Self-Improvement 101
What Every Leader Needs to Know
by John C. Maxwell

Intentional Personal Development
To keep growing, you must keep learning.

QUICK OVERVIEW

In Self-Improvement 101, best-selling author John C. Maxwell builds on centuries of wisdom on personal growth and leadership skills, from Plato to Gandhi, to provide a concise look at how to be successful. An easy read, Self-Improvement 101 looks at success as an ongoing journey of personal development, requiring one to be open to learning new ideas, willing to let go of past achievements to keep moving forward, and ready to accept failure and loss as part of the growing process.

A must-read for any entrepreneur or small-business owner who wonders what is holding him back from moving to the next level, Maxwell’s book provides quick and powerful insights into the fears that often keep us from living our full potential. He provides inspiration for overcoming risk aversion, adopting an attitude of humility, and trying new things that take us outside our comfort zones. And he does with chunky sections filled with action points for turning that next conference or mentoring session into an opportunity for massive change.

APPLY AND ACHIEVE

It may be no surprise that the thing that keeps most people from living life fully and achieving their dreams is fear of failure. But Maxwell points out that failure is an essential component of success. He says everyone should be willing to not only risk failure, but to embrace failure as an opportunity for learning how to do things differently in the future. Maxwell points to the story of Joseph in the Old Testament, who continually faced adversity, years and years of it, but maintained his faith in his ability to overcome, which he did, ultimately becoming a key leader of Egypt.

And as we learn from failure, Maxwell also advises us to be willing to let go in order to keep growing. Rather than resting on our laurels once we achieve a goal,
If you want to grow and become the best person you can be, you’ve got to be intentional about it.

At the same time, life is busy and complex. Most people run out of day long before their to-do lists are done. And trying to get to the bottom line in just about any area of life can be a challenge.

WHAT WILL IT TAKE FOR ME TO IMPROVE?

Just about anyone would agree that growing is a good thing, but relatively few people dedicate themselves to the process. Why? Because it requires change, and most people are reluctant to change. But the truth is that without change, growth is impossible.

Author Gail Sheehy asserted: “If we don’t change, we don’t grow. If we don’t grow, we are not really living. Growth demands a temporary surrender of security. It may mean a giving up of familiar but limiting patterns, safe but unrewarding work, values no longer believed in, relationships that have lost their meaning. As Dostoevsky put it, ‘taking a new step, uttering a new word, is what most people fear most.’ ” The real fear should be the opposite course.

Most people fight against change, especially when it affects them personally. As novelist Leo Tolstoy said, “Everyone thinks of changing the world, but no one thinks of changing himself.” The ironic thing is that change is inevitable. Everybody has to deal with it. On the other hand, growth is optional. You can choose to grow or fight it. But know this: people unwilling to grow will never reach their potential.

Growth is a choice, a decision that can really make a difference in a person’s life.

Take a look at the following eight principles. They’ll help you develop into a person dedicated to personal growth:

1) Choose a Life of Growth—The people who reach their potential, no matter what their profession or background, think in terms of improvement. The only way to improve the quality of your life is to improve yourself.

2) Start Growing Today—The best way to ensure success is to start growing today. If you don’t make growth your responsibility, it will never happen.

3) Focus on Self-Development, Not Self-Fulfillment—Beginning in the late sixties and early seventies, people began talking about “finding themselves,” meaning that they were searching for a way to become self-fulfilled. It’s like making happiness a goal because self-fulfillment is about feeling good. But self-development is different. Sure, much of the time it will make you feel good, but that’s a by-product, not the goal. Self-development is a higher calling; it is the development of your potential so that you can attain the purpose for which you were created.

4) Never Stay Satisfied with Current Accomplishments—Thinking that you have “arrived” when you accomplish a goal has the same effect as believing you know it all. It takes away your desire to learn. It’s another characteristic of destination disease. But successful people don’t sit back and rest on their laurels. They know that wins—like losses—are temporary, and they have to keep growing if they want to continue being successful.

5) Be a Continual Learner—If you want to be a continual learner and keep growing throughout your life, you’ll have to carve out the time to do it.

6) Develop a Plan for Growth—The key to a life of continual learning and improvement lies in developing a specific plan for growth and following through with it. I recommend a plan that requires an hour a day, five days a week.
7) Pay the Price—I mentioned before that self-fulfillment focuses on making a person happy, whereas self-development proposes to help a person reach potential. A trade-off of growth is that it is sometimes uncomfortable. It requires discipline. You have to face constant change and take risks. And sometimes it’s just plain lonely. That’s why many people stop growing when the price gets high. But growth is always worth the price you pay because the alternative is a limited life with unfulfilled potential. Success takes effort, and you can’t make the journey if you’re sitting back waiting for life to come along and improve you.

8) Find a Way to Apply What You Learn—The bottom line when it comes to personal development is action. If your life doesn’t begin to change as a result of what you’re learning, you’re experiencing one of these problems: You’re not giving your growth plan enough time and attention; you’re focusing too much time on the wrong areas; or you’re not applying what you learn.

HOW DO I MAINTAIN A TEACHABLE ATTITUDE?

Teachability is not so much about competence and mental capacity as it is about attitude. It is the desire to listen, learn, and apply. To make the most of your talent and remain teachable, consider the following truths about teaching:

1) Nothing Is Interesting If You Are Not Interested—It’s a shame when people allow themselves to get in a rut and never climb out. They often miss the best that life has to offer. In contrast, teachable people are fully engaged in life. They get excited about things. They are interested in discovery, discussion, application, and growth. There is a definite relationship between passion and potential.

2) Successful People View Learning Differently from Those Who Are Unsuccessful—Teachable people are always open to new ideas and are willing to learn from anyone who has something to offer.

3) Learning Is Meant to Be a Lifelong Pursuit—Too many people regard learning as an event instead of a process. Someone told me that only one-third of all adults read an entire book after their last graduation. Why would that be? Because they view education as a period of life, not a way of life!

4) Pride Is the Number One Hindrance to Teachability—While envy is the deadly sin that comes from feelings of inferiority, the deadly sin of pride comes from feelings of superiority. It creates an arrogance of success, an inflated sense of self-worth accompanied by a distorted perspective of reality.

If you want to expand your talent, you must become teachable. That is the pathway to growth.

1) Learn to Listen—Being a good listener helps us to know people better, to learn what they have learned, and to show them that we value them as individuals.

How to Find the Right Mentor

You must have the right attitude toward others in order to grow. But if you really want to maximize your progress, you need to take another step. You need to find a mentor who can model what you want to learn and help you grow. I have developed six questions to ask myself before picking a model to follow.

1. Does my model’s life deserve a following?
2. Does my model’s life have a following?
3. What is the main strength that influences others to follow my model?
4. Does my model produce other leaders?
5. Is my model’s strength reproducible in my life?
6. If my model’s strength is reproducible in my life, what steps must I take to develop and demonstrate that strength?

When you find someone who can personally mentor you, use these guidelines to help develop a positive mentoring relationship with that person:

- Clarify your level of expectations
- Accept a subordinate, learning position
- Respect the mentor, but don’t idolize him
- Immediately put into effect what you are learning
- Be disciplined in relating to the mentor
- Reward your mentor with your own progress
- Don’t threaten to give up
2) Understand the Learning Process—Here’s how the learning typically works:
   STEP 1: Act.
   STEP 2: Look for your mistakes and evaluate.
   STEP 3: Search for a way to do it better.
   STEP 4: Go back to step 1.

3) Look for and Plan Teachable Moments—Cultivate friendships with people who challenge and add value to you, and try to do the same for them. It will change your life.

4) Make Your Teachable Moments Count—For thirty years I’ve been a speaker at conferences and workshops—events that are designed to help people learn. But I’ve found that many people walk away from an event and do very little with what they heard after closing their notebooks. I try to help people take action steps that will help them implement what they learn.

5) Ask Yourself, “Am I Really Teachable?”—To know whether you are really open to new ideas and new ways of doing things, answer the following questions:
   1. Am I open to other people’s ideas?
   2. Do I listen more than I talk?
   3. Am I open to changing my opinion based on new information?
   4. Do I readily admit when I am wrong?
   5. Do I observe before acting on a situation?
   6. Do I ask questions?
   7. Am I willing to ask a question that will expose my ignorance?
   8. Am I open to doing things in a way I haven’t done before?
   9. Am I willing to ask for directions?
   10. Do I act defensive when criticized, or do I listen openly for the truth?

If you answered no to one or more of these questions, then you have room to grow in the area of teachability. You need to soften your attitude and learn humility.

WHERE SHOULD I FOCUS MY TIME AND ENERGY?

I believe success is knowing your purpose in life, growing to your maximum potential, and sowing seeds that benefit others.

If you are able to do those three things, you are successful. However, none of them is possible unless you find and stay in your strength zone.

Improvement is always related to ability. The greater your natural ability, the greater your potential for improvement.

You need to discover and develop who you are. Whenever you see people who are successful in their work, you can rest assured that they are working in their strength zone. But that’s not enough if you want to be successful as a leader. Good leaders help others find their strength zones and empower them to work in them.

Sadly, most people are not working in their areas of strength and therefore are not reaching their potential. The Gallup organization conducted research on 1.7 million people in the workplace. According to their findings, only 20 percent of employees feel that their strengths are in play every day in the work setting. In my opinion, that is largely the fault of their leaders. They have failed to help their people find their strengths and place them in the organization where their strengths can be an asset to the company.

If you desire to be an effective leader, you must develop the ability to develop people in their areas of strength. How do you do that?

- Study and know the people on your team
- Communicate to individuals how they fit on the team
- Communicate to all team members how each player fits on the team
- Emphasize completing one another above competing with one another

WHAT ROLE DOES EXPERIENCE PLAY?

Some people learn and grow as a result of their experience; some people don’t. Everybody has some kind of experience. It’s what you do with that experience that matters. We all begin our lives as empty notebooks. Every day we have an opportunity to record new experiences on our pages. With the turning of
We gain more knowledge and understanding. Ideally, as we progress our notebooks become filled with notations and observations. The problem is that not all people make the best use of their notebooks. Some people seem to leave the notebook closed most of their lives. They rarely jot down anything at all. Others fill their pages, but they never take the time to reflect on them and gain greater wisdom and understanding. But a few not only make a record of what they experience; they linger over it and ponder its meaning. They reread what is written and reflect on it. Reflection turns experience into insight, so they not only live the experience but learn from it. They understand that time is on their side if they use their notebook as a learning tool, not just as a calendar. They have come to understand a secret. Experience teaches nothing, but evaluated experience teaches everything.

It’s a terrible thing to pay the price for experience and not receive the lesson. But that is often what happens with people. Why? Because when an experience is negative, people often run away from it. They’re very quick to say, “I’ll never do that again!”

People who make it a regular practice to reflect on their experiences, evaluate what went wrong and right, and learn from them are rare. But when you meet one, you know it.

WHAT AM I WILLING TO GIVE UP TO KEEP GROWING?

What is the greatest obstacle you will face once you have begun achieving your goals and tasting success? I believe it is the ability to let go of what you have so that you can reach for something new.

Anything we get will exact a price from us. The question is, when will we pay? The longer we wait to pay, the greater the price.

I’ve found that the higher we go, the harder it is to make trade-offs. Why? We have so much more that we risk giving up. People often talk about the sacrifices they had to make in the beginning of their careers. But in truth, most people have very little to give up in the beginning. The only thing of value that they have is time. But as we climb higher, we have more, and we find it more difficult to let go of what we’ve worked for. That’s why many climb partway up the mountain of their potential and then stop. They come to a place where they are unwilling to give up something in order to get the next thing. As a result, they stall—some forever.

To achieve excellence, I think you have to learn to travel light. You must learn to off-load before trying to reload. You have to let go of one thing in order to grasp a new one. People naturally resist that. We want to stay in our comfort zone and hold on to what’s familiar. Sometimes circumstances force us to give up something and we have the chance to gain something new. But more often than not, if we want to make positive trades, we have to maintain the right attitude and be willing to give up some things.

With each passing year, I want to make good choices that make me a better person, help me become a better leader, and make a positive impact on others. That requires a willingness to keep making trades, because for everything you gain, you have to give up something.
ACTION STEPS
Get more out of this SUCCESS Book Summary by applying what you’ve learned to your life. Here are a few questions and thoughts to get you started.

1. Open yourself to the idea of change.
2. Are you teachable? Be willing to learn new things every day.
3. Find a mentor in your field. Connect with them this week.
4. Write down three positive outcomes of your most recent failure.
5. Remember that to grow and learn, you must be willing to step outside your comfort zone.
6. List three things that you need to let go of in order to move forward.
7. Understand that self-improvement requires risk, and risk always exacts a price. What positive risks have you been avoiding? List three ways your life could improve if you took those risks.

About the Author
John C. Maxwell is an internationally known leadership expert, speaker, and author who has sold more than 19 million books. More than 5 million leaders in over 125 countries have received training from EQUIP, an organization Maxwell founded in 1996. Every year he speaks to a wide variety of audiences, ranging from Fortune 500 companies and international government leaders to the United States Military Academy, the National Football League, and United Nations ambassadors. The John Maxwell Company provides services, events, and products, including public and private training, coaching, faith-based offerings and other leadership resources, to individuals and corporations.

Leadershipgurus.net named Maxwell, a New York Times, Wall Street Journal, and BusinessWeek best-selling author, as the World’s Top Leadership Guru. In addition, he was one of only 25 authors and artists named to Amazon.com’s 10th Anniversary Hall of Fame.

Recommended Reading
If you enjoyed the summary of Self-Improvement 101, check out:

Teamwork 101 by John C. Maxwell

Self-Improvement: The Top 101 Experts Who Help Us Improve Our Lives by David Riklan

50 Self-Help Classics: 50 Inspirational Books to Transform Your Life by Tom Butler-Bowden