

From:

**The 21 Indispensable Qualities of a Leader
By John Maxwell**

C H A R A C T E R :

B E A P I E C E O F T H E R O C K

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

—*Bernard Montgomery,*
British Field Marshal

Never “for the sake of peace and quiet”
deny your own experience or convictions.

—*Dag Hammarskjöld,*
Statesman and Nobel Peace Prize Winner

PUTTING IT ALL ON THE LINE

If you've traveled through smaller airports or have much experience flying in corporate aircraft, you've probably seen or flown in a Lear Jet. I've had the opportunity to fly in one a couple of times, and it's quite an experience. They're small—capable of carrying only five or six passengers—and very fast. It's like climbing into a narrow tube with jet engines strapped to it.

I have to admit, the whole experience of riding in a Lear Jet is pretty exhilarating. But by far the most amazing thing to me about it is the time it saves. I've traveled literally millions of miles on airlines, and I'm accustomed to long drives to airports, car rental returns, shuttles, terminal congestion, and seemingly endless delays. It can be a nightmare. Flying on a Lear Jet can easily cut travel time in half.

The father of this amazing airplane was a man named Bill Lear. An inventor, aviator, and business leader, Lear held more than 150 patents, including those of the automatic pilot, car radio, and eight-track tapes (you can't win them all). Lear was a pioneer in his thinking, and in the 1950s, he could see the potential for the manufacture of small corporate jets. It took him several years to make his dream a reality, but in 1963, the first Lear Jet made its maiden voyage, and in 1964 he delivered his first production jet to a client.

Lear's success was immediate, and he quickly sold many aircraft. But not long after he got his start, Lear learned that two aircraft he'd built had crashed under mysterious circumstances. He was devastated. At that time, fifty-five Lear Jets were privately owned, and

Lear immediately sent word to all of the owners to ground their planes until he and his team could determine what had caused the crashes. The thought that more lives might be lost was far more important to him than any adverse publicity that action might generate in the media.

As he researched the ill-fated flights, Lear discovered a potential cause, but he couldn't verify the technical problem on the ground. There was only one sure way to find out whether he had diagnosed the problem correctly. He would have to try to recreate it personally—in the air.

It was a dangerous process, but that's what he did. As he flew the jet, he nearly lost control and almost met the same fate as the other two pilots. But he did manage to make it through the tests, and he was able to verify the defect. Lear developed a new part to correct the problem and fitted all fifty-five planes with it, eliminating the danger.

Grounding the planes cost Lear a lot of money. And it planted seeds of doubt in the minds of potential customers. As a result, he needed two years to rebuild the business. But Lear never regretted his decision. He was willing to risk his success, his fortune, and even his life to solve the mystery of those crashes—but not his integrity. And that takes character.

F L E S H I N G I T O U T

How a leader deals with the circumstances of life tells you many things about his character. Crisis doesn't necessarily make

character, but it certainly does reveal it. Adversity is a crossroads that makes a person choose one of two paths: character or compromise. Every time he chooses character, he becomes stronger, even if that choice brings negative consequences. As Nobel prize-winning author Alexander Solzhenitsyn noted, “The meaning of earthly existing lies, not as we have grown used to thinking, in prospering, but in the development of the soul.” The development of character is at the heart of our development not just as leaders, but as human beings.

What must every person know about character?

1. Character Is More than Talk

Anyone can say that he has integrity, but action is the real indicator of character. Your character determines who you are. Who you are determines what you see. What you see determines what you do. That’s why you can never separate a leader’s character from his actions. If a leader’s actions and intentions are continually working against each other, then look to his character to find out why.

2. Talent Is a Gift, but Character Is a Choice

We have no control over a lot of things in life. We don’t get to choose our parents. We don’t select the location or circumstances of our birth and upbringing. We don’t get to pick our talents or IQ. But we do choose our character. In fact, we create it every time we make choices—to cop out or dig out of a hard situation, to bend the truth or stand under the weight of it, to take

the easy money or pay the price. As you live your life and make choices today, you are continuing to create your character.

3. Character Brings Lasting Success with People

True leadership always involves other people. (As the leadership proverb says, if you think you're leading and no one is following you, then you're only taking a walk.) Followers do not trust leaders whose character they know to be flawed, and they will not continue following them.

4. Leaders Cannot Rise Above the Limitations of Their Character

Have you ever seen highly talented people suddenly fall apart when they achieved a certain level of success? The key to that phenomenon is character. Steven Berglas, a psychologist at Harvard Medical School and author of *The Success Syndrome*, says that people who achieve great heights but lack the bedrock character to sustain them through the stress are headed for disaster. He believes they are destined for one or more of the four A's: *arrogance*, painful feelings of *aloneness*, destructive *adventure-seeking*, or *adultery*. Each is a terrible price to pay for weak character.

REFLECTING ON IT

If you've found yourself being sucked in by one of the four A's that Berglas identifies, call a time-out. Do what you must to step

away from some of the stress of your success, and seek professional help. Don't think that the valley you're in will pass with time, more money, or increased prestige. Unaddressed cracks in character only get deeper and more destructive with time.

If you're not struggling in any of these four areas, you should still examine the condition of your character. Ask yourself whether your words and actions match—all the time. When you say you'll finish an assignment, do you always follow through? If you tell your children that you'll make it to their recital or ball game, are you there for it? Can people trust your handshake as they would a legal contract?

As you lead others at home, at work, and in the community, recognize that your character is your most important asset. G. Alan Bernard, president of Mid Park, Inc., stated, "The respect that leadership must have requires that one's ethics be without question. A leader not only stays above the line between right and wrong, he stays well clear of the 'gray areas.'"

BRINGING IT HOME

To improve your character, do the following:

- *Search for the cracks.* Spend some time looking at the major areas of your life (work, marriage, family, service, etc.), and identify anywhere you might have cut corners, compromised, or let people down. Write down every instance you can recall from the past two months.

- *Look for patterns.* Examine the responses that you just wrote down. Is there a particular area where you have a weakness, or do you have a type of problem that keeps surfacing? Detectable patterns will help you diagnose character issues.
- *Face the music.* The beginning of character repair comes when you face your flaws, apologize, and deal with the consequences of your actions. Create a list of people to whom you need to apologize for your actions, then follow through with sincere apologies.
- *Rebuild.* It's one thing to face up to your past actions. It's another to build a new future. Now that you've identified any areas of weakness, create a plan that will prevent you from making the same mistakes again.

D A I L Y T A K E - A W A Y

A man took his young daughter to a carnival, and she immediately ran over to a booth and asked for cotton candy. As the attendant handed her a huge ball of it, the father asked, "Sweetheart, are you sure you can eat all that?"

"Don't worry, Dad," she answered, "I'm a lot bigger on the inside than on the outside."

That's what real character is—being bigger on the inside.