

MAXWELL MOMENT**Creating a Winning Environment - Part Two**

by Dr. John C. Maxwell

The environment has taken center stage recently in the American media. Going "green" has become trendy among everyone from Hollywood elites to suburbanites. Corporate America is experiencing pressure from environmentally savvy consumers who are flocking en masse to socially responsible companies. At a time when the USA is at war, an American, Al Gore, was awarded with the Nobel Peace Prize for his persistent advocacy of the environment. Whether the discussion involves global warming, renewable energy, or organic agriculture, seemingly everywhere environmental issues are at the forefront of debate.

The California wildfires of October 2007 were stark reminders of the horror that can be unleashed when the environment turns hostile. The cluster of fires were fanned by the Santa Ana winds which swept westward across the California deserts and out to sea. The hot and dry winds gusted up to 100 mph in places, and, for days, they made firefighting next to impossible.

The rapidly advancing fires charred and blackened everything in their paths. Thousands had to flee their homes to escape the fires as blazes raged uncontrollably across the southern portion of the state. By the time the fires subsided, over a half-million acres had gone up in flames, 1,600 houses had burned down, and well over \$1 billion of damage had been done. The tragic effects of the widespread fires will be felt in California for months, if not years.

As evidenced by California's wildfires, when the natural environment goes haywire, everyone living within it suffers. Likewise, when leaders lose control of their environment, everyone within the organization undergoes harm. It's critical for leaders to stay abreast of environmental factors in order to protect a healthy and secure workplace.

Last edition of *Leadership Wired*, we looked at five questions leaders ask to create a winning environment. In this lesson, we'll pick up where we left off by exploring five more questions posed by leaders concerned about the climates they are orchestrating.

Questions That Create a Winning Environment

6. *"Do I seek out barriers and remove them to make the team's job easier?"*

Trailblazers remove tree limbs, boulders, and overgrowth so that future travelers may safely navigate a path through the wilderness. Leaders are trailblazers. They go

ahead of the pack to scout out barriers to progress. When they find a road block, they remove it from the environment. When they discover a pitfall, they carefully mark it, and redirect the trail around the hazard.

Leaders should be on the lookout for specific environmental hazards. These include the following:

1. Lack of communication.
2. Formation of silos and cliques.
3. Distrust among team members.
4. Bad attitudes.
5. Inexplicable underperformance.
6. Unwillingness to change.

Any of the aforementioned landmines, if not unearthed, can blow apart a health team. Leaders have the duty of identifying and removing landmines before they wreak destruction.

7. *"Do I give people the freedom required to learn, grow, and deliver?"*

As I wrote in *The Law of Empowerment*, "Only secure leaders give power to others." If a leader doesn't know his own strengths/weaknesses, he will not hand off responsibilities to his team. If a leader doesn't know his team's strengths/weaknesses, he cannot hand off responsibilities to his team.

8. *"Do I foster a culture of inclusion by hiring people who are different than I am?"*

To a degree, we are all prisoners of our own perspectives. Trapped in the grid of our experiences and background, we are limited in our ability to see the world clearly. As a result, we must be purposeful in nurturing an environment of diversity. A collection of viewpoints is the only way to offset biases and blind spots.

Within an organization, a few qualities must be homogenous—held in common by all. These are values, vision, and commitment to the team. However, in most areas, hiring for diversity is the wisest course of action. The strongest environments are inhabited by leaders with varied expertise, experiences, backgrounds, and temperaments.

9. *"Am I a consensus builder?"*

Team leaders genuinely believe that they do not have all the answers, consequently, they do not insist on providing them. They believe they do not need to make all key decisions—so they do not. They believe they cannot succeed without the combined contributions of all the other members of the team—so they avoid any action that might constrain input or intimidate anyone on the team. Ego is not their predominant concern.

10. *"Have I created a caring environment among team members?"*

When molding a collection of individuals into a team, a leader should endeavor to promote an environment of mutual care and concern. An illustration from an elementary school classroom explains this concept better than I could ever hope to do.

Mr. Alter's fifth-grade class at Lake Elementary School made headlines when the boys in the class decided by themselves to shave their heads. They did so, without embarrassment, because one of their own, Ian O'Gorman, developed cancer and had undergone chemotherapy. His hair began to fall out. To make their friend feel at home, all of his classmates agreed to shave their heads (with their parents' permission) so that upon his return, Ian would not stand out from the class. That way, no one would know who the "cancer kid" was. The teacher, Mr. Alter, was so moved by the spirit of his class that he too shaved his head.

Through the experience, Mr. Alter's class leaped the chasm of friendship and became the caring environment of a family.

Summary

Leaders orchestrate environments, environments impact behaviors, and behaviors determine the fate of the organization. Over the past two editions of LW, we've looked at 10 questions leaders ask to create a winning environment. Here's a recap:

- "Do I understand what it takes to be a team?"
- "Are my expectations crystal clear?"
- "Do my people understand why what we do is important?"
- "Does my team define success with their customer?"
- "Am I holding people accountable for their performance?"
- "Do I seek out barriers and remove them to make the team's job easier?"
- "Do I give people the freedom required to learn, grow, and deliver?"
- "Do I foster a culture of inclusion by hiring people who are different than I am?"
- "Am I a consensus builder?"
- "Have I created a caring environment among team members?"

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LEADERSHIP@LARGE

Building Loyalty

The erosion of employer-employee loyalty in the workplace has been the subject of much debate and consternation. Economic downturns make employers appear ruthless when they layoff their workers. Employee infidelity seems to be the norm as workers search incessantly for more lucrative or more fulfilling work. Gone are the days of forty year careers followed by hefty pensions. Frequent job transitions are the new reality. In observing this shift, many have referred to the death of workplace loyalty, claiming that workers are all free agents now.

On one hand, the mobile workforce benefits both workers and business owners. American workers have the opportunity to experiment throughout their careers in order to find their niche. For businesses, the ease of downsizing affords the flexibility to restructure payroll in order to stay competitive during lean times.

On the other hand, disloyalty places a wall of suspicion between the employer and the employee. In the absence of job security, workers live with underlying stress.

Employers run their businesses uncertain how long their top talent will stay on board.

An organizational culture bereft of loyalty is doomed. With too little loyalty, motivation plummets and cynicism threatens to divide workers from the organizations in which they serve. In a climate of disloyalty, backstabbing, second-guessing, and finger-pointing infect relationships and destroy productivity.

What can a leader do to earn the loyalty of his or her people?

For a moment, let's examine why we're loyal in the first place. Generally, we're loyal to companies for three main reasons, 1) the relationships we have in the organization, 2) the values we share in common with the organization, and 3) the sense of fulfillment we derive from our role within the organization. Each of these reasons provides motivation for us to commit ourselves to a job.

PRINCIPLES FOR INSPIRING LOYALTY

People don't walk away from a job; they walk away from a manager. The best way to build loyalty is by making an effort to know people at a personal level. Find common interests and build bridges into their world. Understand what makes them tick. Reward their successes. Appreciate each person in a way that recognizes and validates his or her unique personality.

People will be drawn to the values espoused by your organization, and they will stick by your side because they share those values. Be clear about values from the hiring process onward. It's not enough to profess your values; you must consistently walk in step with them. Allow your values to be scrutinized, and give people permission to hold you accountable to them. Explain any behavior which appears not to align with values, confront behavior that runs contradictory to values, and seek forgiveness when you fail to uphold values.

Like it or not, "What's in it for me?" is the refrain at the forefront of the minds of those you lead. To win loyalty, cast a vision for the future so that each person sees how they will benefit by being part of the team. Be intentional about uncovering each person's strengths, and, as much as possible, position them where their job duties match their desires. Train, mentor, and stretch every person under your leadership. People respond with loyalty to those who invest in them.

Leave Problem Employees Behind

The United State Army Rangers have a policy of "no man left behind." The U.S. Department of Education's latest initiative is entitled No Child Left Behind. The state of Michigan has begun No Worker Left Behind, a program to train the unemployed.

When it comes to the workplace, shouldn't the slogan be "No Employee Left Behind?" Shouldn't leaders look out for the welfare of all so that everyone benefits when the team wins?

Not at all! That's the resounding answer from Mark Goulston in his article recently featured on www.FastCompany.com. Goulston warns that leaders not only risk losing their top performers, but also imperil their own health when they devote too much time attempting to motivate low-performance, low-potential employees.

Leaders squander effort when they over-invest in the weakest link. In the words of leadership author Warren Bennis, "There are none so blind as those who will not see, none so deaf as those who will not hear, none so ignorant as those who will not listen... and none so foolish as those who think they can change those who will not see, hear or listen."

Leaders free themselves from the "no employee left behind" philosophy by ordering underperformers to shape up or ship out. Those leaders who aren't willing to cut loose underperformers, place themselves in danger of the following fates (as described by Warren Bennis):

- Allowing frustrations with mediocre workers to spill over into negative treatment of top performers
- Losing self-respect or the esteem of colleagues
- Burning out after failing to motivate inept workers
- With so much at stake personally, leaders cannot afford to tolerate employees who refuse to change and fail to contribute.

In addition to the personal toll, leaders jeopardize their relationships with all-star performers by avoiding the removal of unproductive employees. Having to rely on an undependable colleague drains a high-performance individual. Likewise, a person who pours passion and energy into their job is tremendously de-motivated when a lazy worker receives promotion or recognition. Ultimately, top talent will take flight if it perceives a leader is unwilling to eliminate mediocrity from the midst of a company.

Leaders can actively address performance issues by looking out for telltale signs of mediocre employees:

- They stubbornly resist change
- They are reactive rather than proactive
- They are habitually lazy and unprepared
- They make promises, but they don't deliver results.
- They shirk responsibility and pass on blame.
- They identify problems without finding solutions.

In business, sometimes a leader is forced to drop the axe. It seems harsh, but in reality, tolerating mediocrity poses greater danger to an organization than the unpleasantness of having to fire an employee.

Visit Fast Company's Website to access Mark Goulston's full article: ["Separating the Cream from the Crap"](#)

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The Leadership Challenge, 4th Edition by James M. Kouzes and Barry Z. Posner (Wiley, 2007)

When we visualize the leaders we've met, we see a patchwork picture of contradictory styles and diverse personalities. It's difficult to find a common thread. We are left wondering, "What exactly makes a great leader?" The best seem to have an endless array of talents. They build teams, strategize, motivate, find efficiencies, seize opportunities, manage resources, and more. With a laundry list of skills to focus upon, improving as a leader can feel overwhelming. Where do we start?

The brilliance of *The Leadership Challenge* is the authors' ability to distill the broad field of leadership into five essential practices.

1. Model the Way
2. Inspire a Shared Vision
3. Challenge the Process
4. Enable Others to Act
5. Encourage the Heart

By identifying a set of core behaviors, Kouzes and Posner make leadership accessible for anyone desiring to gain influence. Over the course of the book, they systematically investigate each of the five practices. The end result is an insightful and inspirational guidebook on what it takes to be a leader.

The entirety of the book is neatly organized so that the authors' comprehensive treatment of leadership is as clear and concise as possible. The book's content rests on a firm bed of research, which lends credibility without cluttering the text with cumbersome facts and figures. Rather than overloading the reader with information, the authors engage and enlighten their audience with principles of wisdom. Each chapter's content is reinforced by a closing section entitled, "Reflection and Action." These sections briefly summarize the chapter's main ideas and offer specific steps to apply them.

In writing *The Leadership Challenge*, Kouzes and Posner purposefully avoid perpetuating the myth that only a select few are cut out for the upper echelon of leadership. When they cite exemplary leadership, they don't rely on references to famous CEO's or historical figures. Rather, they mine the insights and experiences of extraordinary leaders in ordinary roles. To the authors, leadership isn't an exclusive territory for a chosen few, but rather a public domain waiting for anyone willing to step forward.

Before you even reach page one of *The Leadership Challenge*, the book's enduring popularity and widespread influence are visibly evident. Glancing at its dust jacket, you'll notice the book is in its 4th edition and has sold 1.5 million copies. Rarely does any book merit a 2nd edition, yet twenty years removed from its initial publication, readers are still consuming this ageless classic. As you leaf through the first few pages, you'll discover the book's influence on today's top leadership thinkers. Endorsements from Tom Peters, Marshall Goldsmith, Patrick Lencioni, John C. Maxwell, Frances Hesselbein, and Warren Bennis all sing the praises of *The Leadership Challenge*.

The Leadership Challenge is worth every bit of the notoriety it has received. It would be difficult to overstate the book's value and its influence on the field of leadership in the last quarter century. It is possibly one of the finest books ever written on leadership. Those who have not yet had the pleasure of reading *The Leadership Challenge* won't want to delay finding their way to a nearby bookstore to pick up a copy.

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QUOTES

Stress

"The greatest weapon against stress is our ability to choose one thought over another." ~ William James

"Tension is who you think you should be. Relaxation is who you are." ~ Chinese Proverb

"The happiest people I know are the ones who have learned how to hold everything loosely and have given the worrisome, stress-filled, fearful details of their lives into God's keeping." ~ Charles R. Swindoll

"Yesterday is gone. Tomorrow has not yet come. We have only today. Let us begin."
~ Mother Teresa

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