The 21 Irrefutable Laws of Leadership
by John C. Maxwell

QUICK OVERVIEW
The 10th anniversary edition of *The 21 Irrefutable Laws of Leadership* offers updated stories and several revisions, including the addition of two laws. How can *irrefutable* laws be revised? Author John C. Maxwell notes the edits extend from his own life experience. Growth equals change.

This classic book on leadership provides real-life examples from world-famous and infamous leaders alike. Their stories illustrate how each of the 21 laws are applied or misapplied. Maxwell narrates these stories, he explains how and why the laws work. Each chapter ends with a series of exercises designed to help readers apply the law to their own lives and circumstances. This effective combination of meaningful content with practical application makes it possible for almost anyone to improve their leadership skills. But as “The Law of Process” states, “Leadership develops daily, not in a day.”

The premise of *The 21 Irrefutable Laws of Leadership* is that leadership is a skill that can be learned. Undoubtedly, there are character traits that make people seem like “natural leaders,” but by studying leadership, it is possible to increase one’s skills and effectiveness, and thereby one’s success.

APPLY AND ACHIEVE
1. The laws can be learned.
2. The laws can stand alone.
3. The laws carry consequences with them.
4. These laws are the foundation of leadership.
5. Leadership requires the ability to do more than one thing well.
6. No one does all 21 laws well—look for team members to balance you.

SUCCESS Points
*From this book you will learn:*

- Ethics can be taught, but they must also be modeled
- Momentum is the most powerful change agent
- Winning requires personal responsibility, a clear vision and a dedication to victory
- Giving your power away can make you a more effective leader
A widespread misunderstanding is that leading and managing are one and the same. Up until a few years ago, books that claimed to be on leadership were often really about management. The main difference between the two is that leadership is about influencing people to follow, while management focuses on maintaining systems and processes.

The best way to test whether a person can lead rather than just manage is to ask him to create positive change. Managers can maintain direction, but often they can’t change it. Systems and processes can do only so much. To move people in a new direction, you need influence.

Let’s take a look leadership and influence, beginning with the first law:

1. **The Law of the Lid**
   The lower an individual’s ability to lead, the lower the lid on his potential. The higher the individual’s ability to lead, the higher the lid on his potential.
   To give you an example, if your leadership rates an 8, then your effectiveness can never be greater than a 7. If your leadership is only a 4, then your effectiveness will be no higher than a 3.
   Your leadership ability—for better or for worse—always determines your effectiveness and the potential impact of your organization.

2. **The Law of Influence**
   Why do some people emerge as leaders while others can’t influence people no matter how hard they try? I believe that several factors come into play:
   1. **Character—Who They Are**
      True leadership always begins with the inner person.
   2. **Relationships—Who They Know**
      Build enough of the right kinds of relationships with the right people, and you can become the real leader in an organization.
   3. **Intuition—What They Feel**
      Leaders seek to recognize and influence intangibles such as energy, morale, timing and momentum.
   4. **Experience—Where They’ve Been**
      Experience doesn’t guarantee credibility, but it encourages people to give you a chance to prove that you are capable.

5. **Ability—What They Can Do**
   The bottom line for followers is what a leader is capable of. As soon as they no longer believe you can deliver, they will stop listening and following.

3. **The Law of Process**
   It’s not an event; it’s a process. Becoming a leader is a lot like investing successfully in the stock market. If your hope is to make a fortune in a day, you’re not going to be successful.
   Although it’s true that some people are born with greater natural gifts than others, the ability to lead is really a collection of skills, nearly all of which can be learned and improved. But that process doesn’t happen overnight. Leadership has many facets: respect, experience, emotional strength, people skills, discipline, vision, momentum, timing—the list goes on.

4. **The Law of Navigation**
   I should probably confess at this point that I’m not a strong navigator. I don’t take joy getting into details, and I tend to go with my gut instinct—sometimes a little too quickly for my own good. However, I had to take responsibility for the navigation process, and to help me do that, I developed a strategy I have used repeatedly. My blueprint follows the acrostic: Plan Ahead.
   - Predetermine a course of action.
   - Lay out your goals.
   - Adjust your priorities.
   - Notify key personnel.
   - Allow time for acceptance.
   - Head into action.
   - Expect problems.
   - Always point to the successes.
   - Daily review your plan.
   Leaders who navigate do even more than control the direction in which they and their people travel. They see the whole trip in their minds before they leave the dock. They have vision for getting to their destination, they understand what it will take to get there, they know who they’ll need on the team to be successful, and they recognize the obstacles long before they appear on the horizon.

5. **The Law of Addition**
   Many people view leadership the same way they view success, hoping to go as far as they can, to climb the ladder, to achieve the highest position possible for their talent. But, contrary to conventional thinking, I believe the bottom line in leadership isn’t
how far we advance ourselves, but how far we advance others. That is achieved by serving others and adding value to their lives.

The interaction between every leader and follower is a relationship, and all relationships either add to or subtract from a person’s life. If you are a leader, then trust me, you are having either a positive or a negative impact on the people you lead. How can you tell? There is one critical question: Are you making things better for the people who follow you?

6. The Law of Solid Ground

Trust is the foundation of leadership. It is the glue that holds an organization together. Leaders cannot repeatedly break trust with people and continue to influence them. It just doesn’t happen. Your people know when you make mistakes. The real question is whether you’re going to fess up. If you do, you can often regain their trust.

Trust is like change in a leader’s pocket. Each time you make good leadership decisions, you earn more change. Each time you make poor decisions, you pay out some of your change to the people.

All leaders have a certain amount of change in their pocket when they start in a new leadership position. Whatever they do either builds up their change or depletes it.

7. The Law of Respect

People don’t follow others by accident. They follow individuals whose leadership they respect. People who are an 8 in leadership (on a scale from 1 to 10, with 10 being the strongest) don’t go out and look for a 6 to follow—they naturally follow a 9 or 10. The less skilled follow the more highly skilled and gifted.

In general, followers are attracted to people who are better leaders than themselves. That is the Law of Respect. Leaders gain respect because of their natural leadership ability, by demonstrating respect for others, and for courage, success, loyalty and adding value to others. Evaluate yourself in each of these areas. Then work for a month on each to make that trait or skill a regular part of your life.

8. The Law of Intuition

Intuition is so difficult to explain because it’s not concrete. It doesn’t rely on just empirical evidence. But the following five facts are true and indicative of intuition.

1. Leaders Are Readers of Their Situation—They are very aware of both atmosphere and environment.

2. Leaders Are Readers of Trends—Leaders have the ability—and responsibility—to step back from what’s happening at the moment and to discern not only where the organization has been, but also where it is headed.

3. Leaders Are Readers of Their Resources—Their focus is on mobilizing people and leveraging resources to achieve their goals rather than on using their own individual efforts.

4. Leaders Are Readers of People—Intuition helps leaders sense what’s happening among people and know their hopes, fears and concerns.

5. Leaders Are Readers of Themselves—Leaders must know not only their own strengths and blind spots, skills and weaknesses, but also their current state of mind. Why? Because leaders can hinder progress just as easily as they can help create it.

9. The Law of Magnetism

Take a look at the following characteristics. If you have recruited and hired a staff, you will probably find that you and the people who follow you share common ground in several of these key areas: generation, attitude, background, values, energy, giftedness and leadership ability.

You may be saying to yourself, I’m not crazy about the people I’m attracting. Am I stuck with my situation? No. But you will have to identify the undesirable traits you see in these people and work on improving these in yourself.

On the other hand, you may be saying, I like who I am, and I like the kind of people I attract. That’s great! Now, take the next step in effective leadership. Work at recruiting people who are different from you to staff your weaknesses. If you don’t, important organizational tasks are likely to be overlooked, and the organization will suffer as a result.

10. The Law of Connection

When it comes to working with people, the heart comes before the head. That’s true whether you are communicating to a stadium full of people, leading a team meeting or trying to relate to your spouse. Think about how you react to people. If you listen to a speaker or teacher, do you want to hear a bunch of dry statistics or a load of facts? Or would you rather the speaker engaged you on a human level—maybe with a story or joke? You first have to touch people’s hearts before you ask them for a hand.

11. The Law of the Inner Circle

When we see any incredibly gifted person, it’s always tempting to believe that talent alone made him successful. To think that is to buy into a lie. Nobody does anything
great alone. Leaders do not succeed alone. A leader’s potential is determined by those closest to him. What makes the difference is the leader’s inner circle.

Leaders have to deliver. There is no substitute for performance. But without a good team, they often don’t get the opportunity. Their potential is determined by those closest to them. That is the Law of the Inner Circle.

12. The Law of Empowerment

To lead others well, we must help them to reach their potential. That means being on their side, encouraging them, giving them power and helping them to succeed.

When I teach the Law of Empowerment in emerging countries, I usually ask a volunteer to come up so that I can show visually what happens when a leader tries to keep others down instead of raising them up. I ask the volunteer to stand in front of me, and I put my hands on his shoulders.

Then I begin pushing him down. The lower I want to push him, the more I have to bend down to do it. As I push him lower, I go lower.

That’s the same way it is in leadership: To keep others down, you have to go down with them. And when you do that, you lose any power to lift others up.

13. The Law of the Picture

Good leaders are always conscious of the fact that they are setting the example and others are going to do what they do, for better or worse. In general, the better the leader’s actions, the better their people’s.

That’s not to say that leaders have all the answers. Anyone who has led anything knows that. The leaders who make the greatest impact are often those who lead well in the midst of uncertainty. Remember: Followers are always watching what you do. It’s easier to teach what’s right than to do what’s right. That’s why we should work on changing ourselves before trying to improve others. The most valuable gift a leader can give is being a good example.

14. The Law of Buy-In

If the leader has not built credibility with his people, it really doesn’t matter how great the vision is. Every message that people receive is filtered through the messenger who delivers it. If you consider the messenger to be credible, then you believe.

You cannot separate leaders from the causes they promote. It cannot be done, no matter how hard you try. It’s not an either-or proposition. The two always go together. As a leader, having a great vision and a worthy cause is not enough to get people to follow you. You have to become a better leader; you must get your people to buy into you. That is the price you have to pay if you want your vision to have a chance of becoming a reality.

15. The Law of Victory

The best leaders feel compelled to rise to a challenge and do everything in their power to achieve victory for their people. In their view...

- Leadership is responsible.
- Losing is unacceptable.
- Passion is unquenchable.
- Creativity is essential.
- Quitting is unthinkable.
- Commitment is unquestionable.
- Victory is inevitable.

With that mindset, they embrace the vision and approach the challenges with the resolve to take their people to victory.

Three Components of Victory

1. Unity of Vision
2. Diversity of Skills
3. Leader Dedicated to Victory and Raising Players to Their Potential

16. The Law of the Big Mo

If you want your organization, department or team to succeed, you must learn the Law of Momentum and make the most of it in your organization.

Here are some things about momentum that you need to know:

- Momentum is the great exaggerator.
- Momentum makes leaders look better than they are.
- Momentum helps followers perform better than they are.
- Momentum is easier to steer than to start.
- Momentum is the most powerful change agent.
- Momentum is the leader’s responsibility.
- Momentum begins inside the leader.
- Motivation is a key factor in developing momentum.
- To encourage momentum, you need to help your people celebrate their accomplishments.
17. The Law of Priorities

Although it’s a requirement for success, not every leader practices the discipline of prioritizing. Why? I believe there are a few reasons.

When we are busy, we naturally believe that we are achieving. But busyness does not equal productivity. Activity is not necessarily accomplishment.

Prioritizing requires leaders to continually think ahead, to know what’s important, to know what’s next, to see how everything relates to the overall vision. That’s hard work.

Prioritizing causes us to do things that are at the least uncomfortable and sometimes downright painful.

Three R’s of Priority

Three guidelines I use whenever I evaluate my priorities are the three R’s. No, not reading, writing and ‘rithmetic. My three R’s are requirement, return and reward. I believe that to be effective, leaders must order their lives according to these three questions:

1. What is required?
2. What gives the greatest return?
3. What brings the greatest reward?

Effective leaders should strive to live every day by the Law of Priorities.

18. The Law of Sacrifice

There is a common misperception among people who aren’t leaders that leadership is all about the position, perks and power that come from rising in an organization. But the reality is that leadership requires sacrifice. A leader must give up to go up.

If you desire to become the best leader you can be, then you need to be willing to make sacrifices in order to lead well. If that is your desire, then here are some things you need to know about the Law of Sacrifice:

1. There is no success without sacrifice.
2. Leaders are often asked to give up more than others.
3. You must keep giving to stay up.
4. The higher the level of leadership, the greater the sacrifice.

19. The Law of Timing

Timing is often the difference between success and failure in an endeavor.

Every time a leader makes a move, there are really only four outcomes:

1. The wrong action at the wrong time leads to disaster.
2. The right action at the wrong time brings resistance.
3. The wrong action at the right time is a mistake.
4. The right action at the right time results in success.

As you prepare to engage in future plans, use the list of factors from the chapter to prepare for the timing of your actions:

• Understanding: Do you have a firm grasp on the situation?
• Maturity: Are your motives right?
• Confidence: Do you believe in what you are doing?
• Decisiveness: Can you initiate action with confidence and win people’s trust?
• Experience: Have you drawn upon wisdom from others to inform your strategy?
• Intuition: Have you taken into account intangibles such as momentum and morale?
• Preparation: Have you done everything you must to set up your team for success?

20. The Law of Explosive Growth

In short, the Law of Explosive Growth says:

• If you develop yourself, you can experience personal success.
• If you develop a team, your organization can experience growth.
• If you develop leaders, your organization can achieve explosive growth.

Leaders who develop leaders develop the top 20 percent of their team. They focus on strengths rather than weaknesses. Leaders who develop leaders do so by giving rewards, resources and responsibility based on results. They invest time in others to help increase their ability and influence. Every time you develop leaders and help them increase their leadership ability, you make them capable of influencing an even greater number of people. By helping one person, you can reach many others.

21. The Law of Legacy

If you desire to make an impact as a leader on a future generation, then I suggest you become highly intentional about your legacy. I believe that every person leaves some kind of legacy. For some, it’s positive. For others, it’s negative.
But here’s what I know: We have a choice about what legacy we will leave, and we must work and be intentional to leave the legacy we want. Here’s how:

1. Know the legacy you want to leave.
2. Live the legacy you want to leave.
3. Choose who will carry on your legacy.
4. Make sure you pass the baton.

CONCLUSION

As you work to build your organization, remember this:

- Personnel determine the potential of the organization.
- Relationships determine the morale of the organization.
- Structure determines the size of the organization.
- Vision determines the direction of the organization.
- Leadership determines the success of the organization.

Now that you know the laws and understand them, share them with your team. And take time to evaluate yourself regarding each of the laws using the evaluation tool on the following pages. As I mentioned at the beginning of this book, nobody does all the laws well. That’s why you need to build a team.

I wish you great leadership success.

Recommended Reading

If you enjoyed this summary of The 21 Irrefutable Laws of Leadership, check out:

Developing the Leader Within by John C. Maxwell

Talent Is Never Enough by John C. Maxwell

Life Is a Series of Presentations by Tony Jeary

About the Author

John C. Maxwell didn’t get an allowance growing up; instead, his father paid him for each personal-development book he read. By applying the knowledge he acquired through self-discipline, Maxwell has become one of the most prominent leadership experts of the 20th and 21st centuries.

Maxwell is a frequent speaker to Fortune 500 companies as well as international government leaders. His books have sold more than 12 million copies. The book that is the basis for this summary has sold more than a million copies. His organizations have trained more than a million leaders, and he continues to make an impact throughout the world with his sound, insightful leadership principles.