

Board Presidents: Are You Leading or Managing?

Qualities of leadership that all board presidents should be familiar with

BY JESSE ADAMS

To lead, or not to lead, that is the question. With apologies to William Shakespeare, the challenges of true leadership can sometimes be daunting and the definition of leadership is often misunderstood.

Just because you are the supervisor, the department head, someone in charge, or even the board president; does that automatically make you a leader? My answer would be, no. These individuals may be good managers, but may lack the attributes and qualities of a leader. “Leading” and “managing” are not the same. But many times, based on misconceptions and myths, we incorrectly use these terms interchangeably. Management focuses on maintaining systems, processes, and resources. Managers can execute processes and maintain direction, but very often they cannot change it. Leadership, on the other hand, is about influencing people to follow. Leadership is a skill; leadership can be learned; and leadership is a choice. True leaders can affect positive change on the team or within an organization.

Leadership guru John C. Maxwell, author of the bestselling books, *The 21 Irrefutable Laws of Leadership* and *The 21 Indispensable Qualities of a Leader*, discovered through his decade of teaching the 21 Laws that “leadership requires the ability to do more than one thing well” and “no one does all 21 Laws well.” With that in mind, learning, understanding and mastering Maxwell’s 21 Laws would take a lot of time and practice. But as a newly elected board

president, you don’t have time. You need to hit the floor running and you find yourself wondering: Where do I start?

Based on the concepts expressed in Maxwell’s books, let’s start by focusing on the four laws that can quickly impact your ability to lead. We will then highlight the qualities exhibited when practicing these four laws.

The Law of Influence: The True Measure of Leadership is Influence — Nothing More, Nothing Less

Being assigned, appointed, or elected to a position can provide you with the opportunity to lead, but true leadership is not achieved by simply getting a title. Your ability to influence others is the key. You can’t mandate influence. It must be earned.

Maxwell addresses several factors that play a major role in a person’s ability to influence others. They are:

- **Character:** Who They Are (their inner person)
- **Relationships:** Who They Know (followers)
- **Knowledge:** What They Know (grasp of facts, understanding situation dynamics, doing homework, vision)
- **Intuition:** What They Feel (ability to deal with intangibles)
- **Experience:** Where They’ve Been (past challenges faced)
- **Past Success:** What They’ve Done (good track record, demonstrated successes)

- **Ability:** What They Can Do (are you capable, can you deliver)

Maxwell also points out that influence is critical to a person’s ability to lead, and to attain and maintain followers when there is no leverage, as with volunteer organizations like a school board. For example, in organizations like the military or businesses, positional leaders have the added leverage of rank (military) or a person’s livelihood (salary and benefits) to maintain and motivate cooperative followers. But volunteers cannot be forced to follow you.

The bottom line is this: If you can’t influence people, then they will not follow you. And if people won’t follow you, you are not a leader. The same is true for your fellow board members.

The Law of Process: Leadership Develops Daily, Not in a Day

As school board members, we discuss with our superintendents what we want to provide for our students. In addition to areas like academic success and social-emotional wellness, I often hear boards express their desire to develop their students to become lifelong learners. In the “Law of Process,” Maxwell identifies leaders as learners. And continuous learning and self-improvement is an ongoing process, not an event.

Maxwell proposes that leadership development and progress follows five phases:

- **Phase 1:** I don’t know what I don’t know.

People fail to understand the value of leadership or falsely believe that leadership is limited to a select few. They don't understand that the skills of leadership are a learning process.

- **Phase 2:** I know what I need to know. When you are put into a leadership position and you find that no one on the team is following you, it's time to ask yourself what are you doing that causes people to not follow you. Through that self-evaluation, you'll realize that you need to learn how to lead.
- **Phase 3:** I know what I don't know. When you realize that you need to learn to lead, you can then start to build your own personal growth plan to address the leadership skills you want to grow.
- **Phase 4:** I know and grow, and it starts to show. When you apply the discipline of continuous personal growth, focused on your recognized lack of leadership skills, the benefits start to appear.
- **Phase 5:** I simply go because of what I know. By your disciplined personal leadership growth through Phase 4 and by focusing on every move you make with your team, you become effective at leading and attaining followers. But, you know you've entered Phase 5 when your ability to lead seems automatic and based on great instincts.

Great athletes don't become great overnight. It takes years of practice. The same is true for great leaders.

Another key aspect of the Law of Process is that the difference between good leaders and great leaders is the investment they make in their followers. Just as you need your own personal growth plan to improve, so do your fellow board members. Ask yourself: How have I provided opportunities for growth for the board team? If you find it hard to answer that

question, then it is time for you to pause and develop your board team's growth plan. Board president, it's your responsibility!

The Law of Addition: Leaders Add Value by Serving Others

Are you an "adder" or a "subtractor"? I'm sure you are wondering what that means. Maxwell said that if you are a leader you are having either a positive or a negative impact on the people you lead. If you strive to make things better for your followers, then you are an adder. If you're unsure if you are making things better, then you may be a subtractor.

Maxwell notes that inexperienced leaders are quick to lead before knowing about the people. Mature leaders listen, learn, and then lead. Mature leaders work to add value to others. Maxwell has developed three fundamental guidelines to help leaders add value to others.

- **Fundamental 1: We add value to others when we truly value others** Darryl Hartley-Leonard, former chairman of Hyatt Hotels Corporation, says, "When a person moves into a position of authority, he or she gives up the right to abuse people." But it's not enough to merely not use your position for abuse. Effective leaders show that they value and care about others by intentionally demonstrating their unwavering help and support.
- **Fundamental 2: We add value to others when we make ourselves more valuable to others** You can't give value to others if you don't possess anything of value. Ask yourself: What do I bring to the table that will add value to my fellow board members? If you have been on a journey of personal continuous learning and professional growth, then you've gained skills, wisdom, insights, and perspectives that should be valuable to

the board team. By continuing to grow, you continue to have value to offer.

- **Fundamental 3: We add value to others when we know and relate to what others value** As board president, do you know what is valuable to each of your fellow board members? When you think of your favorite restaurant, besides the great food, why is it your favorite? Maybe it's because of the great customer service. Do they automatically refill your drinks, bring extra napkins, and keep the bread tray replenished? Chances are the staff anticipates what is important to you. As a leader, do you anticipate what is important to your board members? An effective leader will listen and learn what is important and valuable to each member of the team and then lead based on what they've learned. Do you take the time to know and relate to each of your fellow board members?

The Law of Solid Ground: Trust Is the Foundation of Leadership.

Your effectiveness as a leader and your ability to influence others will be driven by one thing: trust. Maxwell identifies trust as "the most important thing" to the leader's ability to be successful with his or her team. Leaders can build trust through their ability to "consistently exemplify competence, connection, and character." But of these three qualities, leaders will lose trust and ultimately effectiveness if they slip in their character. As board president, your personal character will determine whether your fellow board members will trust you and become followers. This will ultimately drive the success of the board team to move the school district in a positive direction for the benefit of the children. Maxwell states, "Character makes trust possible. And trust

makes leadership possible.”

Maxwell observes that a person’s character communicates three important things:

- **Character Communicates Consistency** – A strong character models integrity in all a leader does.
- **Character Communicates Potential** – A strong character breeds trust and allows leaders to tap into the full potential of their followers.
- **Character Communicates Respect** – A strong character allows leaders to focus on what’s best for the team and the organization versus their own personal agendas, thus, gaining the respect of their followers.

The importance of gaining the trust of your fellow board members is paramount to a board president’s success as a leader. As part of your personal leadership growth plan, what are you doing to develop your character? Look in the mirror and ask yourself: How trustworthy would your fellow board members say you are? Remember, it’s not the board members’ responsibility to trust you. It’s your responsibility to earn their trust.

In *The 21 Indispensable Qualities of a Leader*, Maxwell looks at the 21 qualities of a leader. Based on the four laws that we have reviewed, the table on this page highlights those qualities I feel are exhibited when a leader is actively demonstrating those laws. As board president, take your own inventory to determine where you rate with these qualities. Based on your personal inventory, update your personal growth plan for the qualities you want to work on.

The NJSBA field service representatives often remind boards that being on a board of education is a team sport. And every team benefits from great leadership.

Qualities of a Leader	Take a Self-Inventory
Character	When facing the adversity crossroads, do you choose the “character” path or the “compromise” path? Do you not only steer clear of wrongdoing but also avoid “gray areas”?
Charisma	Do you think of others and their concerns before thinking of yourself? Do you consistently see the good in people? Do you give people hope?
Communication	Do you keep your messages simple, clear and concise? Do you know your audience—board members, staff, parents, public?
Competence	Do you continually educate yourself as a board member and a leader? Do you go the extra mile for your board team and the school district?
Courage	Are you willing to take personal risks and make tough decisions to drive student achievement improvement? Are you willing to stick by your principles or do you bow to public perception?
Focus	Do you set board priorities and concentrate on them? Do you utilize your areas of strength, and delegate to other board members tasks in areas in which you have weaknesses?
Generosity	Do you put people first? Are you a giver or a taker?
Listening	Do you listen for emotional content as well as factual content? Do you listen to learn and connect with people?
Positive Attitude	Do you choose to maintain a good attitude, even when that is difficult? Is the attitude of fellow board members a mirror of yours (good or bad)?
Relationships	Do you have a leader’s head (understand people), a leader’s heart (love people), and a leader’s hand (help people)?
Responsibility	Do you commit to get the job done and go the extra mile if necessary? Are you driven by excellence?
Security	When the board succeeds, do you give key board members credit? Do you support great ideas of others or do you suppress them?
Servanthood	Do you put others ahead of your own agenda? Do you strive to serve your fellow board members? Do you invest in the growth of your board team?
Teachability	Are you teachable or do you believe you know everything? Do you fear making mistakes or do you see mistakes as opportunities to learn and grow?

Being that great leader is the responsibility that all board presidents take on when their fellow board members elect them to the position. It’s important for presidents to set their egos aside and become the best servant leaders that they can possibly be for the children of their school district. The journey to great leadership isn’t short and isn’t easy. But if you work hard at it, the benefits that you and your board team will reap will be many.

There’s a leadership proverb that goes: He who thinks he leads, but has no followers, is only taking a walk.

So the challenge to board presidents and other board members in leadership roles is: Are you leading or managing?

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