



About the Author

John Maxwell is a bestselling author who has sold more than 20 million books. He is the founder of EQUIP and the John Maxwell Company, organizations that have trained more than 5 million leaders worldwide.

Overview of the 5 levels of Leadership

Why read another book on leadership? This book outlines an approach to leadership and leadership development that works—it has been tested and refined in a myriad of contexts, and gives an understanding of how leadership works that can help anyone grow and develop.

Level 1—Position. Position is the lowest level of leadership—the entry level. The only influence a positional leader has is that which comes with the job title. People follow because they have to. Positional leadership is based on the rights granted by the position. Position is the only level that does not require ability and effort to achieve. Anyone can be appointed to a position.

Level 2—Permission. Level 2 is based entirely on relationships. On the Permission level, people follow because they want to. When you like people and treat them like individuals who have value, you begin to develop influence with them. You develop trust, which gives you influence.

Level 3—Production. One of the dangers of getting to the Permission level is that a leader may be tempted to stop there. But good leaders don't just create a pleasant working environment. They get things done! That's why they must move up to Level 3, which is based on results. On the Production level leaders gain influence and credibility, and people begin to follow them because of what they have done for the organization.

Level 4—People Development. Leaders become great, not because of their power, but because of their ability to empower others. That is what leaders do on Level 4. They use their position, relationships, and productivity to invest in their followers and develop them until those followers become leaders in their own right. The result is reproduction; Level 4 leaders reproduce themselves.

Level 5—Pinnacle. The highest and most difficult level of leadership is the Pinnacle. While most people can learn to climb to Levels 1 through 4, Level 5 requires not only effort, skill, and intentionality, but also a high level of talent. Only naturally gifted leaders ever make it to this highest level. Level 5 leaders develop people to become Level 4 leaders. Ultimately, they create Level 5 organizations, and a legacy. People follow them because of who they are and what they represent; they have a reputation which often transcends their position or organization.



Now that you are acquainted with the levels, I want to share some insights that will help you to understand how the levels relate to one another.

You can move up a level but you never leave the previous one behind. Rather than leaving, you actually build on it. Leaders don't trade one level for another; they add a new level to the previous one.

You aren't on the same level with every person. Someone the first day on the job will acknowledge only my position, while someone in whom I've invested and whom I've raised up to lead will likely put me on Level 4.

The higher you go, the easier it is to lead.

The higher you go, the more time and commitment is required to win a level. Being given a leadership position is easier than getting people's permission to actually lead them; it's harder to be consistently productive than it is to make friends.

Moving up levels occurs slowly, but going down can happen quickly. It only takes a moment to lose trust that has taken years to build.

Moving farther up always requires further growth. Each time a leader moves to a higher level, greater skill is required. Growth requires a combination of intentional growth and leadership experience.

You cannot climb the levels alone. To succeed as a leader, you must help others follow you up the levels. As Quaker leader C.W. Perry said, "Leadership is accepting people where they are, then taking them somewhere."

Level 1: Position

Position is the starting place for every level of leadership. It is the bottom floor and the foundation upon which leadership must be built. Real influence must be developed upon that foundation. There are several good aspects to having a leadership position.

A leadership position is usually given to people because they have leadership potential. If you have been given a position, someone in authority believes in you.

A leadership position means authority is recognized. When given a position a limited amount of authority comes with it; as a new leader, you must use that authority wisely.

A leadership position is an invitation to grow as a leader. Getting a position doesn't mean you've arrived; it means you have been recognized and now have an opportunity to grow.

A position allows potential leaders to shape and define their leadership. While the position they receive may be defined, they are not. A new leader has the chance to decide what kind of leader he or she is going to be. In particular, new leaders need to consider three things:

1. Who Am I? Successful leaders work hard to know themselves—their strengths, weaknesses, temperament, work habits, etc.
2. What are my values? Your values are the soul of your leadership, and they drive your behavior.
3. What leadership practices do I want to put into place? How do your values translate into practice?

There are also downsides to positional leadership. Here are several:

Having a leadership position can be misleading. Having a position doesn't make you a leader; it just gives you the opportunity to become one.

Leaders who rely on position to lead often devalue people. Their highest value is often holding onto their position.

Positional leaders place rights over responsibilities. That results in a sense of entitlement, and they expect people to serve them, rather than looking for ways to serve their people.

Leaders who remain positional get branded and stranded. When people use their position to lead others for a long time and fail to develop genuine influence, they become branded as positional leaders, and they rarely get further opportunities for advancement.

Positional leaders receive people's least, not their best. People do what is required; they give compliance, not commitment.

So how does a positional leader move to Level 2? There are a few key understandings to embrace to make the shift:

First, recognize that titles are not enough. Who the person is and the work he does is what really matters, not the position they hold. Second, understand that people, not position, are a leader's most valuable asset. In order to be effective a leader must build relationships, because it is people that get things done.

A third understanding is that a leader doesn't need to have all the answers. Positional leaders often think that if they don't have all the answers it is a sign of weakness (and then how will they hold onto their position?) A leader's job is to attract people who know the things he doesn't. Finally, a good leader always includes others. Stand-alone leadership doesn't lead to teamwork, creativity, collaboration, or high achievement.

Level 2: Permission

Shifting to Level 2 brings a person's first real step into leadership. At this level people start to really follow, because they want to. The leader begins to influence people with relationships, not just position. There are five key upsides to operating at Level 2.

Leadership Permission makes work more enjoyable. Leaders who move up to Level 2 shift their focus from "me" to "we." They like people, develop relationships with them, and win people over through their interactions.

Leadership Permission increases the energy level. When you spend time with people you don't especially like, it drains you of energy. The opposite is also true—good relationships create energy. When you invest time and energy to get to know people and build good relationships, it pays off with greater energy once the relationships are built.

Leadership Permission opens up channels of communication. On Level 2, top-down positional leadership is replaced with side-by-side relationships. That requires and cultivates good communication. On this level, leaders listen to their people and their people listen to them.

Leadership Permission focuses on the value of each person. You can care for people without leading them, but you cannot lead them effectively beyond Level 1 without caring for them.

Leadership Permission nurtures trust. Trust is the foundation of permission. If you have integrity with people, you develop trust. The more trust you develop, the stronger the relationship becomes. The better the relationship, the greater the potential for a leader to gain permission to lead. It's a building process that takes time, energy, and intentionality.

There are also downsides to the Permission Level. If you are a relational person, these might be hard to see. Here are the downsides I have observed:

Permission leadership appears too soft for some people. Caring for people and being relational can be seen as weak, especially by those who possess a natural bias toward action. However, it is impossible to move to higher levels of leadership without investing in relationships.

Leading by Permission can be frustrating for achievers. High achievers want to get things done *now*. Leading by permission requires them to slow down; building relationships takes time.

Permissional leaders can be taken advantage of. When leaders are relational, their followers naturally get closer to them. This means that they may mistake kindness for weakness, and that encouragement means they don't have to respect boundaries.

Permission leadership requires openness to be effective. Rick Warren says, "You can impress people from a distance, but you must get close to influence them." To develop relationships on the Permission level, leaders need to be authentic, and admit their mistakes and shortcomings. They must be the real deal.

Moving from Level 2 to Level 3 requires another change of thinking regarding leadership. To begin the shift, keep in mind the following three things:

1. Relationships alone are not enough. Once you have built those relationships, you now have some influence. The question now is: what are you going to do with it? True leadership takes people somewhere.
2. Building relationships requires twofold growth. In a relationship, people grow toward each other. For relationships to be meaningful, people must also grow with each other.
3. Achieving the vision as a team is worth risking the relationships. To succeed as a leader and to move up to higher levels of leadership, you have to be willing to risk what you've developed relationally for the sake of the bigger picture. Building relationships and then risking them to advance the team creates tension for a leader. That tension will force you to make a choice: to shrink the vision or to stretch the people to reach it.

Level 3: Production

The production level is where leadership really takes off and shifts into another gear. Production qualifies and separates true leaders from people who merely occupy leadership positions. Good leaders make things happen. They get results. No one can fake Level 3. Either you are producing or you're not. Level 3 leaders create momentum and develop an environment of success. These leaders also attract other high producers. Ultimately, this creates growth for the organization.

With the addition of Production, people's leadership really begins to hit its stride. Built on a foundation of strong relationships, leaders who get results dramatically improve their team and organization. Here are some of the upsides to Level 3:

Leadership Production gives credibility to the leader. The ability to produce results has always been the separation line for success. It is also the qualifying line for leadership. If we do our work with excellence and help others become productive, if we get results, we gain great leadership credibility.

Leadership Production models and sets the standard for others visually. Producers always have an impact on the people who work with them and for them. They set an example, and their productivity sets the standard for the team.

Leadership Production brings clarity and reality to the vision. Good leaders constantly communicate the vision of the organization. They do it clearly, creatively, and continually. But that doesn't mean that everyone who receives the message understands and embraces it. The Production level of leadership communicates the vision through action, which helps people understand it in ways they may not have before. When followers see positive results and see goals being met, they get a clearer picture of what it means to fulfill the vision.

Leadership Production solves a multitude of problems. Leaders on the Production level have to be active in breaking through obstacles, putting out fires, correcting mistakes, and directing people.

Leadership Production creates momentum. When well-led organizations sustain high morale and high productivity over time, they gain momentum, which is any leader's best friend. Even more important than solving problems is building momentum.

With Level 3 leadership, achievement within the organization becomes easier. However, the leadership itself doesn't become easy. There are also downsides to the Production Level of leadership:

Being Productive can make you think you're a leader when you're not. All great leaders are productive, but it is possible to be productive and not be a leader. Personal success does not always translate into team success. Leadership is defined by what a person does with and for others, and is measured by what the entire group accomplishes.

Productive leaders feel a heavy weight of responsibility for results. High performance requires high commitment. Many leaders who reach Level 3 tire of leading because of the responsibility they feel; effective leaders understand that the cost of leadership is carrying that responsibility.

Production Leadership requires making difficult decisions. Most of the difficult decisions you must make will be related to yourself! I've found that about 25% of the decisions I make on Level 3 relate to my team; the rest are personal and require change, honesty, and self-discipline.

Production Leadership demands continual attention to Level 2. Becoming accountable for the productivity of the team does not mean that leaders can stop caring for the people they lead. There is a temptation to neglect relationships in pursuit of achieving results, but if that is done long enough, leaders will eventually find themselves back on Level 1.

Moving up through Level 3 is no small feat. Many people find themselves incapable of achieving it. If you have the opportunity, here is what you need to do to make the most of it:

Understand how your personal giftedness contributes to the vision. If you are a leader, you must have a sense of vision for your leadership. And it must align with the vision of the organization you serve. If you want to reach your potential as a leader, you have to know what your personal contribution to the organization can be.

Cast vision for what needs to be accomplished. Vision casting is an integral part of leading. Fuzzy communication leads to unclear direction, which produces sloppy execution. Productive leaders create a clear link between the vision of the organization and everyday production of the team. They show how the short-term impacts the long term. They define what success looks like.

Begin to develop your people into a team. At Level 2 people begin to like being together; at Level 3, they begin to work together. Production makes team building possible. That can be accomplished only by a leader who is willing to push forward and lead the way for the people.

Prioritize the things that yield high return. To be effective at this level, you must learn to not only get a lot done, but to get a lot of the right things done. That means understanding how to prioritize time, tasks, resources, and even people.

Never lose sight of the fact that results are your goal. Good leaders have an orientation towards results. They know that results always matter, regardless of how many obstacles they face, what the economy does, what kind of problems their people have, etc. They fight for productivity and are held accountable no matter what.

If you want to go the next level, beyond Level 3, you need to embrace the following ideas:

Production is not enough. There are higher levels of leadership that require more than getting work done effectively and adding to the bottom line. What's higher? Developing people so that they can lead with you. Great leaders measure themselves by what they get done through others. That requires developing people in a leadership culture.

Growing leaders is the most effective way to accomplish the vision. The more leaders an organization has, the greater its potential, and the greater the ability to fulfill its vision.

People development is the greatest fulfillment for a leader. Ultimately it trumps even direct production.

Level 4: People Development

Effective leaders understand that what got them to their current level of leadership won't be enough to get them to the next level. They understand that if they want to keep getting better as leaders, they have to be willing to keep growing and changing, and that each move

up the 5 Levels of Leadership requires a paradigm shift and a change in the way a person leads.

To reach the upper levels of leadership that create elite organizations, leaders must transition from producers to developers. Why? Because people are any organization's most appreciable asset. Good leaders on Level 4 invest their time, energy, money, and thinking into growing others as leaders.

When you become capable of leading people on Level 4, the upside of leadership becomes even stronger and the potential of the organization increases dramatically. Here are the primary positive benefits of leading on the People Development level:

People development sets you apart from most leaders. Most leaders are looking for ways to grow their organizations, so they focus on Level 3. But that's the wrong focus. You grow a company by growing the people in it. And if you really want to expand the organization, focus on growing the leaders.

People development assures that growth can be sustained. Achieving success isn't easy. What gives an organization the best chance for sustaining growth and success? Developing and training people. Only then can your organization reach its potential.

People development empowers others to fulfill their leadership responsibilities. People development by its very nature shares responsibility for getting things done. It is more than just teaching—it's transforming. When you give someone responsibility and authority, they not only learn, but they also start to fulfill their leadership responsibilities. That action transforms people and organizations.

People development empowers the leader to lead larger. Many leaders don't want to share responsibility with others because they don't want to lose any of their power. But sharing leadership doesn't actually take away from you. Instead, it gives you something you can get only by developing others: it gives you back time. As you develop people, their territories expand and so does yours. But you are also freed up to do more important things, the most important of which are often thinking, envisioning, and strategizing.

People development provides great personal fulfillment. The greatest satisfaction in life comes from giving to others.

There is a reason that many leaders don't develop people. It isn't easy! And there's no guarantee that it will work out. Every leader has horror stories of investment in others that turned out badly. You may pour yourself into some people and nothing happens, or they fall far short of your expectations. The only thing worse is not training them and having them stay with your organization! If you think about it, you have only one great choice as a leader

if you want to lead to the full extent of your potential: you need to invest in your people. But there are several practical reasons why it may not happen:

Self-centeredness can cause leaders to neglect people development. Maturity is the ability to think beyond yourself and place other's needs above your own. Becoming a Level 4 leader requires us to recognize that we now have the authority to serve people in a special way; you can't do that with a self-serving attitude.

Insecurity can make leaders feel threatened by people development. No amount of personal competency can compensate for personal insecurity. Insecure leaders often rely on control to avoid making mistakes. They think if they micromanage their people they can keep them from making mistakes. Unfortunately, controlling leaders don't understand that progress comes only from taking risks and making mistakes.

Shortsightedness can keep leaders from seeing the need for people development. It's often easier to do a job yourself than give it to someone else. But that's short-term thinking! To become a developer of people, you have to be willing to adopt a long-term mindset. If you pay the price on the front end, the return is great on the back end.

Lack of commitment can keep leaders from doing the hard work of people development. Many people can lead at Levels 1-3; very few are both able and willing to develop others to become leaders. That is why most leaders only ever lead followers.

How to develop people

Only leaders can develop other people to become leaders. A well-intentioned person with no leadership knowledge and experience cannot train another person to lead. Theorists who study leadership without practicing it cannot equip someone to lead, any more than a cookbook reader who has no experience in the kitchen is able to teach someone how to cook. Nobody really understands leadership until he or she does it. If you want to make the most of People Development, then follow these guidelines.

Recruiting—find the best people possible. Recruiting is the first and most important task in developing people and creating winning organizations. You can't develop people without potential, no matter how hard you work at it. The key to success in recruiting is a clear picture of who you are looking for. I look for chemistry (I need to like the person), character (I need to be able to trust the person), capacity (they must have potential), and contribution (they go beyond the minimum).

Positioning—placing the right people in the right position. It's not enough to recruit good players; the leader must know how those players best fit on the team and put them there.

Modeling—showing others how to lead. Nothing replaces showing people what to do by example.

Equipping—helping others do their jobs well. You can't simply tell people what to do; you must help them do it, and do it well, by making sure they have the skills and resources they need.

Developing—teaching others to do life well. Development goes beyond just giving the skills to do the job; it is ultimately about doing all of life well. That includes things like handling their personal finances and being successful in their marriages.

Empowering—enabling people to succeed. Empowerment is helping people to see what they can do without your help, and releasing them to do it. It can be hard for a leader not to meddle, but releasing work to others is an essential link to empowering people and developing them as leaders.

The highest goal of leadership is to develop leaders, not gain followers or do work. The highest levels of leaders embrace this as a life commitment, not a job commitment. It becomes a lifestyle, not a program.

We live in a needy world. If you feel perplexed or overwhelmed about how all the many needs you see might be met, then please realize that the greatest needs will never be met until we equip leaders who can work to meet those needs.

To get to Level 5, you need to continue growing, work through your insecurities, decide that people are worth the effort, then commit to spend the time needed to develop leaders. Finally, you need to create a personal development process. Development doesn't just happen—it needs to be planned for and structured.

Level 5: The Pinnacle

Rare is the leader who reaches Level 5—the Pinnacle. Not only is leadership at this level a culmination of leading well on the other four levels, but it also requires both a high degree of skill and some amount of natural leadership ability. It takes a lot to be able to develop other leaders so that they reach Level 4; that's what Level 5 leaders do. The individuals who reach Level 5 lead so well for so long that they create a legacy of leadership in the organization they serve.

There are some significant upsides to Level 5 leadership:

Pinnacle leadership creates a Level 5 organization. A few organizations rise above the rest and seem to function at an extraordinarily high level. Great organizations have great leaders, and the best organizations that function at the highest capacity become what they are because they are led by Level 5 leaders.

Pinnacle leadership creates a legacy within the organization. Level 5 leaders want to do more than just run an organization well. They want to do more than succeed. They want to create a legacy. And they are measured not by the caliber of their own leadership, but by the caliber of leaders they develop.

Pinnacle leadership provides an extended platform for leading. The influence of great leaders far exceeds the organizations they led. Leaders like Nelson Mandela, Jack Welch, and Billy Graham have extensive influence and legendary reputations.

There are three negative things you need to look out for if you reach the Pinnacle:

Being on the Pinnacle can make you think you've arrived. People who reach the top of their field are always in danger of thinking they have nothing left to learn. To be effective, leaders must always be learners—no matter how high they have climbed.

Being on the Pinnacle can lead you to believe your own press. Few things are more ridiculous than leaders who take themselves too seriously and begin to believe they are God's gift to others. Yet it happens often.

Being on the Pinnacle can make you lose focus. When leaders reach Level 5, the number of opportunities they receive becomes extraordinary. Everyone wants to hear what such leaders have to say. But many of these opportunities are really little more than distractions. They won't help the leader's organization or cause.

The key focus of Level 5 leaders is helping others to move up to the higher levels of leadership. If you want to make the most of your influence on Level 5, then you need to create key learning opportunities that will enable your best leaders to reach their leadership potential. Here's how I suggest you go about doing it.

Identify and create the crucial leadership lessons they must learn. Begin by identifying the essential qualities and skills any good leader must possess. Once you have that list, look for opportunities to put leaders in situations where they can learn experience-based lessons in those areas.

Look for, or create, teachable moments. Life happens, and often provides opportunities to learn and grow.

Expose them to other people and organizations that will impact them. Leaders on Level 5 have access to leadership, organizations, opportunities, and experiences that your emerging leaders don't. Make the most of them for their benefit. Even if you are not yet on the Pinnacle level, you still have access that your leaders don't. Share it.

Every time you develop a leader, you make a difference in the world. And if you develop leaders who take what they've learned and use it to develop other leaders, there's no telling what kind of impact you'll have or how long that impact will last.



From the Pastor's Perspective

*J*ohn Maxwell packs more info into one of his books than anyone I know. I remember first hearing about the "Five Levels" years ago; I thought they were a nice framework, but not necessarily having much practical value. Years later, I find them to be a very helpful tool in thinking about leadership. Maxwell seems wiser the more I grow and learn!

The thing I found most helpful was taking a practical look at my own leadership and evaluating where I am. It was a bit humbling, but helpful. I see that I am generally at Level 3 (production) with my church, and with most people around me. I have a natural bias towards people, so there are parts of Level 4 I do naturally, but really succeeding at Level 3 is where I need to focus my personal growth efforts. It's also the biggest need in our church—to be productive and make things happen. I suspect it's no coincidence that those things line up.

I didn't cover it in the summary, but if you aren't sure what Level you are on, Maxwell has a whole chapter of assessments that you can go through to help yourself get a grasp on it.

I have a sneaking suspicion most pastors are in a similar place to me. Given that most churches in this country are not growing, it seems evident that mastering Level 3 is a big need. I encourage you to take an honest look at where you are and commit yourself to growing. The church, and the world, needs you to be your best. Understanding The 5 Levels of Leadership can help you do that.