

From:

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Leadership Gold

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THE TOUGHEST PERSON TO LEAD IS ALWAYS YOURSELF

During a Q&A session at a conference, someone asked, “What has been your greatest challenge as a leader?” I think my response surprised nearly everyone in the auditorium.

“Leading me!” I answered. “That’s always been my greatest challenge as a leader.”

I think that’s true for all leaders regardless of who they lead and what they accomplish. We sometimes think about accomplished leaders from history and assume that they had it all together. But if we really examine their lives, whether we’re looking at King David, George Washington, or Winston Churchill, we’ll see that they struggled to lead themselves well. That’s why I say that the toughest person to lead is always yourself. It’s like Walt Kelly exclaimed in his *Pogo* cartoon strip: “We have met the enemy and he is us.”¹

Acknowledging that leading myself is a challenge brings back some painful memories. Many of my leadership breakdowns have been personal breakdowns. In a leadership career that has spanned almost four decades, I’ve made plenty of mistakes, but I have experienced only four major leadership crises. And I’m sorry to say that all of them were my fault.

The first occurred in 1970, just two years into my first official leadership position. After two years of work, I had won over many people and there was a lot going on. However, one day I realized that my organization had no direction. Why? Because I lacked the ability to prioritize correctly and bring focus to my leadership. As a young leader, I didn't yet understand that activity does not necessarily equal accomplishment. As a result, my people, following my example, were wandering in the wilderness for sixteen months. In the end, I didn't really lead them anywhere.

The next crisis came in 1979. At that time I felt pulled in two directions. I had been successful in my second leadership position, but I also realized that if I was going to reach a broader audience, which I felt was the right thing to try to do, I would have to leave the organization I had been a part of for the first twelve years of my career. My uncertainty and the personal changes that I was dealing with negatively impacted the organization

I led. I became unfocused, and my vision for the organization became cloudy. My passion and energy also began to wane. Leaders who aren't focused aren't as effective as they could be. As a result, we weren't moving forward as effectively as we could.

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The third occurred in 1991 when I was overloaded with work and my life was out of balance.

Because I had been leading my organization successfully for ten years, I thought I could take a few shortcuts to make things easier for me. I made three difficult decisions in rapid succession without doing proper due diligence or taking the time needed to process everyone through them. What a mistake! As a result, the people were not prepared for the decisions—and I was unprepared for their response. The trust that it had taken me ten years to build began to erode. To make matters worse, when the people who questioned my decisions balked at following my lead, I became increasingly impatient. I angrily thought, *What is their problem? Why don't they "get it" and get on with it?* Within a few weeks, I realized that the problem wasn't them. It was me. I ended up having to apologize to everyone for my attitude.

The fourth occurred in 2001 and involved a staff member whom I

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needed to let go. I'll tell you more about that in "A Leader's First Responsibility Is to Define Reality." The bottom line was that my unwillingness to make difficult decisions cost me many dollars and some key personnel. Once again, I was the source of the problem.

JUDGE FOR YOURSELF

If we are honest with ourselves, we'll admit that the toughest person to lead is ourselves. Most people don't need to worry about the competition. Other people aren't the reason they lose. If they don't win, it's because they disqualify themselves.

That's as true for leaders as it is for anyone else. They are often their own worst enemies. Why is that?

We Don't See Ourselves as We See Others

My years counseling others taught me something important: people seldom see themselves realistically. Human nature seems to endow us with the ability to size up everybody in the world except ourselves. That's why in my book *Winning with People* I start with the Mirror Principle, which advises, "The First Person We Must Examine Is Ourselves." If you don't look at yourself realistically, you will never understand where your personal difficulties lie. And if you can't see them, you won't be able to lead yourself effectively.

We Are Harder on Others Than We Are on Ourselves

Most people use two totally different sets of criteria for judging themselves versus others. We tend to judge others according to their *actions*. It's very cut-and-dried. However, we judge ourselves by our *intentions*. Even if we do the wrong thing, if we believe our motives were good, we let ourselves off the hook. And we are often willing to do that over and over before requiring ourselves to change.

KEYS TO LEADING YOURSELF

The truth is that to be successful in any endeavor, we need to learn how to get out of our own way. That's as true for leaders as it is for anyone else.

Because I have known for many years that the toughest person to lead is me, I have taken steps to help me do that. By practicing the following four things, I have tried to lead myself well as a prerequisite to leading others:

1. Learn Followership

Bishop Fulton J. Sheen remarked, "Civilization is always in danger when those who have never learned to obey are given the right to command." Only a leader who has followed well knows how to lead others well. Good leadership requires an understanding of the world that followers live in. Connecting with your people becomes possible because you have

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walked in their shoes. You know what it means to be under authority and thus have a better sense of how authority should be exercised. In contrast, leaders who have never followed well or submitted to authority tend to be prideful, unrealistic, rigid, and autocratic.

If those words describe your leadership, you need to do some soul searching. Arrogant leaders are rarely effective in the long run.

They alienate their followers, their colleagues, and their leaders. Learn to submit to another person's leadership and to follow well, and you will become a more humble—and effective—leader.

2. Develop Self-Discipline

It's said that one day Frederick the Great of Prussia was walking on the outskirts of Berlin when he encountered a very old man walking ramrod straight in the opposite direction.

"Who are you?" Frederick asked his subject.

"I am a king," replied the old man.

"A king!" laughed Frederick. "Over what kingdom do you reign?"

"Over myself," was the proud old man's reply.

Each of us is "monarch" of our own lives. We are responsible for ruling our actions and decisions. To make consistently good decisions, to take the right action when needed, and to refrain from the wrong actions requires character and self-discipline. To do otherwise is to lose control of ourselves—

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to do or say things we regret, to miss opportunities we are given, to spend ourselves into debt. As King Solomon remarked, “The rich rule over the poor, and the borrower is servant to the lender.”²

In “Decision of Character,” British essayist John Foster writes, “A man without decision of character can never be said to belong to himself. He belongs to whatever can make a captive of him.” When we are foolish, we want to conquer the world. When we are wise, we want to conquer ourselves. That begins when we do what we should no matter how we feel about it.

3. Practice Patience

The leaders I know tend to be impatient. They look ahead, think ahead, and want to move ahead. And that can be good. Being one step ahead makes you a leader. However, that can also be bad. Being fifty steps ahead could make you a martyr.

Few worthwhile things in life come quickly. There is no such thing as instant greatness or instant maturity. We are used to instant oatmeal, instant coffee, and microwave popcorn. But becoming a leader doesn’t happen overnight. Microwave leaders don’t have any staying power. Leadership is more of a Crock-Pot proposition. It takes time, but the end product is worth the wait.

Leaders need to remember that the point of leading is not to cross the finish line first. It’s to take people across the finish line with you. For that reason, leaders must deliberately slow their pace, stay connected to their people, enlist others to help fulfill the vision, and keep people going. You can’t do that if you’re running too far ahead of your people.

4. Seek Accountability

People who lead themselves well know a secret: they can’t trust themselves. Good leaders know that power can be seductive, and they understand their own fallibility. To be a leader and deny this is to put yourself in danger.

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Over the years, I've read about many leaders who failed ethically in their leadership. Can you guess what they had in common? They all thought it could never happen to them. There was a false sense of security. They thought they were incapable of ruining their lives and the lives of others.

Learning that was very sobering to me, because I shared the same attitude. I thought I was above such possibilities, and that scared me. At that moment, I made two decisions: First, I will not trust myself. Second, I will become accountable to someone other than myself. I believe those decisions have helped to keep me on track and able to lead myself and others.

“When you see a good man, think of emulating him; when you see a bad man, examine your heart.”
—Chinese proverb

Lack of accountability in our personal life will certainly lead to problems in our public life. We saw that time and time again with high-profile CEOs a few years ago. A Chinese proverb says, “When you see a good man, think of emulating him; when you see a bad man, examine your heart.”

Many people feel that accountability is a willingness to explain your actions. I believe that effective accountability begins way before we take action. It starts with getting advice from others. For leaders especially, this often develops in stages:

- We don't want advice.
- We don't object to advice.
- We welcome advice.
- We actively seek advice.
- We often follow the advice given to us.

The willingness to seek and accept advice is a great indicator of accountability. If you seek it early—before you take action—you will be less likely to get off track. Most wrong actions come about because people are not being held accountable early enough.

Leading yourself well means that you hold yourself to a higher standard of accountability than others do. Why? Because you are held responsible not only for your own actions, but also for those of the people you lead. Leadership is a trust, not a right. For that reason, we must “fix” ourselves earlier than others may be required to. We must always seek to do what’s right, no matter how high we rise or how powerful we become. It’s a struggle we never outgrow. When Harry Truman was thrust into the presidency upon the death of Franklin Roosevelt, Sam Rayburn gave him some fatherly advice: “From here on out you’re going to have lots of people around you. They’ll try to put a wall around you and cut you off from any ideas but theirs. They’ll tell you what a great man you are, Harry. But you and I both know you ain’t.”

Yesterday I participated in a conference call with board members of an organization who had to step in and hold a leader accountable for wrong actions he had taken. It was a sad experience. He will probably lose his leadership position. He has already lost their respect. If he had only led himself effectively first, the board’s actions would not have been necessary. After the call I thought to myself, *When the leader doesn’t inspect himself, the people don’t respect him.*

Thomas J. Watson, the former chairman of IBM, said, “Nothing so conclusively proves a man’s ability to lead others, as what he does from day to day to lead himself.” How true. The smallest crowd you will ever lead is you—but it’s the most important one. If you do that well, then you will earn the right to lead even bigger crowds.

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To see a video clip of John Maxwell teaching more on this leadership principle and to access additional helpful tools and information, visit www.johnmaxwell.com/leadershipgold.

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APPLICATION EXERCISES

1. How clearly do you see yourself? To get a more objective look at yourself, review your performance from the last year. List all of your major goals and objectives and then mark each as either “achieved” or “not achieved.” Now talk to someone you know and respect and tell them you are evaluating a candidate for a job, and show them the list. Ask them what they think based on the “candidate’s” achievements and failures. How does that person’s evaluation jibe with your own?

2. Where do you need to grow? In which of the following areas do you most need to grow: self-discipline, “followership,” or patience? What new task or practice can you take on to develop it? Maybe you should set a recreational goal that will require at least a year’s work, or put off buying something you’ve wanted for a long time. Perhaps you should offer to do a task for a leader whom you find difficult to follow. Or you could consider volunteering; it requires patience, followership, and self-discipline.

3. How well do you take advice? Ask five to ten friends, colleagues, and family members to evaluate you using the levels mentioned in the chapter. Each of the following is worth the number beside it:

1. You don’t want advice.
2. You don’t object to advice.
3. You welcome advice.
4. You actively seek advice.
5. You often follow the advice given to you.

Average their scores. If your average is below a 4, you need to improve in this area. Begin enlisting others in your information-gathering process before you make decisions. If you are married, begin with your spouse.



MENTORING MOMENT

Have a very frank conversation with each of the people you mentor explaining how they're doing when it comes to leading themselves. Provide specific examples to illustrate your point of view. Then assist those who need to grow in this area by giving them assignments that will help them show initiative and become more responsible. Meet with them periodically to provide accountability in this area.