

LEADERSHIP MISTAKES

Dr. John C. Maxwell - John C. Maxwell's Leadership Wired Volumes

RISING WITH YOUR PEOPLE

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I used to think that leaders distinguished themselves by rising above their people. It's the "cream of the crop" theory. That was a mistake. I've learned that leaders distinguish themselves by rising with their people, and there's a world of difference between those two.

Leaders take people with them on the journey. You don't go by yourself. If you're going by yourself, you are not a leader. You might be a very self-made, successful person, but you're not a leader. You've got to decide whether you're going to be a tour guide or a travel agent.

Travel agents give you brochures and tell you all about the trip, but they've never even been there. They get the tickets for you, give you a planner and send you off somewhere. You don't want to be a travel agent; you don't want to be sending people where you've never been — you want to be a tour guide. You want to bring your people along with you and say, "Let me show you something. I'm going to take you places where I've been and lived, and tell you all about them as we go. I'm going to let you in on the journey."

Because I felt that leaders should be separated from others in my younger days, because I mistakenly felt that leaders should rise above their people the following things happened:

1. I was lonely.

We've all heard the expression "It's lonely at the top," haven't we? Well, I was at the top, lonely. By the way, a leader never said that — you know that, don't you? Because if you're at the top all alone, nobody's following you! I'd get off the mountain if I were you. I'd go find the people.

2. I seldom asked for help.

The reason I seldom asked for help is because I thought it was a sign of weakness. I thought that leaders had to be Mr. Answer Man or Ms. Answer Woman. Why would you ask somebody for help? After all, that would make you kind of like them, and after a while, you could be a commoner if you weren't careful. Sooner or later, everyone needs help, and admitting it does not make you less of a leader.

3. I was very position-conscious.

I was very position-conscious. I was making sure that I had my title and my position and "my rights." Let me tell you something: leaders come from all

walks of life, and they often lead people without the benefit of a position or a title. They do it by building influence with others. People who are focused on their position are too wrapped up rights and responsibilities to influence anyone.

4. I was very competitive.

I became very competitive during that whole process, and the reason for that's very simple: I was always trying to beat someone else. People are not apt to follow you if your goal is to defeat them and make a loser out of them. Leaders encourage people and make them feel like winners.

This was one of many mistakes I made in my early years and I will discuss others I made during those times in upcoming issues of "Leadership Wired."

FOCUSING ON THE PEOPLE'S AGENDA

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In the [last issue](#) of *Leadership Wired*, I presented one of the mistakes that I made in my early years as a leader. That **first mistake** was that [I thought leaders distinguished themselves by rising *above* their people](#), only to find out that [leaders distinguish themselves by rising *with* their people](#).

This next mistake is related to the first: I thought as a leader that the people should be focused on my agenda; and the lesson I learned was, as a leader, that I should be focused on their agenda.

A perfect example is General George Custer. We all know about Custer and his last stand on June 26, 1876. There are three mistakes that General Custer made that day when he led his people into the slaughter:

- 1. He put his agenda above the soldiers.**

History proves that he put his agenda above the soldiers', because Custer had tremendous ambitions--he wanted to go to the White House--and he saw this campaign as a way to get there. It was a selfish agenda, and it cost him his life, as well as the lives of many of his men.

- 2. He underestimated the strength of the enemy.**

His last recorded words as the soldiers began to break rank and go into battle were, "Hang on, boys. There'll be enough Indians for everyone." He left behind two Gatlin guns, his most effective weapons, because he didn't think that they would need them. You should never let pride get you in that kind of trouble--to be caught off guard simply because you expected to win and became complacent.

- 3. He didn't prepare his soldiers for battle.**

There's a moment in the film "We Were Soldiers", starring Mel Gibson, when the main character looks at his right-hand man and says, "I feel

like General Custer." He was distraught because he was watching so many of his men being killed, but there was a vast difference between him and General Custer. This real-life colonel looked at his men and said, "I'll be the first on the field of battle, I'll be the last off of the field of battle; and when I go, everybody, dead or alive of our group, will be with me." That's a perfect example of somebody who puts someone else's agenda above their own, unlike Custer, who was more interested in glory than the safety of his men.

There are five things that happen when leaders put their agendas above the people:

1. **They become self-serving instead of a servant.**
Leaders should be servants and stewards of their people--plain and simple.
2. **They manipulate people instead of motivating people.**
I manipulate you when I move you for my advantage; I motivate you when I move you for mutual advantage. Motivation as a leader is always right; manipulation as a leader is always wrong.
3. **They become self-absorbed instead of focusing on others.**
Vanity takes the place of humility in this case.
4. **They are image-conscious instead of improvement-conscious.**
This is the difference between the art of seeming and the art of doing.
5. **They place their interest above the people's interest.**
If you do this for too long, people will find a new leader.

Now let me just stop here for a moment and say that my background is in leading people by pastoring. When I first started out, I looked at the people in my church and said to myself, "I wonder how they can help me. I've got this vision, I've got this goal; here's what I want to do--I want to build this church."

It was a huge day in my life when I went the opposite way, asking the question, "How can I help them? How can I add value to them?" When I did that, I began to have some huge breakthroughs.

In my beginning days, I also wanted to sit down and say, "Listen to me, listen to me, listen to me," and I realized that if I really wanted to lead people, I needed to shut up and listen to them. I needed to walk slowly through the crowd, and keep my ears to the ground.

I will explore other lessons I learned in upcoming issues of Leadership Wired.