

A Leader's Inner Circle

By Dr. John C. Maxwell

Months before President Obama took the oath of office he began assembling an inner circle of advisors. He and his transition team painstakingly pored over the qualifications of candidates to identify the strongest leaders for cabinet posts. In methodically vetting future leaders of his administration, President Obama demonstrated that he understands the law of the inner circle: **A leader's potential is determined by those closest to him or her.**

Past presidents have learned the hard way that failures of a leader's trusted advisors can bring disaster. During the Clinton administration, investigations into the conduct of five cabinet members eroded public perception of the President's judgment. The indictments and allegations gave ammunition to Clinton's foes and cast doubts on his character, especially after the Monica Lewinsky scandal came to light.

Likewise, President George W. Bush faced embarrassment when the man he appointed as head of FEMA, Michael D. Brown, failed to provide strong federal leadership in the aftermath Hurricane Katrina. Inexperienced in emergency management, Brown was overwhelmed by the crisis. During the height of the disaster, he fretted about finding a dog sitter and fussed about his attire. His unpreparedness and inaction left the Bush Administration vulnerable to scathing accusations of neglect and indifference.

Five questions to ask when forming your inner circle:

Do they display exemplary character in everything they do?

Deception eats away at a leadership team like cancer. Dishonesty on the part of one member of an inner circle can bring shame and disaster to all. Entire organizations have toppled from the misbehavior of one bad apple.

Do they bring complementary gifts to the table?

Imbalance within an inner circle can attune a leader's ear to only one side of an argument. When putting together an inner circle, prioritize diversity of personality and perspective. By doing so, you widen the range of your vision and the breadth of your influence.

Do they hold a strategic position and have influence within the organization?

Members of the inner circle must have the platform and influence to implement a leader's decisions. If they cannot be relied upon to execute a chosen strategy, then they shouldn't be entrusted with a spot on the leadership team. In addition, inviting uninfluential advisors into the inner circle disrupts the political balance of an organization. High performers suffer a motivational blow when they see a less deserving colleague granted special access to top leadership.

Do they add value to the organization and to the leader?

When considering someone for the inner circle, you should be able to articulate clearly the value they will bring. Ask yourself the following questions: What will they infuse into discussion? Where do they have expertise? What unique skills can they be counted on to bring to the table?

Do they positively impact other members of the inner circle?

If you've ever inhabited a house with a feuding husband and wife, then you can understand the need for leaders in close proximity to get along. Infighting saps energy and focus from a senior leader, forcing him or her to mediate conflicts with time that could be better spent elsewhere. Differences of opinion signal healthy debate, but personal animosities destroy a leadership team. Make sure members of your inner circle have the emotional intelligence to keep arguments from becoming too personal.

We've looked at the questions to consider when gathering a team of trusted advisors, I'd also like to offer thoughts on the two traps you can fall into when forming their inner circle.

Two common errors in constructing the inner circle:

Soliciting praise instead of candor.

Stacking an inner circle with flatters and "yes" men ranks among the lousiest decisions you can make as a leader. Doing so restricts your perspective, exposes you to blind spots, and leaves you on an island when do-or-die decisions must be made. When picking members of your inner circle, be sure they have the gumption to voice dissent. You'll rely on them to question your assumptions, to focus you on the mission, and to measure the integrity and worthiness of your ideas.

Driving away talent so that your power isn't threatened.

The wisdom of accumulating a talented inner circle may seem intuitive, but a rising star may threaten insecure leaders. Leaders should not be, and cannot be, the utmost authorities on all matters germane to the organization. Invariably, people have weaknesses. Wise leaders staff around their weaknesses, and welcome talent in areas where they lack strength.

Summary

Questions to Ask of Candidates for Your Inner Circle:

1. Do they display exemplary character in everything they do?
2. Do they bring complementary gifts to the table?
3. Do they hold a strategic position and have influence within the organization?
4. Do they add value to the organization and to the leader?
5. Do they positively impact other members of the inner circle?

Traps to Avoid when Staffing Your Inner Circle:

1. Soliciting praise instead of candor.
2. Driving away talent so that your power isn't threatened.

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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