

A Life That Counts

By Dr. John C. Maxwell

Ben Franklin once wrote, "I would rather have it said 'he lived usefully' than 'he died rich.'" More than just words, it was the way Franklin lived his life. One example of his useful nature was the invention of the Franklin stove. Instead of patenting it and keeping it to himself, Ben Franklin decided to share his invention with the world.

According to Dr. John C. Van Horne, Library Company of Philadelphia: "Franklin's philanthropy was of a collective nature. His sense of benevolence came by aiding his fellow human beings and by doing good to society. In fact, in one sense, Franklin's philanthropy, his sense of benevolence, was his religion. Doing good to mankind was, in his understanding, divine." Even his position as a printer fit this philosophical bent. He did not hoard his ideas, but shared them, and everyone benefited. He had an "abundance mentality."

Instead of seeing the world in terms of how much money he could make, Franklin saw the world in terms of how many people he could help. To Benjamin Franklin, being useful was its own reward.

As I age, I gain perspective on the illusion of wealth and status as forms of fulfillment. I don't want my life to be measured by dollars and cents, or the number of books I've authored. Rather, I want to be remembered by the lives that I've touched. I want live a life that counts. With each day that passes, I feel a greater sense of urgency to make sure my time and energy are invested in developing leaders.

A Life That Counts Is Determined By:

1. The Relationships That I Form

Relationships help us to define who we are and what we can become. In my own life, I can see how relationships have shaped my character, values, and interest. I consider relationships to be my greatest treasures in life and an immense source of joy.

Most people can trace their failures or successes to pivotal relationships. That's because all relationships involve transference. When we interact with others we exchange energy, emotions, ideas, and values. Some relationships reinforce our values and uplift us; while others undercut our convictions and drain us. While we cannot choose every relationship in our lives, on the whole, we get to select those who are closest to us.

Relationship Rules

1. *Get along with yourself*
The one relationship you will have until you die is yourself.
2. *Value people*
You cannot make another person feel important if you secretly feel that he or she is a nobody.
3. *Make the effort to form relationships*
The result of a person who has never served others? Loneliness.

4. *Understand the Reciprocity Rule*

Over time, people come to share reciprocal, similar attitudes toward each other.

5. *Follow the Golden Rule*

The timeless principle: treat others the way you want to be treated.

2. The Decisions That I Make

Good decisions sometimes reap dividends years into the future, while bad decisions have a way of haunting us. Consider diverging decisions made by Johnson & Johnson and Phillip Morris.

In 1982, Johnson & Johnson faced a dilemma when seven people died from cyanide poison placed inside of Tylenol bottles. Johnson & Johnson's reaction? The company pulled its product from the shelves, invested in tamper-proof bottling, and emerged as a paragon of corporate responsibility. To this day, Johnson & Johnson remains one of America's most admired companies.

In 1999, Phillip Morris, in an attempt to counter antismoking measures in the Czech Republic, commissioned an economic analysis to look into the "indirect positive effects" of premature deaths to smokers. The purported "benefits" to Czech society included savings on health care, pensions, welfare, and housing costs for the elderly. After word of the study began to circulate, public opinion forced Phillip Morris to issue a sheepish apology. In light of clear evidence showing the health detriments of smoking, Phillip Morris' decision to justify cigarette sales has contributed to the "Big Tobacco" image as an object of consumer scorn.

My friend, legendary basketball coach John Wooden, encourages leaders to, "Make every day your masterpiece." Two ingredients are necessary for each day to be a masterpiece: decisions and discipline. I like to think of decisions as goal-setting and discipline as goal-getting. Decisions and discipline cannot be separated because one is worthless without the other.

Good Decisions - Daily Discipline = A Plan without Payoff

Daily Discipline - Good Decisions = Regimentation without Reward

Good Decisions + Daily Discipline = A Masterpiece of Success

3. The Experiences That I Encounter

In addition to relationships and decisions, our lives are shaped by pivotal experiences. Whether triumphs or tragedies, our lives are molded by a shortlist of prominent experiences. Perhaps we receive a long-awaited promotion or we're suddenly let go from a job. Perhaps a loved one passes away, or a newborn baby enters our lives. These experiences immerse us in emotions and challenge our convictions. They may even reveal our purpose in life.

Oftentimes, we're defined not so much in the moment of experience itself as in our response to the experience. Do we quit or rebound? Do we harbor bitterness or choose to forgive? Do we blame or improve? Whatever the case, the experiences in our lives profoundly touch us.

The life experiences we encounter are broad and varied, but here are a few brief pointers on gaining the most from them.

1. Evaluate experience

Experience isn't the best teacher. Evaluated experience is the best teacher. Learn from mistakes and victories alike. Draw upon experiences to grow and gain wisdom.

2. Manage the emotional aspects of experience

Pivotal moments come with a flood of emotions - at times positive, and at times negative. Teach yourself to counteract negative feelings and learn to harness the momentum of positive emotions.

3. Share them through storytelling

Experiences are my richest repositories of teaching material. Make a habit of sharing the lessons learned from the experiences that have shaped your life and your leadership.

REVIEW

Living a Life That Counts Is Determined By...

1. The Relationships That I Form
2. The Decisions That I Make
3. The Experiences That I Encounter

FINAL THOUGHTS

If you're not doing something with your life, then it doesn't matter how long you live. If you're doing something with your life, then it doesn't matter how short your life may be. A life is not measured by years lived, but by its usefulness. If you are giving, loving, serving, helping, encouraging, and adding value to others, then you're living a life that counts!

About

John C. Maxwell is an internationally recognized leadership expert, speaker, and author who has sold over 16 million books. His organizations have trained more than 2 million leaders worldwide. Dr. Maxwell is the founder of EQUIP and INJOY Stewardship Services. Every year he speaks to Fortune 500 companies, international government leaders, and audiences as diverse as the United States Military Academy at West Point, the National Football League, and ambassadors at the United Nations. A *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, and *Business Week* best-selling author, Maxwell was named the World's Top Leadership Guru by Leadershipgurus.net. He was also one of only 25 authors and artists named to Amazon.com's 10th Anniversary Hall of Fame. Three of his books, *The 21 Irrefutable Laws of Leadership*, *Developing the Leader Within You*, and *The 21 Indispensable Qualities of a Leader* have each sold over a million copies.

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