

JOHN C.  
MAXWELL

*#1 New York Times* BESTSELLING AUTHOR

PREVIEW

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THE

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LEADER'S  
GREATEST  
RETURN

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ATTRACTING, DEVELOPING,  
AND MULTIPLYING LEADERS

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# THE LEADER'S GREATEST RETURN

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HARPERCOLLINS  
LEADERSHIP

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## CHAPTER 1

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# IDENTIFYING LEADERS

### *Find Them So You Can Develop Them*

One of my favorite activities when I speak is answering specific questions from the leaders in the audience. Recently, at a conference put on by Chick-fil-A, someone asked how I developed good leaders. “First,” I responded, “you need to know what a good leader looks like.”

I know that may sound simplistic, but it’s true. And I’ve found that most people have a difficult time describing what a good leader—or good potential leader—looks like. Leadership experts and authors James M. Kouzes and Barry Z. Posner said, “Our images of who’s a leader and who’s not are all mixed up in our preconceived notions about what leadership is and isn’t.”<sup>1</sup> How can people find something they can’t identify?

As speaker, I do a lot of traveling. And often my host will send a driver to pick me up from the airport. Over the years, I’ve found there are two types of people who look for me. The first stands near baggage claim, holding a sign or iPad showing my name. I have to go over and find that person and identify myself. The second type of person comes over and finds me as I step off the escalator and says, “Hi, Mr. Maxwell. I’m here to take you to your hotel.”

I’ve never met either of these people, yet the second type is able to

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find me. How? They recognize me from a photograph they've found in one of my books or on a website. They took the time to be proactive and know who they're looking for.

As you prepare to develop leaders, which type of person do you want to be? Do you want to know what you're looking for in potential leaders and be able to find them? Or do you want to hold up a sign and hope somebody comes and finds you? It's your choice.

For many years I've been friends with Bob Taylor, cofounder of Taylor Guitars. Bob makes some of the finest guitars in the world. What's his secret? He'll tell you it's the design and manufacturing process. He can make a guitar out of anything, and to prove it, he even once made a guitar out of scrap wood from an oak pallet. But that's not the norm. He uses the finest woods he can find, and buying them has become more and more difficult, as many of the best exotic woods are on the endangered species list or disappearing altogether. Bob says, "I'm living in the era where you cross the threshold of 'there's all the wood in the world' to 'there's not any more.'"<sup>2</sup>

In an interview he gave to the *New York Times* more than ten years ago, Bob said, "I used to buy Brazilian rosewood back in the 1970s at the lumber yard for \$2 a square foot. Now it's impossible for us to make a guitar out of it and ship it outside the US. If we do get a little bit of it, it's extremely expensive. The cutting of it has all but halted. Adirondack spruce is unavailable. Mahogany was so plentiful it was a commodity. Now only specialty cutters are getting it and the prices have gone through the roof. All these things happened just in my lifetime."<sup>3</sup>

That's been such a concern of his that he's dedicating the next twenty years of his life to initiatives to ensure that wood is sourced responsibly and to growing trees for the future—not his future, but the future of others—sixty, eighty, and a hundred years from now. Bob says, "We no longer live in a world of new frontiers and of wasteful use of our natural resources."<sup>4</sup>

Bob knows what he's looking for when it comes to potential guitar wood. If you want to be successful developing leaders, you need to know

## IDENTIFYING LEADERS

what potential leaders look like, and you need to be as tenacious as Bob Taylor is when he's sourcing wood for guitars. Every person you bring onto your team will make you either better or worse. And every leader you develop will do the same. Maybe that's why Amazon founder Jeff Bezos remarked, "I'd rather interview 50 people and not hire anyone than hire the wrong person."<sup>5</sup>

## THE SIX AS OF IDENTIFICATION

For a leader who develops leaders, there is something scarcer and much more important than ability. It is the ability to recognize ability. One of the primary responsibilities of any successful leader is to identify potential leaders. Peter Drucker observed:

Making the right people decisions is the ultimate means of controlling an organization well. Such decisions reveal how competent management is, what its values are, and whether it takes its job seriously. No matter how hard managers try to keep their decisions a secret—and some still try hard—people decisions cannot be hidden. They are eminently visible. . . .

Executives who do not make the effort to get their people decisions right do more than risk poor performance. They risk losing their organization's respect.<sup>6</sup>

So, how do you do it? How do you identify good potential leaders, people you want to develop? As I said, you need to have a picture of that person, and I want to paint that picture for you. Take a look at these six areas of

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identification and answer each of the corresponding questions, and you'll know what you're looking for.

## 1. Assessment of Needs: "What Is Needed?"

Who are you looking for? If the mission of your organization were to climb trees, which would you rather do: hire a squirrel or train a horse to do the job? That answer is obvious. What is your organization trying to do? Do you possess a clear target? Do you know what you're going after? That will tell you what kind of leaders you need to find to improve your organization. You'll never hit a target that you haven't identified.

Chick-fil-A's Mark Miller, whom I quoted in the introduction, has vast experience finding and training leaders. He said:

I'm wondering how often, as a leader, we fail to clearly define the target. I think about all the times my leadership efforts have fallen short . . . how many of those failures can be attributed, directly or indirectly, to an unclear target or goal?

There are many things leaders CANNOT do for their people. However, clarity regarding intent should never be in short supply. People must always know what they are trying to accomplish.<sup>7</sup>

If you never defined your target, or you have not revisited it lately, I encourage you to do so now, before you start identifying potential leaders. Answer these questions:

- What is your vision?
- What is your mission?
- Who do you need on your team to accomplish your vision and mission?
- What resources will you need to accomplish your vision and mission?

Knowing what you need and who you are looking for are isessential

to success. You can't be haphazard in selecting people to develop and expect to succeed.

### **2. Assets on Hand: "Who Has Leadership Potential Within the Organization?"**

Where is the best place to begin looking for potential leaders to develop? In your own organization or on your team. It just makes sense for so many reasons:

#### ***They Are a Known Quantity***

Unlike when you interview people from outside, you don't have to imagine how insiders will perform. You don't have to rely on what they say about themselves. You're not limited to hearing the opinions of their handpicked references. You can look at their actual performance to see what they can do. You can observe their strengths. You can personally talk to everyone who works with them to find out about them.

#### ***They Already Fit the Culture***

Anytime you bring in someone from outside, you have to guess whether that person will really fit your culture and be able to work well with the people in your organization. When someone has already been working in the organization for any length of time, you know if he or she fits. And that individual is already a part of the community.

#### ***They Have Already Established Influence***

Good leaders, even those with little training or experience, influence other people. When you're trying to identify potential leaders to develop, look for influence. It's a qualification that must be present in someone you wish to develop as a leader, because leadership is influence, nothing more, nothing less. If people can't influence others, they can't lead. And if they already have some degree of influence in your organization, they already possess an asset that they will be able to use in the future to get things done. It's like having a running head start in a race. When you give



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them tasks, they will be able to mobilize the people they already influence more quickly.

How do you measure their influence? I recommend you use the 5 Levels of Leadership. Here they are in order from lowest to highest levels of influence:

1. **POSITION:** People follow because of title.
2. **PERMISSION:** People follow because of relationships.
3. **PRODUCTION:** People follow because of results.
4. **PEOPLE DEVELOPMENT:** People follow because of personal life change.
5. **PINNACLE:** People follow because of respect from earned reputation.

Andrew Carnegie was a master at identifying potential leaders. Once asked by a reporter how he had managed to hire forty-three millionaires, Carnegie responded that the men had not been millionaires when they started working for him. They had become millionaires as a result. The reporter next wanted to know how he had developed these men to become such valuable leaders. Carnegie replied, “Men are developed the same way gold is mined . . . Several tons of dirt must be moved to get an ounce of gold; but you don’t go into the mine looking for dirt,” he added. “You go in looking for the gold.”<sup>8</sup>

I wouldn’t call the people who can’t lead *dirt*, but I would definitely call the people who can *gold*. Where do you put your focus? On those who can’t lead or on those who can—the *gold* within your organization?

One of the best leaders I know is my friend Chris Hodges, the founder of Church of the Highlands in Birmingham, Alabama. He started the church in 2001. It has a weekly attendance of forty-seven thousand people on eighteen campuses, more than \$280 million in assets, with no debt, and more than twenty-two thousand active volunteers on what he calls his dream team. If you don’t know anything about the church world, then let me tell you: that’s extraordinary!

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I love meeting with Chris periodically to talk leadership. On one of those recent occasions, I asked Chris how he identified and developed thousands of leaders. He shared with me his two principles, and I want to share them with you.<sup>9</sup>

### *First, Gather Many to Find One*

Chris starts by taking a broad approach. He told me, “I never know who the next leader will be or where they are going to come from within my organization.” So, he developed a leadership farm team, similar to the way Major League Baseball does. Professional baseball teams have farm teams at multiple levels. The players they sign are put on one of those teams according to their current performance level, and they have a chance to work their way up. Their big dream is to make it from the minors to the major-league team.

Chris follows a similar model, except that instead of having single, double, and triple A minor-league teams, he has eighteen campuses. Each one is a farm team where volunteers are recruited, trained, and given a chance to serve. The potential leaders naturally rise to the top and have places to practice and hone their leadership skills.

### *Second, See and Speak to People’s Leadership Potential*

All eighteen of Chris’s campuses are farm teams for leaders, but not all campuses perform equally in that process. Certain campuses identify and develop leaders at a much higher rate than the rest. I asked Chris why, and he said that when he discovered this, he asked why too. It took some research to figure it out, but Chris learned that the successful campuses were led by leaders who not only saw the potential in leaders, but as Chris said, “spoke leadership potential to them.”

My friend speaker and author Mark Sanborn says, “Great leaders help people have a larger vision of themselves.”<sup>10</sup> That’s what Chris’s best campus leaders do. That’s what all good developers of leaders do, because people often become what the most important influencers in their lives think and say they will become. If people you care about tell you how

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terrible you are, you're going to have a difficult time rising up to a better life. If you're told every day that you can't lead, you probably won't even try.

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—MARK SANBORN

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But when people believe in you and communicate it repeatedly, you gain confidence and try harder. Nothing erases self-doubt quicker than when a person of influence speaks belief into your life. No wonder Abraham Lincoln said, "I'm a success today because I had a friend who believed in me and I didn't have the heart to let him down."<sup>11</sup>

Stop reading for a moment and think of someone you look up to who believes in you, who believes you are a person with potential. Is there someone in your life like that? Now think of how you behave around that person. Doesn't his or her confidence bring out the best in you?

Here is what I know: we will do everything in our power to measure up to the spoken belief we have received. That's why as a leader who develops people, I recognize the importance of my words. I look for opportunities to speak potential into the lives of people, especially leaders. Why? Because when I look back at the high points of my life, I recognize that most of them came when someone important to me spoke words of encouragement into me. Encouragement is oxygen to the soul for the leader, and if you're a leader who wants to develop other leaders, you need to encourage them and help them breathe.

Do you have a way to "farm" talent in your organization, in your department, or on your team? If not, can you start one? People need a place where they can rise up and practice leadership. And are you speaking positively into the lives of people, especially potential leaders? If not, start doing it today.

### 3. Assets Not on Hand: “Who has Leadership Potential Outside of the Organization?”

As much as I advocate identifying leaders in your own organization, sometimes you can’t find who you’re looking for. But bringing in outsiders can create challenges because of the unknowns. I think the greatest challenge is cultural compatibility.

I read an article in *Inc.* magazine by David Walker, CEO and cofounder of Triplemint real estate brokerage in New York City.<sup>12</sup> Walker says, “If there’s one thing that keeps every founder up at night, it’s hiring. Hiring the best talent is a massive and never-ending challenge. . . .

. . . While every company has a different culture, there are four questions that will help you identify if a candidate is a good fit, no matter where your company falls on the culture spectrum.” Here are his four questions:

1. How did the culture at your last company empower or disempower you?
2. What were the characteristics of the best boss you’ve ever had?
3. Describe how you handled a conflict with one of your coworkers.
4. What kind of feedback do you expect to receive in this role and how often do you expect to receive it?

Here’s what I love about Walker’s approach. Asking the first question helps you understand the culture candidates come from. Asking the second question helps you understand their view of leadership. Asking the third question helps you understand their relational skills. And asking the fourth question helps you understand their expectations regarding feedback.

Walker says, “I’ve made great hires who were a near-perfect culture fit, and I’ve made less-than-stellar hires who ultimately didn’t work out.

There is no such thing as batting a thousand with hiring. You're going to make mistakes no matter how good you are at it."

When you bring an outsider into your organization, I think it's important to set expectations with that new hire up front. In my book *Leadershift*, I wrote about the expectations we set for people who join our team. We tell them:

- "It's not about me—it's not about you—it's about the big picture."
- "You are expected to keep growing."
- "You must value other people."
- "Always take responsibility."
- "We will not avoid tough conversations."<sup>13</sup>

The more we're on the same page, the better chance we all have of success.

#### 4. Attitude of the Potential Leaders: "Are They Willing?"

Recently, I was having a conversation about hiring with my friend Ed Bastian, the CEO of Delta Airlines. Ed told me, "At Delta, we hire

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for attitude but train for aptitude. Always start with attitude." He continued, "Bring people on the team that the other members will enjoy working with."<sup>14</sup>

Attitude is a choice, and at the heart of a good attitude is willingness—willingness to learn, to improve, to serve, to think of others, to add value, to do the right thing, and to make sacrifices for the team. Leadership skill may come from the head, but leadership attitude comes from the heart.

Good leaders want more *for* the people they lead than they want *from* them. For

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years I've taught potential leaders that people do not care about how much you know until they know how much you care. That requires leaders to get to know the people they lead and have empathy for them. And as Jeffrey Cohn and Jay Morgan say, "Empathy is critical for leadership for many reasons. Combined with integrity, it drives trust. It gives followers a sense that their interests are being looked after, and this creates positive energy. Followers who sense that a leader appreciates them are motivated to carry out their duties in a more committed way."<sup>15</sup>

When potential leaders have the right attitude, you can sense it. When their hearts are right, they have passion that spills out. They have energy. They're positive. They're like the chairman and CEO of Berkshire Hathaway, Warren Buffett, who loves what he does so much that he says, "I tap dance to work [every day]."<sup>16</sup> Or like longtime manager of the Los Angeles Dodgers Tommy Lasorda, who won two World Series titles. One night, after a crushing loss to Houston in the 1981 playoffs, Lasorda was undaunted and enthusiastic. When asked about his upbeat attitude, he said, "The best day of my life is when I manage a winning game. The second-best day of my life is when I manage a losing game."<sup>17</sup> That's the kind of attitude you want to see in the potential leaders you select. They believe they can succeed. They're willing to put in the time and effort. Even in the face of defeat, they cheerfully keep working and trying to move forward.

I admire that kind of positive attitude, and I teach it too. But sometimes even the attitude guy needs a little help. In November 2018, I participated in the Rock 'n' Roll Las Vegas Marathon and Half Marathon with my CEO, Mark Cole. Mark is a runner who has completed several marathons, but I'm not. I haven't done much running since I gave up playing basketball in my thirties, and I've had replacement surgeries on both of my knees. But I decided I wanted to take on this race with Mark, but as a walker.

This was my first experience in a marathon. I was excited as we got started. If you've ever participated in a big race like this, you know how exhilarating they can be. Tens of thousands of people at the starting line,

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raring to go. Music playing. Some people dressed in costumes. And the race was at night!

As excited as I was, I have to admit that at about mile ten, my attitude wasn't great. I was physically finished, and I wanted to stop. But I didn't. Why? Because Mark was with me, encouraging me, helping me to keep my attitude positive even when my body was done and my willpower was fleeting. And it was worth it. When we crossed the finish line, I was proud of my accomplishment. I'm guessing not many seventy-one-year-olds were participating in that race. I couldn't have done it without Mark's help.

Let me say one more thing about attitude. Good character is what holds together all the positive attitude traits I've mentioned—willingness to serve, selflessness, empathy, growth, and sacrifice. Character keeps

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everything secure. Without it, things can break down fast. Character is about managing your life well, so you can lead others well. As Gayle Beebe says, "The formation of our character creates predictability to our leadership. Predictability, dependability and consistency: these three qualities ensure that our leadership is reliable and motivates people to place their confidence in us. Our effectiveness as leaders is built on trust."<sup>18</sup>

When potential leaders have the right heart for people, choose to be positive every day, and maintain the good character to help them keep making the right choices, they possess the willingness needed to become better leaders. And they are worth choosing to develop.

### 5. Ability of the Potential Leaders: "Are They Able?"

I already told you that Ed Bastian says at Delta they believe in hiring for attitude. But that doesn't mean he ignores talent. As he also told me, "We look for talent because talent lifts us." I'd say leadership talent lifts organizations the most.<sup>19</sup>

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Excellence is impossible in any endeavor without talent. No highly successful organization got to where it is without talent. It isn't possible. Finding good leaders is like finding a good high jumper. It does you no good to find seven people who can jump one foot. You need one person who can jump seven feet. Leadership is too difficult and complex to be done by a committee of average people. The more difficult the situation, the higher the leaders must be able to "jump."

There is a saying that a person's gift makes room for him or her. Poet Ralph Waldo Emerson expressed a similar idea when he wrote, "Each man has his own vocation. The talent is the call. There is one direction in which all space is open to him."<sup>20</sup> The direction that has space for each of us is in our area of talent and giftedness. Not only are we able in that area—we are capable of more.

How do you know potential leaders are gifted in a particular area?

- They will be good at it—that displays excellence.
- They will have opportunities to use it—that creates expansion.
- They will draw other people to them—that shows attraction.
- They will enjoy doing it—that brings fulfillment.

Potential leaders with talent have the potential to lift the whole organization through excellence and expand the organization through opportunity. That is a powerful combination, because, as Nobel laureate Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, observed, "Talent is always conscious of its own abundance and does not object to sharing."<sup>21</sup>

### **6. Accomplishments of the Potential Leaders: "Have They Produced Results?"**

The final area you need to examine when it comes to potential leaders has to do with their accomplishments. You need to look at whether they have produced results in the past. What have they achieved? When given a task, do they complete it with excellence? Do they meet and exceed goals? Do they deliver? If they can produce results for themselves, they have the



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potential to help other people succeed. They can't lead others to success if they've never led themselves there.

Good leaders come in all sizes, shapes, ages, and backgrounds. Their personalities are different, and they don't all lead the same way. However, people with the most leadership potential stand out from other people who are average because they know how to win. They are able to build something of value with the help of others.

When I talk about builders, I mean people who share five characteristics:

### ***Builders Love Results***

Thomas Edison is reputed to have said, “There ain't no rules around here. We are trying to accomplish something.”<sup>22</sup> That's the mind-set of a builder!

Paul Martinelli, president of the John Maxwell Team, is a builder. He has taken the idea of training people to be coaches and speakers and built it into an organization that has trained more than twenty thousand men and women in more than 140 countries. And he keeps building. His favorite time of year comes when he hosts a year-end meeting with his staff so that they can examine the past year, plan the next, and improve everything they do. Builders are producers.

### ***Builders Are Seldom Satisfied***

Builders don't get comfortable. They live the Law of the Rubber Band, which I taught in *The 15 Invaluable Laws of Growth*.<sup>23</sup> It says growth stops when you lose the tension between where you are and where you could be. Builders like to be stretched. Or as former Indy race car driver Mario Andretti said, “If everything seems under control, you're just not going fast enough.”<sup>24</sup>

### ***Builders Are Comfortable with Uncertainty***

Change is constant and essential to progress, and change brings uncertainty. Builders make themselves comfortable with that. They know there are times when they must take steps forward without knowing all the answers or with limited information. But they move forward just the same, believing there is an answer, they can figure it out, and progress will result. After all, uncertainty is a leadership opportunity. The more uncertainty there is, the greater the need for good leaders to find the way and take others with them. Builders constantly seek ways to open doors and keep growing. They recognize that when nothing is 100 percent certain, anything is possible.

### ***Builders Are Impatient***

There are two kinds of progress in our world. There are things you have to work for and things you have to wait for. Builders excel in the progress that comes from working. Like me, they see patience as a minor form of despair, disguised as a virtue. I know I need more patience. Do you know where I might be able to take a crash course to get it?

Maybe I come by impatience naturally. My father, Melvin Maxwell, who's in his nineties, has always been a builder and shows few signs of patience. Recently my sister Trish took my dad and his car to get an oil change. The place was very busy, and it was taking longer than he expected. Trish told me that for the first thirty minutes, Dad was fine. But then he began pacing, and soon he was repeatedly asking, "How much longer will this take?" Finally, when he could handle it no more, he took Trish's arm and said, "Come on. Let's go *buy* a car. That will be faster!"

My friend Chris Hodges says that the vision gap is the space between what we *are* doing and what we *could* do. Builders are impatient to close that gap.

### ***Builders Are Contagious***

Recently the John Maxwell Team committed to begin training people in Poland, and Ivonna, one of our coaches from Poland, set up a launch

call. A few minutes before the call, she and I were talking, and she told me there would be more than a thousand people on the call. I was

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impressed and congratulated her, but Ivonna was not impressed. She said, "It's a start. You know there are forty-nine million people in Poland." That got me excited, and I could see that Ivonna was going to spread the word in her country about how the training could add value to people.

Builders are passionate about what they are doing and where they are going. And their passion inspires others to join them. Their can-do spirit spreads. Is there not enough time? They will find the time. Is there not enough money? They will find the money. Are there not enough people? They will find the people. How do they do it? By inspiring others to join and help them.

The bottom line for builders is that they always *build* something. They don't just talk about it. They are accomplished, and their track record is a great indicator of their future performance—and it qualifies them to try to lead others successfully.

## NO TEAM CAN WIN WITHOUT GREAT PLAYERS

Red Auerbach, who was the longtime president of the NBA's Boston Celtics, said, "How you select people is more important than how you manage them once they're on the job. If you start with the right people, you won't have problems later on. If you hire the wrong people, for whatever reason, you're in serious trouble and all the revolutionary management techniques in the world won't bail you out."<sup>25</sup> The only way to have a great team is to identify and find the right players.

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In the beginning of this chapter, I mentioned that my friend Bob Taylor has a particular skill for identifying the best wood for his guitars. It's something he developed as he grew from a hobbyist guitar builder in high school to a full-time builder in his twenties to the cofounder of a company that now manufactures 40 percent of all acoustic guitars in the United States. But Bob is also an excellent leader. He couldn't have built the company he has if he weren't. And a few years ago, as Bob entered his late fifties, he realized he needed to start looking for a successor. His longtime guitar codesigner, Larry Breedlove, had retired, and Bob realized that without someone to take over for him, Taylor Guitars would not be able to keep growing and improving and building guitars for future generations.

Bob's desire was to find someone better than he was at building guitars—and he is the guy who revolutionized the way acoustic guitars are made and amplified. That meant he couldn't promote somebody from within the Taylor factory. He needed someone who could be innovative and come up with ideas better than he could. Bob believes that someone who has done the work to figure out something all on his own understands it much more deeply than someone who has been taught.<sup>26</sup>

So, one day Bob sat down and wrote out who he was looking for. During an interview with Tony Polecastro, here's what Bob said he wrote:

Dear God, I need one guitar maker who is a better guitar builder than me, who's self-taught, that didn't learn how to do it by working in another factory, who's a pro player and can play with anybody at the drop of a hat, you know, could be onstage with the best of them, who's a great person, who won't get into this fifteen years and then screw up his life and we have to start all over, you know, who knows the history of guitars, knows how to make guitars"—I mean, I wrote all these things down. . . . "He needs to have twenty years of experience and be less than thirty years old. . . . Oh, yeah, and he's gotta be from San Diego."<sup>27</sup>

Bob admitted that his list was impossible. The person didn't exist. Yet

## THE LEADER'S GREATEST RETURN

Bob found him. His name is Andy Powers. Bob met him because Andy was playing guitar for professional recording artist Jason Mraz at the Taylor Guitars booth at the NAMM show, the world's largest trade show in the music industry. Bob soon got to know Andy, and one day, after spending an afternoon with him, Bob's list, which had sat in a drawer for more than a year, popped into his head as he was driving home. And Bob realized that Andy met *every* criterion on his list, right down to living in northern San Diego County. And, remarkably, even though Andy was only twenty-eight, he had been building real guitars since the age of eight. Bob calls it a modern-day miracle. He had found the leader of the future for Taylor Guitars.

Andy recounted what Bob soon told him. Bob said:

"So here's the deal." He's like, "I won't be here forever, and I want Taylor to be a guitar company that's still guitar-maker driven, and I want it to be a first-generation company . . . Once I'm gone, who's the guitar maker here?" So, he kind of just said, "Look, I've looked the world over and it's like, you're my guitar maker. So, you can take as much time, take two weeks to decide, take two years. I don't care. It's like it's either you or nobody."<sup>28</sup>

Andy accepted Bob's offer, closed his high-end custom guitar-building shop, and became a part of Taylor Guitars in 2011. And he is Bob's heir apparent. "I'm completely confident in turning everything over to him," says Bob. "Andy Powers is the best guitar maker I've ever met in my life."<sup>29</sup>

Andy's entrance into the organization has not only set up the future of the organization, but it has already monumentally improved the guitars Taylor makes. "To me, the thing that I can offer the customers we have and the new customers that are coming is someone who, as much as they love guitars, Andy loves them more. I feel like the next generation is going to see some of the best guitars that the guitar industry has ever made, and that Andy is going to be one of the most important guitar

## IDENTIFYING LEADERS

figures in the history of guitars.”<sup>30</sup> On top of everything else, having Andy as a leader at Taylor has freed up Bob to travel the world to promote old-forest conservation and new forest cultivation.

“I’m not into the ‘name it and claim it’ type of philosophy,” said Bob, “but I am into ‘if you write down some of the things you want sometimes, you see it when it’s standing right in front of you.’ Otherwise, you might not even notice that.”<sup>31</sup>

How did Bob do it? First, he started by knowing *exactly* who he was looking for. And he followed the same pattern I outlined in this chapter:

1. **ASSESSMENT OF NEEDS:** “What is needed?”
2. **ASSETS ON HAND:** “Who has leadership potential within our organization?”
3. **ASSETS NOT ON HAND:** “Who has leadership potential outside our organization?”
4. **ATTITUDE OF THE POTENTIAL LEADERS:** “Are they willing?”
5. **ABILITY OF THE POTENTIAL LEADERS:** “Are they able?”
6. **ACCOMPLISHMENTS OF THE POTENTIAL LEADERS:** “Have they produced results?”

You cannot find something or someone when you don’t know what you’re looking for. People often say, “I’ll know it when I see it.” That’s not a good strategy. I say, *Know it and you’ll see it!* Bob knew exactly what he needed, even to the point of writing it down in detail. And when he found the person, he made him a part of Taylor Guitars.

No matter what kind of team, department, or organization you lead, you can follow this same process. You *need* to follow this same

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## THE LEADER'S GREATEST RETURN

process because everything rises and falls on leadership. If you're not identifying the leaders of tomorrow whom you will train up, your potential and your future will always be limited.

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## CHAPTER 8

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# MENTORING LEADERS

### *Coach Them to the Next Level*

What is the value of a good mentor? Sheri Riley knows. She is a John Maxwell Team certified coach and speaker who is dedicating her life to helping others go to the next level. Recently I talked with her about her journey, and she told me her story.

When Sheri enrolled in the business administration program at the University of Louisville, she dreamt of working in the entertainment industry. Soon after she began classes, faculty members started encouraging her and all the other students to seek out mentors. Sheri had already been taught by her father, Charles Huguely, how to live with integrity and handle personal finances, but she'd never had a professional mentor in business.

"They told us that executives are always willing to give college students fifteen minutes," Sheri said. So, with high hopes and dreams of working in the entertainment industry, she sought out executives she could talk to about her business aspirations. She started making calls and making requests. In the process, she developed great relationships with many executive assistants, but not one executive said yes to her request for an interview—not once in her four-and-a-half-year college career.



## THE LEADER'S GREATEST RETURN

That disappointment didn't stop Sheri from pursuing her career. But it did prompt her to make a decision. She vowed that when she got in the entertainment business, she would never be like the executives who had dismissed her when she was a student. Even though she missed out on having a professional mentor in the business, she would *become* a mentor to others in the business.

## INVESTING IN OTHERS

Right out of school, Sheri was hired by Trevel Productions, the management company of singer, songwriter, and producer Gerald Levert. And a few years later, LaFace Records in Atlanta hired her as a senior director of marketing.

Sheri took her first step as a mentor at LaFace with her very first assistant, a young woman named Tashion Macon. After working with Tashion for only two months, Sheri called her into her office one day and sat her down. She said, "You need to get another job."

"What?! You're firing me?" Tashion gasped.

"No. You're too brilliant to be working as my assistant," Sheri explained. "I want to mentor you and help you to succeed. Find and train your replacement. Then I'll give you another job." Tashion found Billy Calloway, trained him, and six months after her conversation with Sheri, Tashion became a product manager. By the way, Billy followed Tashion's model, found and trained his replacement, and he became a product management coordinator. He's now a sales and marketing executive. And Tashion went on to earn a PhD in psychology and become a principal in her own marketing agency.

Sheri's next investment was in the first artist she was assigned to work with at LaFace—a fifteen-year-old kid who had just been signed to the record label. She had no way of knowing how successful he would become, but she quickly saw that he had extraordinary talent. And what really blew her away was his charisma. She remembers a day when she

took this young man to a high-end mall in the Atlanta area while he was still under the radar nationally. As they walked around, lots of young men in their late teens—who usually go out of their way to play it cool—recognized him and went out of their way to tell him how much they loved his music and get his autograph. Not only that, but as Sheri traveled with this young man, she often found herself chasing away women in their thirties and forties who were flirting with him.

At that time, Sheri made a decision. She had heard plenty of horror stories about young people in the music business whose lives were wrecked by early fame and fortune. She didn't want to see that happen to him. She told him she was more concerned with him as a man than as a brand. She determined to be like a big sister to him, someone who would mentor him and tell him the truth—not what he wanted to hear, and not what would only help the business at his expense. She wanted to help him build a firm foundation for a long and successful career.

## SUPERSTAR

You're probably wondering, who was that fifteen-year-old kid? His name is Usher. And he's had a respected, highly successful career. He has sold more than 75 million records,<sup>1</sup> multiple dozens of his songs have made it onto the *Billboard* charts, and nine songs have gone to number one.<sup>2</sup> When Sheri left LaFace records, Usher tried to hire her. She declined, telling him she would rather be his friend and supporter, and she wouldn't be able to be that if she was financially dependent on him. Usher said of Sheri:

I immediately sensed something unusual about her. Her humanity. She was interested in me not just as a marketing project but as a whole person. She asked me questions and *really listened* to my answers, with no hidden agendas.

Sheri soon became my friend and life consultant. Sometimes she

## THE LEADER'S GREATEST RETURN

was like a mother to me, sometimes like a big sister, sometimes like a coach. But she always had my back, and I always trusted her implicitly.<sup>3</sup>

Today Sheri is working as an empowerment speaker, life strategist, and author. She speaks to corporate audiences in the United States and internationally, but her greatest passion is still mentoring and coaching people, especially young achievers. Her primary focus today is on helping successful athletes and entertainers. She works closely with players in the NBA and NFL, teaching them how to bring success to every area of their lives, not just their sports careers. She loves helping them find their purpose and create successful lives after their short sports careers are over. I'm very proud of her.

## THE VALUE OF MENTORING

We cannot reach our potential without the help of others. Self-evaluation is valuable, but the perspective and assistance of mentors are essential. We all have blind spots where we lack self-awareness, and only another person can help us by providing another perspective. Mentoring helps us go farther, faster, and more successfully than we could ever travel on our own.

Being mentored has made a huge difference in my life. So has being a mentor. For the mentor, nothing is more fulfilling than developing other leaders. Not only is it personally rewarding, but it gives the biggest bang for the buck when it comes to personal investment. Why? Because every leader you mentor can then positively impact other people. That's why I would rather mentor one leader than dozens of followers. It's why my purpose is to add value to leaders who multiply value to others.

Peter Drucker is the person who clarified this in my mind. Back in the eighties, a small group of leaders and I spent several days at a retreat with him. On our last day together, he looked at the dozen of us in the room and said, "Everything I have said to you up to this point is not as

important as what I am about to share with you now. Who are you going to mentor?" He spent the next couple of hours talking to us about our responsibility as leaders to mentor other leaders. It marked my life.

What is mentoring? I think of it as intentionally investing my best into the lives of others. I love what John Wooden said about it:

I think if you truly understand the meaning of mentoring, you understand it is as important as parenting; in fact, it is just like parenting. As my father often said, "There is nothing you know that you haven't learned from someone else." Everything in the world has been passed down. Every piece of knowledge is something that has already been shared by someone else. If you understand it as I do, mentoring becomes your true legacy. It is the greatest inheritance you can give to others. It is why you get up every day—to teach and be taught.<sup>4</sup>

Every time I read those words, I'm stirred to think about all the people who have invested in me, who have given freely for my benefit. Whatever I can do today, whatever I can give, is made possible because I stand on their shoulders. I'm humbled and grateful that they were willing to make mentoring deposits in my life, inspiring vision in me and teaching me life-changing principles. Here are some of my mentors, along with the greatest lessons they taught me:

**Dad (Melvin Maxwell)**—*the value of a great attitude*. He taught me that attitude is the difference maker.

**Elmer Towns**—*the power of proximity*. He taught me to get close to the people who can make you better.

**Lon Woodrum**—*go to places that inspire you*. He gave me the idea of visiting presidential libraries, and I've been to all of them.

**Bob Kline**—*be the first to see potential in others*. He saw the potential in me when I was twenty-five, and I've never looked back.

**Les Parrott**—*expand your influence beyond your personal touch*. He encouraged me to start writing books.

**Jerry Falwell**—*be a rancher, not just a shepherd*. He challenged me to

## THE LEADER'S GREATEST RETURN

do more than feed the sheep I had, but to build and make room to reach other sheep.

**Tom Philippe**—*become your mentee's champion.* He was more than a mentor; he was a sponsor who put his reputation on the line for me so I could take risks and live outside the box.

**Orval Butcher**—*carry the baton with excellence.* He asked me to be his successor and handed the leadership baton to me for the organization he founded and led for thirty-one years. I worked to carry it with excellence for fourteen years and then handed it off to the next leader.

**Charles Swindoll**—*"Who luck" is the best luck a person can have.* Chuck introduced me to leaders much bigger and better than me, and they accepted and helped me.

**J. Oswald Sanders**—*everything rises and falls on leadership.* He mentored me from a distance through his book *Spiritual Leadership*, which lit my fire to lead; I was able to meet him twenty years later to express my gratitude.

**Fred Smith**—*the gift is greater than the person.* He taught me that I should be grateful for the amazing gifts God gave me, but to remember that I am flawed, not amazing; that awareness grounded me.

**Larry Maxwell (my brother)**—*develop different streams of income.* A talented businessman, he instructed me to create passive income that would work for me when I wasn't working.

**Bill Bright**—*have a vision for the world.* He wanted to change the world, and every time I was with him, he expanded my vision and purpose.

**Zig Ziglar**—*help others get what they want, and they will help you get what you want.* His statement prompted me to change the way I saw and practiced leadership, and I loved him for it.

**Sealy Yates**—*take your message to the business world.* He encouraged me to include the business market when I wrote my books, and thirty-one million book sales later, we're still helping people.

**Les Stobbe**—*Will the reader turn the page?* Les coached me in how to write and make my written message more compelling.

**John Wooden**—*make every day your masterpiece.* He modeled his

philosophy and was my greatest mentor; my book *Today Matters* was inspired by him.

I could continue this list, but I don't want to wear you out! My life has been shaped by my mentors. I live on higher ground thanks to the people who have raised me up.

## WHO'S A GOOD MENTOR?

Mentorship is both caught and taught. The catching part of mentorship is totally dependent upon the credibility of the person mentoring you. Therefore, who you learn from is as important as what you learn. My mentors were contagious in their transference of positive qualities. I benefited intellectually from their wisdom, but it was my heart that caught their spirit. I "caught" . . .

- *Consistency* from my father
- *Faithfulness* from Elmer Towns
- *Reflectiveness* from Lon Woodrum
- *Duty* from Bob Kline
- *Creativity* from Les Parrott
- *Faith* from Jerry Falwell
- *Humility* from Tom Philippe
- *Joy* from Orval Butcher
- *Possibilities* from Chuck Swindoll
- *Fulfillment* from J. Oswald Sanders
- *Perspective* from Fred Smith
- *Focus* from Larry Maxwell
- *Vision* from Zig Ziglar
- *Opportunity* from Sealy Yates
- *Servanthood* from Les Stobbe
- *Intentionality* from John Wooden

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These mentors poured into my life and invested themselves in me, and I am grateful. And even now, in my seventies, I still seek out mentors to learn from and inspire me to keep improving.

Whether you're seeking a mentor, or seeking to be a mentor, the following questions need to be answered positively to indicate that someone has the potential to be a good mentor. As you read them, answer the questions about the people who mentor you. And also think about how others who desire to be mentored by you would answer them about you.

### **1. Does the Mentor Have Credibility?**

Credibility is everything when picking a mentor. You don't ask someone to coach you in an area where he's never demonstrated success. You don't seek business advice from a person who's never run a successful business. You don't get fitness instruction from someone who is out of shape and fifty pounds overweight. You don't ask a mediocre speaker to coach you in communication. It just doesn't make sense.

My friend Dale Bronner, a very successful businessman and pastor who has served on my nonprofit board for years, wrote a book on mentoring, and I love the way he describes credibility in a mentor:

Mentors have what the French call "*savoir-faire*." The literal translation of *savoir* is "to know," and *faire* means "to do." Consequently, *savoir-faire* means "knowing how to do."

The term has often been applied to individuals who are cultured in etiquette—"She has a certain *savoir-faire*."

Mentors, too, must possess a specific know-how. Without this confidence and knowledge, they are not ready to transfer what they've learned to others. . . .

The process of mentoring is one of on-the-job training, and the object is improvement not perfection. You only frustrate yourself by trying to be absolutely flawless.

The underlying purpose of mentoring is not for people to *act* differently, rather to *become* different. And it doesn't happen overnight. The process is *evolutionary*, not *revolutionary*.<sup>5</sup>

Competent mentors possess a credibility that comes from both knowing and doing. For this reason, they can help people to evolve over time through action as well as knowledge.

If you're seeking a mentor, look for credibility. If you plan to be a mentor, develop it. And when you mentor others, do so only in your areas of proven success. As your credibility grows, you can expand the areas in which you mentor others.

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## 2. Is the Mentor's Strength Compatible with Yours?

Before you engage in a mentoring relationship, it's important that you know this truth: we teach what we know, but we reproduce who we are. The reason mentoring is so powerful is that good mentors possess the ability to reproduce their abilities in the lives of the people they mentor, but that is only possible if the mentors and the mentee share similar strengths.

It's fine to admire talented and accomplished people. It's great to partner with them if there's something you can accomplish together. But if you don't have common strengths, a mentoring relationship isn't going to be mutually beneficial. The mentor will become frustrated, and the person being mentored won't be capable of executing what the mentor teaches. It would be like LeBron James trying to teach basketball to a five-foot-eight couch potato.



The two areas where I mentor people most are leadership and communication because those are my greatest strengths. And the people I work with not only have ability in one or both of those areas; they typically also have already developed those skills. So when they ask questions, they are often very specific or highly complex, and it gives me great joy to share from my fifty-plus years of experience. The more skilled and experienced they are, the more competent questions they ask. That's as it should be.

There's another implication to the importance of a mentor and mentee sharing strengths: everyone needs more than one mentor. No one does everything well, and no single person shares all of your strengths. I seek out different people to help me develop different areas of my life. You should too. Never expect to become a be-all mentor to anyone. You can cover a lot of ground as a mentor with beginners. But when mentoring higher-level leaders, you need to specialize.

### 3. Does the Mentor Reproduce Other Leaders?

Reproducing leaders only happens if the mentor produces leaders. If you're not identifying, attracting, and equipping leaders, you don't yet have credibility as a leadership mentor. You need to do the groundwork to develop credibility. And if you're wanting to be mentored in leadership, don't try to connect with anyone who hasn't proven himself or herself as someone who produces leaders.

Years ago, when I had the opportunity to be mentored by coach John Wooden, I jumped at the chance. He was a *great* basketball coach, but I didn't want to learn about basketball from him. That's not my strength. If I'd admired only his basketball ability, it would have been fun to meet him once, but it wouldn't have made sense to be mentored by him. But John Wooden developed *leaders*. His basketball players acknowledged that he taught them more about life and leadership than he did about basketball. That's where I focused my questions whenever we met.

## IS IT COACHING OR MENTORING?

Before we go any further, I want to address a question people often ask me about mentoring and coaching. It's probably the second-most-asked question, after, "Who mentored you?" (You already know my answer to that.) Maybe I get this other question because the John Maxwell Team is a coaching company. My questioners often want to know the difference between mentoring and coaching. I know that there are people who argue for the superiority of one or the other. While I recognize that there are differences, I honestly do both at the same time. For clarity's sake, here is how I see the differences between them.

Coaching	Mentoring
Skill centered	Life centered
Formal setting	Informal setting
More structured	Less structured
Directive	Advisory
Short-term	Long-term
Narrow in scope	Broader in scope
Drives the agenda	Receives the agenda
Positional	Relational
Skill awareness	Self-awareness
Trains	Develops
Do something	Be something
Transactional	Transformational

How I interact with a particular leader I'm developing—my choice to lean toward coaching or mentoring—depends on where the leader currently is and what he or she needs. But my goal is always the same: to help

that leader go to the next level personally and professionally. I work to pour into them, challenge them, encourage them, and help them become their best.

## HOW TO MENTOR LEADERS

I want to give you a road map for mentoring leaders. The map is simple, but the journey you take won't be. As a mentor, you need to be teacher, guide, coach, and cheerleader, and you must learn which to be at the appropriate time. But there are few things that bring such great fulfillment in life. Here's how I suggest you proceed:

### **1. Choose Who You Mentor—Don't Let Them Choose You**

The more successful you become, the greater the number of people who will ask you to mentor them. But it's crucial that *you* do the choosing. I learned this from the greatest leadership book I've ever read: the Bible. In fact, everything I know about leadership has its roots in the Bible. Jesus was an awesome leader. The Bible doesn't say that; history proves it. No one mentored leaders more effectively than Jesus did. He started with a small group of ordinary people, and those leaders created a worldwide movement.

Regi Campbell, an entrepreneur and author who founded Radical Mentoring, writes about the importance of the selection process in mentoring:

Jesus picked the twelve. They didn't pick Him.

This is one of the most valuable lessons we take from Jesus. And one of the most countercultural aspects of becoming a mentor like Jesus.

Over and over I hear of young people seeking out mentors. "Could you have breakfast with me? I'd like to pick your brain if I could." We've all been there.

The Scriptures don't depict Jesus' mentoring that way. As a matter of fact, we can visualize the rich young ruler as he approached Jesus. He might have been saying, and I'm paraphrasing, "I've been cool. I've obeyed the commandments. What would it take for me to join up, to follow you, to become one of your inner circle?"

We can imagine Jesus . . . reading the young man's motives from his expression of interest in the kingdom: "Great, go sell all your possessions and come back to see me."

End of conversation.<sup>6</sup>

Letting others pick who you mentor would be like selecting your investments by agreeing to buy any fund from any salesperson who called to pitch it to you. There's no telling what you would end up with or what the outcome would be. Instead, you need to selectively pick the people in whom you see the most leadership potential. When you pick the right ones, you win, they win—everybody wins.

## 2. Set Expectations Up Front for Both of You

People enter mentoring relationships with all kinds of assumptions, and you know how the saying goes: assumptions are the mother of all mess ups! Charles Blair, another one of my early mentors, used to say, "Have an understanding so there is no misunderstanding." That's great advice as you enter a mentoring relationship. You need to lay the groundwork on everyone's part—the we, you, and me of the relationship. Here's how I set this up. When we sit down together for the first time, I go over the three sets of expectations:

### *We Expectations*

I like to start with the things we both agree to do:

**We will maintain an ROI agreement.** Relationships don't last when they become one-sided. If that happens, the one doing all the giving starts to resent or regret the relationship. Mentoring is meant to give a return on investment to both people. When both people benefit, the relationship is

life-giving. When they don't, somebody will soon want out of the relationship. Every time we meet, both of us need to feel that the experience was rewarding. If not, either of us can say it's run its course, and we can walk away at any time without blame or shame.

**We will make each other better.** Coming together with this sort of positive anticipation sets the tone for the experience. The person being mentored expects to be made better. But in the best relationships, the mentor gets better too. That requires both people to humbly bring something to the table. If they do, it becomes a wonderful growing experience. I recognize that there is more than one good way of seeing and doing things, so it's wise to expect everyone to be my teacher. You should too. That's the whole point of mentoring.

### *You-Expectations*

The next thing I want to do is let the person I will mentor know what I expect of him or her:

**You must come ready.** I like asking the people I mentor to set the agenda when we initially meet. I want them to tell me what their objectives are, what issues they are currently encountering, and what questions I can answer. I put the ball in their court. Then each time we meet, I ask them to send me their questions the day before we sit down together. That gives me a chance to think about my answers. And I expect them to come to me at my location, be on time, be prepared, and engage at a deep level.

**You must keep earning my time.** My time is very limited, so I need to make the most of it. I'm sure that's true for you as well. Deciding to mentor someone is a choice I make, not an obligation I must fulfill. As long as the person I'm mentoring is making progress, I'm willing to keep meeting. If progress stops, so do I.

**You must improve, not just learn.** I expect the people I mentor to remain attentive, take notes, and learn. But engaging their intellect isn't enough. I want to see change. Applying what they learn by putting it into action is the only way to take charge of growth and become a better leader. That's why the first question I often ask people I'm mentoring is how

they applied what they learned the last time we met. It's a bad sign if they stammer or look like a deer in the headlights. However, more often than not, they tell me and then ask great follow-up questions. Deeper learning comes out of problems and from the application of lessons.

**You must mentor other leaders.** My whole reason for mentoring is to pass on what I learn. As I've said, my purpose is to add value to leaders who multiply value to others. I know of no better way to multiply value than for those I mentor to mentor others. The magic of mentoring is multiplication. When the young leaders I'm mentoring express a feeling of responsibility to help and develop others, I see that as maturity. It makes my day as a mentor when someone I mentor introduces me to those they are mentoring. That's worth celebrating.

### *Me Expectations*

Finally, I let the person I'm going to mentor know what he or she can expect from me and the standard I will uphold for myself:

**I will be a safe person for you to share.** Good mentors are trustworthy and build a foundation of trust. Warren Bennis and Burt Nanus call trust "the glue that binds followers and leaders together."<sup>7</sup> Building trust may take time, but it's important because the depth of the mentoring will be determined by the vulnerability of the person being mentored. My part is to be real with mentees, allow every emotion, be willing to answer any question, and hold everything they say in confidence. Trust is a result of authenticity, not perfection. Their part is to be real with me, not hide, and be open. They can expect me to be safe.

**I will make myself available.** Availability means you are dependable and accessible. When people need you, they can find you. The people I develop know that I am as close as the phone. They have access to me. Seldom have people taken advantage of that access. They respect my time and only ask for it when it is essential. But not only do I give them access; I check in with them to make sure they're doing well. And I'm ready to jump in when they need my advice.

**I will give you my best.** My mentors always gave me their best. That

impacted me. I am the fruit of their efforts. I may not be the best mentor, but the people I mentor will get my best effort. I work to live up to the standard that was set for me.

**I will look out for your best interest.** My mentoring advice will always be tailored to be what's best for the person I mentor. That does not mean we will always agree. That doesn't mean I'll give everyone whatever they ask for. It just means that I will do everything possible to keep my motives pure and put their interests first.

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—JOHN WOODEN

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I've found that when I establish expectations up front, the mentoring relationship goes well. When I don't, it falls apart. I believe you'll find the same thing to be true for you. In the end, as a mentor, you want to become a trusted friend. Even the great John Wooden wanted that for me. He never wanted to be my hero. He wanted the best for me. In his book on mentoring, he described the difference between heroes and mentors: "A hero is someone you idolize, while a mentor is someone you respect. A hero earns our amazement; a mentor earns our confidence. A hero takes our

breath away; a mentor is given our trust. Mentors do not seek to create a new person; they simply seek to help a person become a better version of himself."<sup>8</sup> That's what you're going for.

### 3. Personalize Your Mentoring to Help Leaders Succeed

One of my favorite things to do is communicate. I love engaging with people, taking them on an emotional journey, and teaching them things that will add value to them. But I always remember that's not mentoring. You can teach the masses, you can coach groups, but you have to mentor individuals one at a time.

Leadership expert Peter Drucker said, "It is important to disciple a

life, not teach a lesson.” That’s what mentoring is. It’s discipling another person. It involves discerning where they are, knowing where they are supposed to go, and giving them what they need to get there. Mentoring leaders must be good at evaluating people’s potential and needs. They need to understand where people need to grow and to reach the next level in their development. They recognize, as Drucker said, that individuals are like flowers. One, like a rose, needs fertilizer. Another, like a rhododendron, doesn’t. If you don’t give flowers the care they need, they’ll never bloom. Mentoring leaders recognize who their people are and what they need individually.

As you mentor leaders, pay attention to each person’s personality type, learning style, love language, strengths, weaknesses, internal motivation, background and history, family relationships, aspirations, inspirations, and more. Leverage every bit of knowledge you have for every leader’s benefit.

#### 4. Care Enough to Have Crucial Conversations

Good mentors don’t hesitate to have difficult conversations with the people they mentor. They deal with the “elephants” in the room even when others won’t. More often than not, the best time to have a crucial conversation is now. That’s why I advise leaders to shovel the pile while it’s small. However, if I think the conversation will be especially difficult for the other person, I sometimes say, “Let’s talk about *x* the next time we meet.” That way they have time to get prepared emotionally for such a talk. But I prefer not to wait. The longer you put off having a difficult conversation, the more difficult it becomes because the timing feels increasingly awkward. Plus, silence communicates approval to

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most people. Furthermore, any problem that remains unaddressed typically snowballs and becomes more difficult to deal with later. And the longer you wait to talk about it, the less likely you are ever to address it. That's poor mentoring.

In chapter 4 I wrote about Traci Morrow. Not only is she a John Maxwell Team coach and Beachbody entrepreneur, but she also hosts my company's Live2Lead simulcast as well as Maximum Impact Mentoring. For the last several years, I've spent time mentoring her, and we've had quite a few crucial conversations. Recently, I asked her if she would feel comfortable sharing about our conversations, and she was more than willing. Here is what she said:

I can count on you to tell me the truth. Typically, you deliver truth wrapped in a question, and always with a choice—my choice—and having options leaves me feeling valued by you. One of the first things you did as our mentoring relationship began was ask me my love language, and when you found out it was words of affirmation, you made sure to speak my language. But that's not just to say you only give me words of praise and appreciation, though you certainly do. What I most value is that you speak words that help me grow, the hard words many people aren't blessed enough to hear from a beloved, trusted mentor.

You have challenged me on a few occasions to make a decision when I was hesitant, and to make a hard call that I'd put off or wasn't addressing. You've challenged me when I've been passive when I needed to take action and have shared hard truths in the most loving manner I've ever received outside of a parent or my husband. I am amazed that somehow you share insight with me that draws out my best rather than shutting me down. Your words call forth my inner tenacious leader rather than making me feel small.

One of our sessions really stands out. It was after I did an interview with someone in a public arena, and I lost my connection with the audience. It just fell flat. I knew something was off about halfway through, but I was too close to see what I was missing. I could not wait to get your

feedback. For most people that would be scary to hear feedback from a master communicator on a job not done well, but for me, I'd already felt the worst of it; I'd suffered through the interview. I wanted to dissect my performance to see where it broke down, and because I know you desire to help me, you'd give it to me straight.

As you walked through my errors, you spoke in a kind voice and without sugarcoating your feedback. I was learning two things that day: how to not lose connection with an audience, but also how to mentor someone when they've just had a failure.

I always leave my conversations with you knowing what I need to do to grow and feeling the freedom to really choose growth. I can see in your face and hear in your voice that you believe in my ability to do what's necessary to grow. It's not fun to hear hard truths, but somehow, I look forward to your feedback. The root of that is trust.

That's the kind of feedback every mentor cherishes. I believe in Traci's potential and want what's best for her. That's the way I feel about everyone I mentor. They're like my sons and daughters, so I want to bring out the best in them and see them become their best. The only way to do that is to say the hard things that will help them.

When you engage in a crucial conversation, you need to be willing to tell the other person what she needs to hear—for her benefit, not yours. Yes, you should express it in a way that will be best received by the person. But the message needs to really help them. Sometimes a mentor is the only person someone has who is willing to be a truth teller. That's why Sheri Riley chose the role she did with Usher. Sheri knew that as a young man, he had no one in his life other than his mother who would care for him enough to tell him what he needed to hear.

There's one more important thing I need to say about crucial conversations. They should be a two-way street. We need to be just as open to hearing the truth as the people we mentor. That's why I give all my leaders permission to speak into my life. I want them to be able to have crucial conversations with me when they see that I need it. My friend Ed

## THE LEADER'S GREATEST RETURN

Bastian, the CEO of Delta, has the same attitude. He says to his inner circle: "Tell me what I should stop doing . . . keep doing . . . and start doing." That's exceptional coming from the leader of one of the world's largest companies.

The mentoring process looks different for every mentor and for every person who is being mentored. That's how it should be. It's a very personal experience. But the result should be the same. The leader being mentored should move up to a higher level of leadership. The ultimate step in mentoring ends with the leader being mentored taking the baton from his mentor and surpassing him.

I came across a touching story that illustrates this concept. It may be apocryphal, but I love it just the same:

It's told of Leonardo da Vinci that while still a pupil, before his genius burst into brilliancy, he received a special inspiration in this way: His old and famous master, because of his growing infirmities of age, felt obliged to give up his own work, and one day bade da Vinci finish for him a picture which he had begun. The young man had such reverence for his master's skill that he shrank from the task. The old artist, however, would not accept any excuse, but persisted in his command, saying simply, "Do your best."

Da Vinci at last trembling seized the brush and, kneeling before the easel, prayed: "It is for the sake of my beloved master that I implore skill and power for this undertaking." As he proceeded his hand grew steady, his eye awoke with slumbering genius. He forgot himself and was filled with enthusiasm for his work. When the painting was finished the old master was carried into the studio to pass judgment on the result. His eye rested on a triumph of art. Throwing his arms around the young artist, he exclaimed, "My son, I paint no more."<sup>9</sup>

That is what a great mentor ultimately wants to see. He wants to pour himself into his student, and see his student surpass him. It is the picture of a mentoring masterpiece. We may never achieve it, but we should never stop striving for it.