



Why the Best Leaders Are the Best Leaders

By Dr. John C. Maxwell

From 1996 to 2007, manager Joe Torre led the New York Yankees to the playoffs every year - winning an astounding 17 series in the post-season. Over those same 12 years, the Los Angeles Dodgers did not win a single playoff series. This past season, Torre departed New York to coach the Dodgers. The result? The Dodgers won their first post-season series in 20 years, while the Yankees missed the playoffs altogether.

Ask Yankees and Dodgers fans, and they will tell you that Joe Torre's leadership matters. However, they may not be able to tell you exactly why Joe Torre is an excellent leader. What's true of the fans in New York and Los Angeles is true for many of us. We experience the effects of leadership without understanding the cause.

In this article, I hope to make plain why the best leaders are the best leaders. In a nutshell, remarkable leaders give their best to their people, and get the best from their people. Let's look at how this happens.

The Best Leaders Give Their Best to Their People By...

1) GROWING

People naturally follow leaders they respect as being more advanced than they are. For this reason, personal growth is directly proportional to influence. If you desire to gain followers, then pay the price of getting better.

To give people your best, you have to elevate your leadership capacity. Consider the metaphor of walking up a narrow staircase - you can only go as fast as the person in front of you. When leaders stop growing, they quit climbing and impede the progress of everyone following them. However, when leaders grow, they ascend the stairs and create space for those behind them to climb higher.

Personal growth involves challenging yourself, and pushing beyond the realm of comfort. When is the last time you did something for the first time? How long has it been since you felt in over your head?

2) SERVING

"Only a life lived for others is a life worthwhile."
~ Albert Einstein

Serving others is an attitude issue. Unfortunately, many leaders operate under a king-of-the-hill mentality. They attempt to pull down anyone above them in order to secure the top spot for themselves. In doing so, they clutch at power, grapple for control of company resources, and strive to dominate others. Seeing relationships as win-lose propositions, they ultimately burn bridges and isolate themselves.

The best leaders take an entirely different approach. Rather than dragging down anyone who threatens their position, they extend a hand to lift the performance of teammates and coworkers.

They function with a mindset of abundance as opposed to an attitude of scarcity, and they wield their influence to prop others up rather than to elevate themselves. Over time, they are honored for the contributions they have made to the lives around them.

All leaders serve. Sadly, some serve only themselves. Serving is a motives issue, and the crux of the matter boils down to a simple question: "Who?" Does a politician serve the public or his pocketbook? Does a CEO serve to benefit her shareholders or to support her lifestyle? The best leaders set a tone by serving and prove they are deserving of being out in front.

3) MODELING

Growing leaders have something to share; serving leaders have something to give; modeling leaders have something to show. As V.J. Featherstone said, "Leaders tell, but never teach, until they practice what they preach." The best leaders embody their values. Their passion exudes from every pore and demands respect.

The Best Leaders Get the Best from Their People By...

1) LISTENING

The smartest leaders realize the limitations of their wisdom, and they listen to their people in order to capture invaluable insights. However, leaders don't just listen to gain knowledge, they also listen to give their people permission: permission to challenge the process, permission to test assumptions; and permission to take risks. Nothing turns off an up-and-coming leader like the deaf ear of a superior. The best leaders don't simply listen to incoming ideas; they proactively draw them out of their people. They listen actively, not passively.

2) RELATING

Leaders touch a heart before they ask for a hand. To touch a heart, a leader has to be open to disclosing his or her identity by sharing personal stories and owning up to professional weaknesses. Mysterious or aloof leaders may be successful decision-makers, but they won't get the heartfelt loyalty that comes from authentic relationships.

As simple as it sounds, making a person feel known correlates powerfully to their job satisfaction. In fact, Patrick Lencioni lists anonymity as one of the top indicators of a miserable job. Leaders dignify their people by studying their interests, learning about their families, and finding out their hobbies. Conscious of the power of connection, the best leaders refuse to be barricaded inside of an office, and they take responsibility for relating with others on a regular basis.

3) TEACHING

Gifted teachers have a way of making students out of disinterested bystanders. The best leaders have an infectious thirst for knowledge, and they take pride in cultivating knowledge of their craft and awareness of their industry. A leader's teaching ability depends upon ongoing personal growth. As Howard Hendricks said, "If you stop growing today, you stop teaching tomorrow."

4) DEVELOPING

The best leaders understand the differences between training people for tasks and developing people to be better leaders.

Training

Focus is on the job
Adds value to specific things
Helpful for a short time
Changes a performance

Developing

Focus is on the person
Adds value to everything
Helpful for a lifetime
Change the performer

The best leaders view their people as appreciable assets and prioritize investing in the talent on their teams.

5) MOTIVATING

After one of my presentations, an audience member approached me who was visibly indignant about my speech. "Why is motivation last on the list?" he demanded. "Well," I replied, "because if you listen, relate, teach, and develop your people, then they will be motivated!"

Sustained motivation comes by creating the right environment for your people and by doing the right things consistently to nurture them. Consider a flower. It cannot grow in the Arctic; it requires a climate conducive to growth. Yet, even in the right environment, the flower must be planted in hospitable soil, exposed to sunlight, watered, and freed of weeds.

REVIEW

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About the Author

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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