### **It Defines *Leading* as a Verb, Not a Noun**

Leadership is a process, not a position. There was a time when people used the terms *leadership* and *management* interchangeably. I think most people now recognize that there is a significant difference between the two. Management is at its best when things stay the same.

Leadership deals with people and their dynamics, which are continually changing. The challenge of leadership is

to create change and facilitate growth. Those conditions require movement, which, as you will soon see, is inherent in moving up from one level of leadership to the next.

### **It Breaks Down Leading into Understandable Steps**

The subject of leadership can be overwhelming and confusing. Where does leadership start? What should we do first? What processes should we use? How can we gain influence with others? How can we develop a productive team? How do we help followers become leaders in their own right? The 5 Levels of Leadership gives answers to these questions using understandable steps.

### **It Provides a Clear Game Plan for Leadership Development**

Too often when people think of their journey into leadership, they envision a career path. What they should be thinking about is their own leadership development! Good leadership isn't about advancing yourself. It's about advancing your team. The 5 Levels of Leadership provides clear steps for leadership growth. Lead people well and help members of your team to become effective leaders, and a successful career path is almost guaranteed.

### **It Aligns Leadership Practices, Principles, and Values**

When I developed the 5 Levels, I conceived of each level as a practice that could be used to lead more effectively. As time went by and I used and taught the levels, I realized they were actually principles. Here's the difference: a practice is an action that may work in one situation but not necessarily in another. A principle is an external truth that is as reliable as a physical law. For example, when Solomon said, "A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger," he stated a principle that is universal and timeless. Principles are important because they function as a map, allowing us to make wise decisions. If we embrace a principle and internalize it, it becomes a part of our values. The 5 Levels influences my leadership life every day.

# How Leadership Works

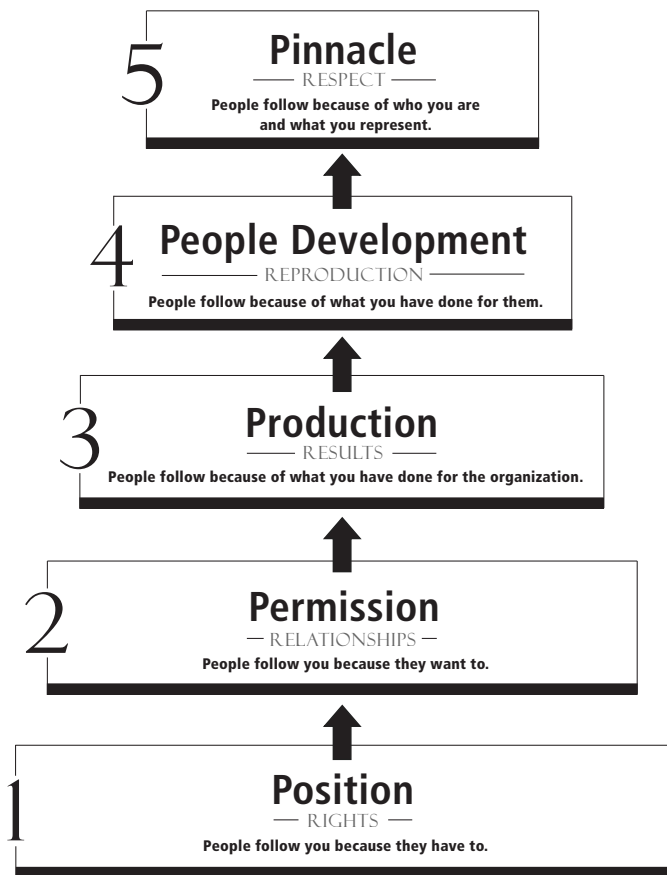
**H**ow do people learn leadership? For most, it's through trial and error. While some things come only through experience, I believe the framework for how leadership works can be learned by looking at the 5 Levels. So let's start with an overview and a few insights about the Levels and how they work. Then we can look at each level individually in the subsequent sections of this book. As you look at each level, you will learn the upside, downside, and best behaviors for that level. You will also become acquainted with the beliefs that help a leader move up to the next level.

## **Level 1—Position**

*People follow you because they have to.*

Position is the lowest level of leadership—the entry level. The only influence a positional leader has is that which comes with the job title. Positional leadership is based on the rights granted by the position and title. Nothing is wrong with having a leadership position. Everything is wrong with using position to get people to follow you. Position is a poor substitute for influence.

## 6 HOW SUCCESSFUL PEOPLE LEAD



*Overview of the 5 Levels of Leadership*

People who make it only to Level 1 may be bosses, but they are never leaders. They have subordinates, not team members. They rely on rules, regulations, policies, and organization charts to control their people. Their people will only follow them within the stated boundaries of their authority. And their people will usually do only what is required of them. When positional leaders ask for extra effort or time, they rarely get it.

Positional leaders usually have difficulty working with volunteers, younger people, and the highly educated. Why? Because positional leaders have no influence, and these types of people tend to be more independent.

Position is the only level that does not require ability and effort to achieve. Anyone can be appointed to a position.

## **Level 2—Permission**

*People follow you because they want to.*

Level 2 is based entirely on relationships. On the Permission level, people follow because they want to. When you like people and treat them as individuals who have value, you begin to develop influence with them. You develop trust. The environment becomes much more positive—whether at home, on the job, at play, or while volunteering.

The agenda for leaders on Level 2 isn't preserving their position. It's getting to know their people and figuring out how to get along with them. Leaders find out who their people are. Followers find out who their leaders are. People build solid, lasting relationships.

You can like people without leading them, but you cannot lead people well without liking them. That's what Level 2 is about.

### **Level 3—Production**

*People follow you because of what you have done for the organization.*

One of the dangers of getting to the Permission level is that a leader may be tempted to stop there. But good leaders don't just create a pleasant working environment. They get things done! That's why they must move up to Level 3, which is based on results. On the Production level, leaders gain influence and credibility, and people begin to follow them because of what they have done for the organization.

Many positive things begin happening when leaders get to Level 3. Work gets done, morale improves, profits go up, turnover goes down, and goals are achieved. It is also on Level 3 that momentum kicks in.

Leading and influencing others becomes fun on this level. Success and productivity have been known to solve a lot of problems.

On Level 3, leaders can become change agents. They can tackle tough problems and face thorny issues. They can make the difficult decisions that will make a difference. They can take their people to another level of effectiveness.

### **Level 4—People Development**

*People follow you because of what you have done for them.*

Leaders become great not because of their power but because of their ability to empower others. That is what leaders do on Level 4. They use their position, relationships, and productivity to invest in their followers and develop them until those followers become leaders in their own right. The result is reproduction; Level 4 leaders reproduce themselves.

Production may win games, but People Development wins championships. Two things always happen on Level 4. First, teamwork goes to a very high level because the high investment in people deepens relationships, helps people to know one another better, and strengthens loyalty. Second, performance increases because there are more leaders on the team, and they help to improve everybody's performance.

Level 4 leaders change the lives of the people they lead, and the people follow them because of that. Their relationships are often lifelong.

### **Level 5—Pinnacle**

*People follow you because of who you are  
and what you represent.*

The highest and most difficult level of leadership is the Pinnacle. While most people can learn to climb to Levels 1 through 4, Level 5 requires not only effort, skill, and intentionality but also a high level of talent. Only naturally gifted

leaders ever make it to this highest level. Level 5 leaders develop people to become Level 4 leaders.

Developing leaders to the point where they are able and willing to develop other leaders is the most difficult leadership task of all. But here are the payoffs: Level 5 leaders develop Level 5 organizations. They create opportunities that other leaders don't. Their leadership gains a positive reputation. They create legacy in what they do. As a result, Level 5 leaders often transcend their position, their organization, and sometimes their industry.

# Insights on Leading from the Levels

If you want to become an effective leader and lead the way successful people do, then you must master the 5 Levels of Leadership. You must learn to recognize where you stand with each person in regard to the Levels, work to establish your credibility and gain influence where you are, and earn your way up to higher levels. If you learn this and live it day after day, you will be able to lead the way successful people do.

Now that you are acquainted with the Levels and how influence is gained on each, I want to share some insights that will help you to understand how the Levels relate to one another.

## **1. You Can Move Up a Level but You Never Leave the Previous One Behind**

You may assume that a leader climbs the Levels, leaving one to arrive at the next, the way a person moves up a staircase. But the truth is that you never leave a level behind after you've achieved it. Instead, you simply build upon it. If you think about it for a moment, you'll agree that it makes sense.

If you start out with a leadership position and you build relationships with the people you oversee, do you resign your position to do so? No. You don't leave your position to advance, but if you win Level 2 correctly, you never need to rely on your position again.

Once you've built relationships with people and move to a higher level of productivity, do you abandon or neglect those relationships? You had better not! If you do, you'll find yourself back down at Level 1 again.

Leaders don't trade one level for another. They add a new level to the previous one. It is a building process.

## **2. You Are Not on the Same Level with Every Person**

Leadership is dynamic, and it changes from relationship to relationship. The same is true for the 5 Levels of Leadership. I may be on a different one of the 5 Levels with each of five different people at my job. A person on his or her first day at work will acknowledge only my position, while someone in whom I've invested and whom I've raised up to lead will likely put me on Level 4. If I've been a good father at home, I may be on Level 4 with my children. If I've been an absentee dad, I may be on Level 1. With my next-door neighbor, perhaps I'm on Level 2. People will respond to you based on the level of leadership you've established with them. And that is subject to change.

Good leaders do not lead everyone the same way, because every person is different and you're not on the same level of

leadership with every person. Effective leaders interact with followers based on:

- Where they are with each specific follower,
- Where the followers perceive the leader to be, and
- Where the followers are in their own leadership development.

Each of these factors comes into play as you evaluate your leadership and work to develop it.

Achieving a level of leadership is not like earning a degree. Nor is it like setting a performance record as an athlete. You don't achieve it and leave it. It's more like having to run a race every day to prove your ability. The lone exception is the Pinnacle. Leaders who rise to Level 5 are sometimes given credit for being on that level by virtue of their reputation, not just their personal interactions with followers. But it's important to note that at any level, a leader doesn't always automatically stay at that level. You must earn your level of leadership with each person, and that level can go up or down at any time.

### **3. The Higher You Go, the Easier It Is to Lead Others**

Here's some good news. As you work to climb up the levels of leadership, you'll find that it gets easier to lead people. Each advance allows you to be more effective in leading others because your influence increases as you go to a higher level. As your influence increases, more people follow you more

readily. Limited influence, limited leadership. Greater influence, greater effectiveness. That's common sense. However, there's also some bad news: it's not easy to climb the levels of leadership! If it were easy, everyone would be a Level 5 leader.

#### **4. The Higher You Go, the More Time and Commitment Is Required to Win a Level**

There is no easy way to get to the top. You have to be more committed, you have to give more, you have to use more energy, each time you want to go up a level. And so do your people. Nobody achieves anything great by giving the minimum. No teams win championships without making sacrifices and giving their best.

#### **5. Moving Up Occurs Slowly, But Going Down Can Happen Quickly**

Building always takes a lot longer than destroying. A lot of things have to be right before you can climb to a higher level, but sometimes it takes only one thing going wrong to cause someone to fall. For example, think about how long it takes to build a great relationship with a person. But if you do something to lose trust with that person, the relationship can become permanently broken in the blink of an eye.

While it's unsettling to think about how quickly one can fall from a level of leadership, I hope you can take solace in this: once you've climbed up to higher levels, the levels below you function as a safety net. So the more you've advanced up the levels, the more secure your leadership is. For example, if

you make some bad decisions on Level 3 that ruin your productivity or that of the team, the relationships you've developed may save you from being fired. The only level without a safety net is the lowest one: Position. You don't get too many chances to make mistakes on that level. That's another good reason to work your way up the levels of leadership.

## **6. The Higher You Go, the Greater the Return**

You may give more to climb to higher levels of leadership, but you get more, too. As a leader, you reap a greater return on your investment with each level you reach. On Level 2, you earn trust and the right to lead. On Level 3, you add to the productivity of the organization. On Level 4, you multiply that productivity because every time you add another leader to an organization, you add all the horsepower of that leader's team. On Level 5, the growth and productivity become exponential as you add leaders to the organization who not only lead others but also create generations of leaders who keep on producing.

The better the leaders are in an organization, the better everyone in the organization becomes. When productivity is high, chemistry is good, morale is high, and momentum is strong, then the payoffs increase.

## **7. Moving Farther Up Always Requires Further Growth**

Each time a leader moves up to a higher level of leadership, greater skill is required. For that reason, each step of growth requires further development on the part of the leader. But

that growth also functions as a platform from which a leader can grow into the next.

Here's how this works. To grow to a new level, leaders take risks. At the lower levels, the risks are smaller and more easily won. For example, to make the climb from Level 1 to Level 2, leaders risk initiating relationships. When leaders get to higher levels, the risks get bigger. For example, on Level 3, leaders may rally the team to try to accomplish a lofty goal, only to fail; that could cost the leader credibility, stop momentum, and demotivate team members. But here's the good news: Every risk at a higher level is a natural extension of the skills that leaders have by then developed. Outsiders might look at a leader and say, "Wow, he really stepped out and took a big risk." But those observers may not see the growth that has occurred in the leader. By the time the next risk must be undertaken, the leader has grown into it.

Growing as a leader requires a combination of intentional growth and leadership experience. If people rely only on experience without intentionally learning and preparing for the next level, they won't progress as leaders. On the other hand, if they only prepare mentally yet obtain no experience through risk and reward, and trial and error, then they still won't progress. It takes both—plus some amount of talent. But you have no control over how much talent you possess. You control only what you do with it.

If you possess a natural gift for leadership, you probably have a passion for growth. You like to see things build. It's part of your wiring. Go with it. If you have a more modest

amount of talent, don't lose hope. You can make up for a lot by becoming a highly intentional student of leadership, thereby making the most of every opportunity. Either way, remember that success at any level helps you to be successful at every level. So work hard to win the level you're working toward now. It will prepare you for the future.

### **8. Not Climbing the Levels Limits You and Your People**

The Law of the Lid in *The 21 Irrefutable Laws of Leadership* states, "Leadership ability determines a person's level of effectiveness." In short, your effectiveness in getting things done and your ability to work through others is always limited by your leadership ability. If your leadership "score" is 4 out of 10, then your effectiveness will be no higher than a 4. Additionally, the Law of Respect says, "People naturally follow leaders stronger than themselves." That means that if you remain a 4, then you will never attract and keep any leaders better than a 3!

One of the burdens of leadership is that as we go, so go the people we lead. Reaching our potential sets an environment for others to reach theirs. When leaders stop climbing, two questions need to be asked: "Can they improve?" and "Will they improve?" Some people can't; they've reached their limit. Others won't. Capacity is not the problem: choice and attitude are. If people are willing to choose improvement and change their attitude, the sky is the limit.

Your leadership ability today is whatever it is. You can't

change the past. However, you can change the future. You have a choice concerning your leadership ability from this day forward. If you learn to climb the Levels of Leadership, your leadership ability will improve. And that will positively impact your overall leadership capacity. However, if you choose not to grow as a leader, you better get used to being wherever you currently are, because your situation isn't likely to improve.

### **9. When You Change Positions or Organizations, You Seldom Stay at the Same Level**

Every time you lead a new person, you start the process over again. People don't recognize you as a Level 4, a People Developer, if you haven't worked with them. You have to earn that. The same goes for Levels 3 and 2. You start over at Level 1. However, there is good news. If you reached Level 4 with some other group of people, you already know how to get there. And because you've done it before, you can move up the levels much more quickly than the previous time.

Each time you go through the process with a new group of people, you become even more skilled at it. And after you've done it enough times, you won't be discouraged by the prospect of having to repeat it with others. Positional leaders are reluctant to have to start over. Because they think of leadership as a destination instead of a process—a noun instead of a verb—they want to hold onto what they have. Their hope is to do it once and be done. Good leaders are

willing to re-earn their way back into leadership because they understand that the leadership life will almost always require them to start again at the bottom more than once.

### **10. You Cannot Climb the Levels Alone**

One of my favorite sayings is, “If you think you’re leading but no one is following, then you are only taking a walk.” That thought captures the true nature of leadership and also expresses the most important insight about the 5 Levels of Leadership. To succeed as a leader, you must help others follow you up the levels. The entire process includes other people and focuses on helping them.

I believe every person has the ability to improve in leadership. Becoming a successful leader isn’t a mystical subject. It can be approached very practically, and everyone has the potential to move up to a higher level of leadership.

What is your potential? Do you have the capacity and the desire to become a Level 3, 4, or 5 leader? There’s only one way to find out. Accept the leadership challenge, give growth your best effort, and dive into leadership. If you’re willing to pick up the gauntlet, you’ll never regret it, because there is no better way to increase your positive impact on the world and add value to others than to increase your leadership ability.

I believe this book, with its guides for growth at each level, will help you navigate the process and help you climb. So good reading, good growing, and, as my friend Zig Ziglar says, “I’ll see you at the top.”

Copyright © 2013 by John C. Maxwell

All rights reserved. In accordance with the U.S. Copyright Act of 1976, the scanning, uploading, and electronic sharing of any part of this book without the permission of the publisher is unlawful piracy and theft of the author's intellectual property. If you would like to use material from the book (other than for review purposes), prior written permission must be obtained by contacting the publisher at [permissions@hbgusa.com](mailto:permissions@hbgusa.com). Thank you for your support of the author's rights.

The author is represented by Yates & Yates, LLP,

Literary Agency, Orange, California.

Originally Published as *The 5 Levels of Leadership* by Center Street, 2011.

Diagram of the 5 Levels of Leadership designed by Alex Watson

Scripture taken from the New King James Version (NKJV)

Copyright © 1982 by Thomas Nelson, Inc. Used by permission.

All rights reserved

Scripture taken from the New American Standard Bible® (NASB),

Copyright © 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1995 by  
The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission.

Center Street  
Hachette Book Group  
1290 Avenue of the Americas  
New York, NY 10104  
[www.CenterStreet.com](http://www.CenterStreet.com)

Printed in the United States of America

RRD-C

First edition: May 2013

15 14 13 12 11 10 9 8 7 6

Center Street is a division of Hachette Book Group, Inc.

The Center Street name and logo are trademarks of Hachette Book Group, Inc.

The Hachette Speakers Bureau provides a wide range of authors for speaking events. To find out more, go to [www.HachetteSpeakersBureau.com](http://www.HachetteSpeakersBureau.com) or call (866) 376-6591.

The publisher is not responsible for websites (or their content) that are not owned by the publisher.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Maxwell, John C., 1947–

How successful people lead : taking your influence to the next level / John C.

Maxwell.—First Edition.

pages cm

Includes index.

ISBN 978-1-59995-362-5 (hbk.)—ISBN 978-1-4555-4545-2 (large print : hbk.)—

ISBN 978-1-4555-7383-7 (ebk.) 1. Leadership. 2. Leadership—Social aspects. I. Title.

HD57.7.M394258 2013

658.4'092—dc23

2012040800