

2012

The 5 Levels of Leadership: Proven Steps to Maximize Your Potential [review] / Maxwell, John C.

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Recommended Citation

Theiss, Christiane E. (2012) "The 5 Levels of Leadership: Proven Steps to Maximize Your Potential [review] / Maxwell, John C.," *Journal of Applied Christian Leadership*: Vol. 6: No. 2, 136-138.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/jacl/vol6/iss2/14>

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the job, then leaders must be trained to empower their employees, from the workers on the assembly line up through top executives, to identify problems and come up with corrective actions. Should Christian leaders not do the same with their employees?

The Toyota methods of leadership seek to create an environment of responsibility for continuous improvement and accountability. Similarly, Christian leaders are called to strive for Christ-like excellence, not to be satisfied with the status quo. Continuous improvement—whether measured in increasing church membership, student enrollment, funds raised, or employee morale—is a relevant issue even in Christian organizations. Is it too much for Christian leaders to expect the best from those they lead? Accountability, when used properly, is an amazing tool that the leader can use to encourage followers down a path to continuous improvement.

The authors wrap up the book by giving readers clear steps to create a Toyota environment within their company or within themselves. Leaders will find helpful suggestions such as seeking a good *sensei* (a “mentor”), working on what they can control (not only what they wish they could control), and implementing the following concept: “Try. Then reflect. Then try some more.” This mindset of incremental experimentation reveals an attitude of striving to become the best leader one can be. Interestingly, the authors recommend even to leave a company if going somewhere else creates a better fit and a chance to be a better leader. Christian leaders can relate to the concept of fitting gifts and experience to challenges. While God often leads a leader in answer to prayer into specific work contexts, He prepares leaders through their inner

growth journey for ever-more-challenging assignments.

At first, readers may not feel at home when reading about *kaizen*, *genchi genbutsu*, and *gemba*. These are themes that I learned when I entered the work force, and that have formed the leadership style I have today as a Christian leader. I feel blessed that God gave me first-hand experience in this way of thinking early in my career; this has allowed me to translate leadership development principles into an approach that builds ordinary people into extraordinary leaders. That is something I also see in the story of the Master Leader: He transformed 12 commoners into the leaders of an incredible community that still lives on today.

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THE 5 LEVELS OF LEADERSHIP: PROVEN STEPS TO MAXIMIZE YOUR POTENTIAL

By John C. Maxwell
New York, NY: Center Street,
Hachette Book Group (2011)
Paperback, 289 pages

Reviewed by CHRISTIANE E. THEISS

Is leadership a process or a position? Looking at the book’s title, *The 5 Levels of Leadership*, you might think that Maxwell sees leadership as a position. But it does not take him long to underscore that he does see leadership as a process, not as a position (p. 4). So how does he resolve the apparent contradiction? Since leadership situations are never static, but dynamic and changing, leaders also have to

be willing to stay on the growing edge. This insight led Maxwell to conceive of the five levels of leadership that are different stages of a leader's development. Now an internationally recognized leadership expert who has sold more than 19 million books, Maxwell says it took him about five years to expand his concept of the five levels of leadership already found in *Developing the Leader Within You* (1993) into a publication on its own.

So, what are the levels of leadership? Instead of defining the term and elaborating on the meaning of leadership, Maxwell discusses five different types of leadership he calls levels:

1. Position—people follow you because they have to.
2. Permission—people follow you because they want to.
3. Production—people follow you because of what you have done for the organization.
4. People Development—people follow you because of what you have done for them personally.
5. Pinnacle—People follow you because of who you are and what you represent.

The core of the book is the in-depth description of those five levels, the unwritten common-sense laws, rules, and behaviors characterizing them, and the downsides of each level keeping leaders from advancing to the next level. A most helpful feature is Maxwell's explanation of how one gets to the next level.

But that also brings out one of the ever-present tensions in the book. Statements like "you can move up a level but you will never leave the previous one behind" (p. 11) and "you are not on the same level with every person" (p. 12), show that the described levels are in fact leadership dimensions rather than steps on a leadership ladder. However, there are other statements that breathe a hierarchical view

of leadership: "The higher you go, the easier it is to lead"; "The higher you go, the more time and commitment is required to win a level"; "Moving up levels occurs slowly, but going down can happen quickly"; "The higher you go, the greater the return"; "Moving farther up always requires further growth"; "Not climbing the levels limits you and your people" (pp. 13–16). Maxwell argues that "when you change positions or organizations, you seldom stay at the same level" (p. 17), and speaks of climbing (p. 18). He seems to be aware of the dependency between leaders, followers and the situation, a common interactional framework used by classic leadership scholars like Fiedler (1967) and Hollander (1978). His assumption that the level of permission (relationships) precedes the level of production (tasks) actually contradicts Hersey & Blanchard's (1969) well-known Situational Leadership model where tasks and relationship-oriented behavior vary according to the maturity of followers.

Thus, even though the book does not acknowledge recognized leadership concepts or theories, Maxwell's practical approach to assessing a current leadership situation can be an asset for a leader's personal day-to-day journey as a leader. He provides a three-part questionnaire about the leader, her specific situation, and her direct reports and their perceptions of her. Taken together, they give a sense of the level where a leader currently stands, according to Maxwell's five leadership levels. Caution is required in regard to the variables Maxwell uses in the assessment questionnaire, because characteristics linked to the variables' behavior, values, and perception are often jumbled with each other.

Even though Maxwell does not give an explanation as to what he under-

stands as growing, his orientation towards developing others to grow and to lead is another enriching aspect of the book. He describes good leaders as investing “their time, energy, money, and thinking into growing others to leaders” (p. 181). This used to be called empowering people. Although Maxwell links the development of people to only two of his leadership levels, developing and empowering people today are the most crucial leadership skills and competencies (Hernez-Broome & Hughes, 2004). Though some of Maxwell’s arguments for people development sound more like common sense, they still are food for thought. According to Maxwell, “people development sets you apart from most leaders” (p. 183) and “provides great personal fulfillment” (p. 192).

Because it is easy to digest and does not claim any scientific approach, *The 5 Levels of Leadership* allows for fast reading. Maxwell’s statements are framed with a lot of good stories and are peppered with anecdotes from his own life. While he tends to overpromise, Maxwell provides plenty of motivational energy as he sends readers on to find their own answers and create their own roadmap to advance along the five levels.

In an interview with CBN on January 9, 2012, Maxwell stated that Jesus Christ is his ultimate leader, and is the motivator who helps others to achieve leadership success. “I put the cookies on the lower shelf, so everybody could have some. And I think when they read [the book] they’re going to say, ‘Hey, I think I can go to the next level as a leader.’” If Jesus Christ is his leadership model, why does Maxwell not mention the servant leadership approach of Jesus? One is left to wonder if Maxwell sees hierarchical leadership as inevitable.

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