

From:

The 21 Indispensable Qualities of a Leader

By John Maxwell

C O M P E T E N C E :

I F Y O U B U I L D I T , T H E Y W I L L C O M E

Competence goes beyond words.

It's the leader's ability to say it, plan it, and do it
in such a way that others know that you know how—
and know that they want to follow you.

—*John C. Maxwell*

The society which scorns excellence in plumbing
because plumbing is a humble activity and tolerates
shoddiness in philosophy because it is an exalted activity
will have neither good plumbing nor good philosophy.

Neither its pipes nor its theories will hold water.

—*John Gardner, Author*

FANFARE FOR A COMMON MAN

Benjamin Franklin always thought of himself as an ordinary citizen. One of seventeen children, Franklin was the son of a tradesman, a candlemaker, who was far from wealthy. He experienced a typical childhood. He attended school for only two years, and at age twelve, he was apprenticed to his brother in the printing trade.

Franklin worked hard and lived a simple life, governing his actions according to a set of thirteen virtues, upon which he graded himself daily. At age twenty he started his own printing business. Had Franklin been content to work at his trade, his name would be little more than a footnote in Philadelphia's history. Yet he lived an extraordinary life. He was one of the fathers of American independence and a great leader of the emerging nation. He coauthored the Declaration of Independence, and he later helped write the Treaty of Paris and the Constitution of the United States. (He was the only man who signed all three.) And he was selected to perform a difficult and dangerous secret diplomatic mission to Paris during the war to secure military and financial support for the Revolution.

What gave a northern tradesman the opportunity to exert so much influence among the wealthy, predominately southern landholders who headed the war for independence? I believe it was Franklin's incredible competence.

Benjamin Franklin excelled at everything he touched for seven decades. When he started his own printing business in 1726, people believed Philadelphia could not support a third

printer, but Franklin quickly established a reputation as the most skilled and industrious printer in town. But the Philadelphia tradesman wasn't content with only that accomplishment.

Franklin's mind was curious, and he continually sought ways to improve himself and others. He expanded into publishing, his work including the noted *Poor Richard's Almanack*. He did extensive experiments with electricity and coined many of the terms still associated with its use. He invented numerous items such as the potbellied stove, the catheter, and bifocals. And when he traveled frequently across the Atlantic Ocean, he took it upon himself to chart the Gulf Stream. His attitude toward life could be seen in an aphorism he wrote for his almanac: "Hide not your talents. They for use were made. What's a sundial in the shade?"

The evidences of Franklin's talents were many. He helped establish Philadelphia's first library. He started the nation's first fire department. He developed the concept of daylight saving time. And he held many posts serving the government.

For the most part, Franklin was recognized for his ability. But sometimes he had to let his competence speak for itself. During a time when he was working on improvements in agriculture, he discovered that plaster made grains and grasses grow better, but he had a difficult time convincing his neighbors about the discovery. His solution? When spring arrived, he went to a field close to a path, dug out some letters into the dirt with his hands, put plaster into the ruts, and then sowed seed over the whole area. As people passed that way in following weeks, they could

see green letters growing brighter than the rest of the field. They said simply, “This has been plastered.” People got the message.

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

We all admire people who display high competence, whether they are precision craftsmen, world-class athletes, or successful business leaders. But the truth is that you don’t have to be Fabergé, Michael Jordan, or Bill Gates to excel in the area of competence. If you want to cultivate that quality, here’s what you need to do.

1. Show Up Every Day

There’s a saying, “All things come to him who waits.” Unfortunately sometimes it’s just the leftovers from the people who got there first. Responsible people show up when they’re expected. But highly competent people take it a step farther. They don’t show up in body only. They come ready to play every day—no matter how they feel, what kind of circumstances they face, or how difficult they expect the game to be.

2. Keep Improving

Like Benjamin Franklin, all highly competent people continually search for ways to keep learning, growing, and improving. They do that by asking *why*. After all, the person who knows *how* will always have a job, but the person who knows *why* will always be the boss.

3. *Follow Through with Excellence*

I've never met a person I considered competent who didn't follow through. I bet it's the same for you. Willa A. Foster remarked, "Quality is never an accident; it is always the result of high intention, sincere effort, intelligent direction and skillful execution; it represents the wise choice of many alternatives."

Performing at a high level of excellence is always a choice, an act of the will. As leaders, we expect our people to follow through when we hand them the ball. They expect that and a whole lot more from us as their leaders.

4. *Accomplish More than Expected*

Highly competent people always go the extra mile. For them, good enough is never good enough. In *Men in Mid-Life Crisis*, Jim Conway writes that some people feel "a weakening of the need to be a great man and an increasing feeling of 'let's just get through this the best way we can.' Never mind hitting home runs. Let's just get through the ball game without getting beamed." Leaders cannot afford to have that kind of attitude. They need to do the job, and then some, day in and day out.

5. *Inspire Others*

Highly competent leaders do more than perform at a high level. They inspire and motivate their people to do the same. While some people rely on relational skills alone to survive, effective leaders combine these skills with high competence to take their organizations to new levels of excellence and influence.

R E F L E C T I N G O N I T

Where do you stand when it comes to getting the job done? Do you attack everything you do with fervor and perform at the highest level possible? Or is good enough sometimes good enough for you?

When you think about people who are competent, you're really considering only three types of people:

1. Those who can see what needs to happen.
2. Those who can make it happen.
3. Those who can make things happen when it really counts.

When it comes to your profession, where do you consistently perform? Are you a thinker, a doer, or a clutch player? The better you are, the greater potential for influence you will have with your people.

B R I N G I N G I T H O M E

To improve your competence, do the following:

- *Get your head in the game.* If you've been mentally or emotionally detached from your work, it's time to reengage. First, rededicate yourself to your job. Determine to give it an appropriate amount of your undivided attention. Second,

figure out why you have been detached. Do you need new challenges? Are you in conflict with your boss or coworkers? Are you in a dead-end job? Identify the source of the problem, and create a plan to resolve it.

- *Redefine the standard.* If you're not performing at a consistently high level, reexamine your standards. Are you shooting too low? Do you cut corners? If so, hit your mental reset button, and outline more demanding expectations for yourself.
- *Find three ways to improve.* Nobody keeps improving without being intentional about it. Do a little research to find three things you can do to improve your professional skills. Then dedicate the time and money to follow through on them.

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

I read an editorial in *Texas Business* not long ago that said, "We are truly the lost generation, huffing and puffing down the fast track to nowhere, always looking to the dollar sign for direction. That's the only standard we recognize. We have no built-in beliefs, no ethical boundaries."

You're only as good as your private standards. When was the last time you gave a task your absolute best even though nobody but you would know about it?