

MAXWELL MOMENT

Improvising Your Approach to Improvement

by Dr. John C. Maxwell

Our well-being and happiness are tied to the notion that our lives can improve. We hope for a better future for our company, our kids, and ourselves. We dream of a tomorrow that's better and brighter than today.

Here are a few improvements many of us desire to see:

- We hope to lose weight and improve our fitness
- We hope to earn more money and improve our financial standing
- We hope to argue less with our spouse and improve our marriage

Over the next year, if we knew our health would deteriorate, our economic situation would worsen, and our closest relationships would unravel, then we'd be depressed. In fact, **even if we knew our lives would stay the same**, most of us would feel unsatisfied. We're always looking to improve the quality of our lives - it's human nature.

Unfortunately, many of us never go beyond *hoping* for improvements to actually making them. In this lesson, I'd like to share some insights to help you improvise your approach to improvement.

Develop Habits

The secret of your success is determined by your daily agenda. Leaders who make successful improvements share a common denominator: they form habits of daily action that those who fail to improve never develop. As my friend Andy Stanley says, "Your direction determines your destination." The steps you make each day, for good or ill, eventually chart the path of your life.

Consider the analogy of saving for retirement. Financial advisers counsel us to invest for retirement early in our careers and consistently throughout life. If we do, we can quit working at 65 with a sizeable nest egg. However, if we neglect funding our 401(k) each month, then we end up with nothing. We may still "hope" to win the lottery and secure our financial future, but we've lost the ability to control our fate.

Befriend Discipline

We live in the ultimate quick-fix culture. Everyone wants to be thin, but few people eat healthy and exercise. Everyone wants financial stability, but many refuse to be

bothered by a budget. Rather than trouble ourselves with discipline, we opt for diet fads or speculate in the stock market. When we don't see long-term improvements, we discard one fad in favor of another.

In life, there are two kinds of pain: the pain of self-discipline and the pain of regret. The pain of self-discipline involves sacrifice, sweat, and delayed gratification. Thankfully, the reward of improvement softens the pain of self-discipline and makes it worthwhile. The pain of regret begins as a missed opportunity and ends up as squandered talent and an unfulfilled life. Once the pain of regret sets in, there's nothing you can do other than wonder, "What if?"

Admit Mistakes

When trying to improve, we not only risk failure, we guarantee it. The good news is that mistakes generally teach us far more than success. There's no sense pretending we're perfect. Even the best of the best have moments of weakness. That's why it's important to be honest when we fall short, learn from the mistake, and move forward with the knowledge gained.

Measure Progress

You cannot manage what you cannot measure. Identify the areas in which improvement is essential to your success and find a way to track your progress. Keeping score holds you accountable and gives you a clear indicator of whether or not you're actually improving.

Change Continually

Continual change is essential for improvement. One of the great paradoxes of success is that the skills and qualities that get you to the top are seldom the ones that keep you there. The quest to improve forces us to abandon assumptions, embrace innovation, and seek new relationships. If we're complacent for too long, we'll fall behind the learning curve. Once this happens, it's a steep, uphill climb to get back to the top.

The desire for improvement has a degree of discontent in it. Personal growth requires apparently contradictory mindsets: humility to realize you have room to grow but also confidence that improvement is possible.

SUMMARY

Tips for Attaining Improvement

1. Develop Habits
2. Befriend Discipline
3. Admit Mistakes
4. Measure Progress
5. Change Continually

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FIGURING OUT FREE AGENTS

PAYING EMPLOYEES TO QUIT

You've heard of a sign on bonus, but likely not a sign off bonus. While most companies dangle cash to lure employees to join their ranks, one company literally pays its employees to quit. In his blog for *Harvard Business Publishing*, Bill Taylor explores the innovative approach being taken by Zappos, a Nevada-based online shoe seller.

Why would a company reward its quitters? At Zappos, quitters get a parting gift of cash so that the company's pristine track record of customer service is preserved. By giving employees financial incentive to leave, Zappos weeds out uncommitted workers before they ruin the company's reputation.

Here's how it works. Zappos has high standards for its call center employees, who are expected to provide stellar service to its customers. After an intensive interviewing process, call center candidates enter 4-weeks of immersive training. After a week of training, Zappos makes an offer: either the candidate agrees to fulfill the rigorous demands of their role, or they walk away with \$1,000, plus payment for their week of labor—no questions asked.

Some managers may balk at the steep cost paid to those who depart. However, for Tony Hsieh, CEO of Zappos, the quality of a customer's experience is well worth the financial cost incurred to find the right people for the call center. Does Zappos' counterintuitive strategy actually work? Accordingly to Bill Taylor, it's a smashing success.

Zappos has also mastered the art of telephone service—a black hole for most Internet retailers. Zappos publishes its 1-800 number on every single page of the site—and its smart and entertaining call-center employees are free to do whatever it takes to make you happy. There are no scripts, no time limits on calls, no robotic behavior, and plenty of legendary stories about Zappos and its customers.

Zappos' leaders are betting the outstanding performance of highly engaged workers will more than offset money paid out to malcontents. And it's a bet they seem to be winning.

Taylor closes with a final point about the business-customer relationship. "Companies don't engage emotionally with customers," he writes, "If you want to create a memorable company, you have to fill your company with memorable people." Business boils down to relationships, and relationships happen between people. Are you attracting the best people to join your ranks? What price are you willing to pay to find out?

To read more of Bill Taylor's insights about the novel business practices of Zappos, visit [Harvard Business Publishing](#).

RESPECT

"I don't get no respect, I tell ya! The other day I told my wife, 'I lost my wallet; I'm very depressed.' She said, 'That makes two of you. You and the guy who found it.'" - Rodney Dangerfield

Comedian Rodney Dangerfield built a career by lamenting the lack of respect he received from everyone around him. His sad sack comedy routines were littered with jokes about the disrespect heaped upon him from all directions. Whether complaining about his wife, his dog, or his parents, Rodney's insistent catchphrase, "I don't get no respect," struck a chord with audiences around the country.

Rodney Dangerfield may have profited by joking about disrespect, but any leader knows a lack of respect is no laughing matter. In many ways, respect serves as a barometer of a leader's influence. Without it, leaders become weak and ineffectual as their followers withhold trust, support, and effort.

In his article, *The CPI Index: How to be a Respected Leader (or President)*, Dr. Mark Goulston examines the ingredients of respectability. In his opinion, respect is founded upon three pillars of character: clarity, preparation, and integrity. Drawing from his insights, we'll examine each quality in more detail.

Clarity

When taking cab rides in foreign cities, I'm put at ease by taxi drivers that clearly understand my desired destination and have expert knowledge of the quickest and safest route to get there. Good drivers give me peace of mind by informing me of the ride time to my destination, pointing out local landmarks along the way, and familiarizing me with the surroundings. A driver with a very clear sense of direction allows me to relax and enjoy the ride.

Regrettably, I've had the misfortune of riding with cab drivers that don't have a clue where they're going. Few experiences are scarier than riding in a taxi in an unfamiliar city with a disoriented cab driver. Of my bad memories, the following stand out: merging haphazardly across multiple lanes of traffic to make a last-minute route adjustment; making dizzying U-turns; placing frantic calls to fellow drivers to ask for directions; and taking unscheduled stops to consult tattered maps. As a passenger, when the driver is unclear of where to go, you feel insecure and uncomfortable.

Respected leaders are like expert cab drivers. They plot a clear route, and they confidently take others to a destination they are assured of reaching. They help people feel safe and secure. Disrespected leaders are like lost cab drivers. Unsure where they're headed, they hesitate, second-guess themselves, send mixed messages, and make jarring course adjustments. They leave people feeling confused and vulnerable.

Preparation

Imagine going on an extended hike with friends. Your preparation before the trip largely determines whether your experience will be enjoyable or disappointing. If you forget insect repellent, bottled water, food, and a poncho to protect you from pouring rain, then you could be in for a miserable experience. However, if you bring plentiful bug spray, canteens of ice-cold water, rainproof outerwear, and coolers stocked with snacks, then you're likely to have fun on the hiking trip.

Respected leaders are pre-planners. They make sure everyone has ample resources at their disposal before the journey begins. While followers may be content to show up, leaders bring the supplies. They consider the path in front of them and take proactive measures to improve their chances of success.

Integrity

To be respected, a leader must have integrity. With integrity, professed values are put into practice; what is promised matches what is delivered; agreements are honored; and contracts are kept. When a leader has integrity, perception matches reality. A respected leader's influence flows from authenticity and transparency. He or she refuses to manipulate or deceive. Shortcuts are bypassed in preference of doing what's right.

How a leader responds to mistakes serves as a litmus test of their integrity. A respected leader takes responsibility for poor decisions, learns from them, and tries to make amends. Disrespectable leaders point fingers, make excuses, and avoid taking ownership of mistakes.

To read more of Dr. Mark Goulston's thoughts on leadership, visit his website at MarkGoulston.com.

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BOOK REVIEW

Influencer: The Power to Change Anything

by Joseph Grenny, David Maxfield, Ron McMillan, Kerry Patterson, and Al Switzler (Jossey-Bass, 2008)

As its subtitle suggests, *Influencer* exudes optimism about a leader's potential to change the surrounding environment. A *New York Times* bestseller, the book has quickly made a splash in the marketplace. Its hopeful tone is augmented by extraordinary success stories of leaders tackling some of the world's toughest problems.

Influencer pools breakthrough discoveries in the social sciences and comfortably places them in a leadership context. The authors draw material from the fields of psychology, social psychology, and organization theory.

Writing with a scientific style, the authors methodically walk readers through a step-by-step approach to enact change. Although more practical than artistic, don't get the impression that *Influencer* is a bore. On the contrary, the book's colorful

examples drive home ideas espoused by the authors. Readers are brought into the struggle against Guinea worm disease in Africa, introduced to an incredibly unorthodox drug rehabilitation center in San Francisco, and taken to Thailand's brothels for a primer on the nation's successful campaign to stem the plague of AIDS.

The authors of *Influencer* are primarily concerned with the means whereby influencers impact human behavior. In the book, they boil down influence into two main skills: 1) convincing others it's worthwhile to change, and 2) supplying knowledge and training so that people are able to change. In short, influencers must provide the **motivation** to change and the **ability** to change.

Furthermore, the authors recognize three sources of influence leaders must master: personal, social, and structural. Combining the sources of influence with the central skills of influence (motivation and ability), the authors come up with six methods of exerting influence. These form the bulk of the book and a chapter is devoted to each.

- Personal Motivation: Making the Undesirable Desirable (Chapter 4)
- Personal Ability: Surpass Your Limits (Chapter 5)
- Social Motivation: Harness Peer Pressure (Chapter 6)
- Social Ability: Find Strength in Numbers (Chapter 7)
- Structural Motivation: Design Rewards and Demand Accountability (Chapter 8)
- Structural Ability: Change the Environment (Chapter 9)

Influencer isn't a book with a lone "big idea." Rather, it's an introduction to a holistic strategy of influence. Like *The Leadership Challenge* it covers vast territory in the field of leadership. Pleasantly simple to comprehend, *Influencer* offers strategies of leadership most appropriate for the seasoned leader. However, the book may be intimidating for the introductory manager due to its wide scope.

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QUOTES

Preparation

"All things are ready, if our minds be so." ~ William Shakespeare

"The time to repair the roof is when the sun is shining." ~ John F. Kennedy

"If I had eight hours to chop down a tree, I'd spend six sharpening my axe." ~ Abraham Lincoln

"Luck is what happens when preparation meets opportunity." ~ Seneca

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