

Groups

5 Levels of Leadership by John Maxwell

Overview: This group is designed for a 10 week semester. Summer groups can combine 2 weeks at a time to fit into the 6 week semester.

Week 1: Introduction to the 5 Levels of Leadership

Introduction & Chapters 1–2 (Pages 1–34)

Summary:

John C. Maxwell opens *The 5 Levels of Leadership* by explaining that leadership is not a static position but a dynamic process. Everyone starts at Level 1—Position—and has the opportunity to grow through four additional levels. The higher one climbs, the greater the influence, effectiveness, and legacy a leader can leave. The book invites readers to evaluate their current level and commit to growth.

Maxwell explains that these five levels are not just theoretical—they are based on decades of leadership experience and observation. He also notes that leadership is about influence, and without influence, one cannot lead. The journey of leadership is not about acquiring power but about increasing one's ability to positively impact others.

The introduction also sets the tone that leadership is not about titles, but transformation. As a leader grows, they move from being someone people follow because they have to, to someone others want to follow, grow with, and eventually emulate. Maxwell emphasizes that leadership is developed daily and deliberately, not in a single event.

In Chapter 2, Maxwell introduces Level 1: Position. This is the starting place of leadership where people follow you because they have to. It's the lowest level of leadership but can serve as a foundation if approached correctly. He cautions against

staying at Level 1 too long, because leadership based only on position rarely results in long-term influence.

The first session prepares readers for the leadership growth journey by explaining that leadership is a process that must be pursued with intentionality. True leaders do not rely on their role but rather on their character, care, and competency.

Discussion Questions:

1. How do you define leadership in your own words?
2. What is your current level of leadership influence, according to Maxwell's framework?
3. Have you experienced leadership based on position alone? What were the results?
4. Why do you think Maxwell says leadership develops daily, not in a day?
5. What are some risks of staying at Level 1 for too long?
6. What habits or attitudes might keep someone from growing past Level 1?
7. What are your personal goals for leadership growth during this group?

Week 2: Mastering Level 1 – Position

Chapters 3–4 (Pages 35–60)

Summary:

Level 1—Position—can serve as a helpful starting place, but it should not be confused with true leadership. Maxwell makes it clear that just because someone has a title or role does not mean they have influence. In fact, positional leaders often rely on rules, policies, and hierarchy rather than trust, motivation, and inspiration.

He encourages leaders to see the position as a platform, not a pinnacle. The position gives access to people, but it does not guarantee engagement. It allows the leader to begin building credibility, fostering communication, and cultivating consistency—key traits for rising to the next level.

Chapter 4 outlines best practices to maximize influence at Level 1. These include learning to lead yourself well, demonstrating character and competence, and shifting from authority-based to relationship-based leadership. Leaders must earn their team's respect and commitment—not demand it.

Maxwell also cautions against common traps of Level 1 leadership, such as entitlement, complacency, or fear-based control. Leaders who stay stuck in position-based leadership will struggle to grow others or expand their influence.

This week emphasizes that Level 1 is a permission slip to begin leading—it's not the final destination. Strong leadership development begins with mastering self-leadership and building a foundation of trust.

Discussion Questions:

1. What leadership strengths can you use to grow beyond Level 1?
2. What habits might keep someone stuck in positional leadership?
3. How do you typically respond to leaders who only lead by title or rank?
4. What does it mean to lead yourself well?
5. How can you begin to move from rule enforcement to relationship-building?
6. What small changes can you make to strengthen your credibility?
7. What legacy would be left if you led solely from position?

Week 3: Level 2 – Permission

Chapters 5–6 (Pages 61–92)

Summary:

Level 2—Permission—marks the transition from rights-based leadership to relationship-based leadership. At this level, people follow a leader because they want to, not because they have to. Maxwell emphasizes that this level requires intentional relationship-building, listening, and empathy.

A leader at Level 2 values people, treats them with respect, and invests in getting to know them personally. This creates a culture of trust and openness. Maxwell notes that people won't go along with you unless they can get along with you, reinforcing the relational nature of effective leadership.

One of the biggest challenges at this level is balancing relational leadership with clear expectations. Leaders must avoid the temptation to be liked at the expense of being respected. Strong leaders listen well, build trust, and communicate authentically while maintaining clear direction.

Maxwell shares practical strategies for thriving at this level: genuinely caring about your people, being accessible, leading with vulnerability, and listening more than speaking. These qualities deepen loyalty and increase the leader's influence.

Level 2 leaders lead with the heart. This is where leadership becomes personal, and teams begin to move together—not just because they must, but because they believe in the person leading them.

Discussion Questions:

1. What makes you want to follow someone voluntarily?
2. How do you invest in building trust with your team?
3. What barriers can prevent a leader from building healthy relationships?
4. How do you balance empathy with accountability?
5. What does it look like to lead with vulnerability?
6. In what ways can you be more present with those you lead?
7. How does building relational trust affect team morale?

Week 4: Level 3 – Production (Part 1)

Chapters 7–8 (Pages 93–122)

Summary:

Level 3—Production—is where leaders gain influence through results. At this level, people follow because of what the leader has done for the organization. This level separates leaders who are merely liked from those who produce and inspire high performance.

Maxwell states that production creates credibility. People admire leaders who “walk the talk,” consistently achieve goals, and deliver measurable outcomes. Production multiplies influence because success attracts commitment and motivates teams.

This level is where momentum begins to build. As the leader models initiative, focus, and discipline, others follow suit. Production-oriented leaders foster a culture of excellence, accountability, and celebration of progress.

Maxwell warns that being busy doesn't equal being productive. True production is about doing the right things consistently and strategically. He encourages leaders to clarify vision, set priorities, and measure progress in visible ways.

Level 3 is where leaders demonstrate what they can do, and others take notice. Influence expands as the leader's results elevate the entire team.

Discussion Questions:

1. How do you measure leadership success in your role or team?
2. What's the difference between busyness and productivity in leadership?
3. How do your personal results impact your leadership credibility?
4. What's one system or habit that helps you stay focused on results?
5. How can you celebrate wins without creating pride or complacency?
6. What are the biggest distractions from producing real impact?
7. How can you align your daily work more closely with your leadership goals?

Week 5: Level 3 – Production (Part 2)

Chapters 9–10 (Pages 123–152)

Summary:

Maxwell continues his discussion of Level 3 by highlighting how leaders can elevate their impact through clarity, consistency, and a results-driven mindset. At this stage, leaders don't just work hard—they help others do the same. They move from achieving personal success to creating a high-performance environment.

He outlines how production-level leaders identify key goals, track progress, and remove obstacles for their team. They drive focus and align resources to ensure outcomes are met. However, results are not just about output—they're about inspiring belief and showing people that success is possible.

Chapter 10 discusses pitfalls of Level 3. Leaders may rely too heavily on productivity and neglect relational or developmental responsibilities. Maxwell reminds readers that production is most powerful when it fuels growth at every level—not just in numbers, but in people.

To thrive at Level 3, leaders must maintain integrity, humility, and team-centered vision. When production is consistent and values-driven, the team's trust and morale rise. Momentum becomes sustainable, and vision becomes reality.

This week reinforces that a leader's greatest results come not from doing everything themselves but by creating systems and empowering people to excel together.

Discussion Questions:

1. What are the top three results your team is focused on right now?
2. How do you help your team stay aligned with those goals?
3. What can happen when leaders emphasize production at the expense of people?
4. How do you evaluate success in your role beyond numbers?
5. What distractions need to be eliminated to raise performance?
6. How do you share ownership of results with your team?
7. What culture is being created by how you lead at Level 3?

Week 6: Level 4 – People Development (Part 1)

Chapters 11–12 (Pages 153–180)

Summary:

Level 4—People Development—is where leadership influence multiplies. Here, leaders focus not just on achieving goals but on growing people. Maxwell teaches that developing others is one of the most fulfilling and strategic uses of leadership.

He explains that leaders at Level 4 identify potential in others and invest in their growth. This requires time, patience, and belief in people before they believe in themselves. It also means being willing to step back and let others lead.

Chapter 12 provides the foundation for becoming a people developer: modeling leadership, building relationships, and creating growth opportunities. These leaders don't just assign tasks—they mentor, coach, and celebrate progress.

Maxwell emphasizes that people developers reproduce leaders, not just followers. This long-term focus creates sustainability and succession, strengthening the entire organization.

This week highlights the shift from doing leadership to multiplying leadership. Your leadership impact increases exponentially when you lift others.

Discussion Questions:

1. Who has invested in your development as a leader?
2. Who are you currently developing in your organization or circle?

3. What qualities do you look for in someone to mentor?
4. How do you make time and space for people development?
5. What fears or challenges hold leaders back from developing others?
6. What's one step you can take this week to invest in someone's growth?
7. How could developing people improve your team's overall impact?

Week 7: Level 4 – People Development (Part 2)

Chapters 13–14 (Pages 181–210)

Summary:

Continuing the journey at Level 4, Maxwell goes deeper into the mindset and methods of people development. He emphasizes that the highest-performing teams are led by leaders who are intentional about coaching and succession.

Maxwell provides practical strategies: training plans, goal setting, delegation, and constructive feedback. He encourages leaders to personalize their development plans to fit each individual's strengths, goals, and learning style.

He also addresses the importance of modeling teachability. Leaders who continue to learn and grow naturally inspire others to do the same. This humility and hunger create a culture where development becomes a norm, not a special event.

People development is not a short-term project—it's a long-term investment. Leaders who commit to it create depth on their teams, increase retention, and leave a lasting legacy.

This session challenges leaders to think less about achievement and more about alignment—developing people who will live out the mission alongside you.

Discussion Questions:

1. What's one development plan you can put into action for someone you lead?
2. How do you personalize growth plans for different team members?
3. What are signs someone is ready for leadership development?
4. How do you evaluate the growth of people you're mentoring?
5. What kind of growth culture exists in your team or organization?
6. What might need to change in your schedule to make room for mentoring?
7. How can you model teachability in your current leadership role?

Week 8: Level 5 – Pinnacle (Part 1)

Chapters 15–16 (Pages 211–240)

Summary:

Level 5—Pinnacle—is the highest and most difficult level of leadership. Few reach it, but those who do create organizations, movements, and legacies that thrive well beyond their time. Pinnacle leaders are respected for who they are, what they represent, and how they've lifted others.

Maxwell clarifies that this level is not about prestige—it's about impact. Pinnacle leaders focus on multiplying leaders who multiply leaders. They build other Level 4 leaders and raise up whole systems of influence.

These leaders embody humility and vision. Their influence reaches beyond their direct circle and often touches industries, communities, or generations. Their leadership becomes a platform for transformation.

Maxwell emphasizes that Level 5 is not achieved through shortcuts. It is the result of years of consistency, integrity, and people-focused leadership. Their legacy is not what they built—but who they built.

This week reminds us that the greatest leaders don't just climb—they carry others with them.

Discussion Questions:

1. Who do you know that models Level 5 leadership?
2. What makes their influence lasting and inspiring?
3. How does humility show up in Level 5 leadership?
4. What legacy do you want to build as a leader?
5. What habits now will help you grow toward Level 5?
6. Who are you developing that could become a leader of leaders?
7. What does long-term impact look like in your field or ministry?

Week 9: Level 5 – Pinnacle (Part 2)

Chapters 17–18 (Pages 241–270)

Summary:

Maxwell continues by detailing how to maintain and steward Level 5 leadership. This includes staying grounded in values, continuing personal growth, and being intentional about transitions and succession.

He discusses the dangers of pride or comfort and urges leaders to keep learning and leading with the same curiosity and discipline that helped them rise. Pinnacle leaders don't coast—they serve.

Succession planning becomes essential. Level 5 leaders prepare others to take the baton and run further. They think generationally, not just strategically.

Maxwell also notes that influence at this level carries immense responsibility. The more influence you have, the greater the need for wisdom, accountability, and vision.

This session encourages deep reflection. What kind of leader do you want to become—and what will it take to sustain that kind of influence?

Discussion Questions:

1. How do you avoid complacency in leadership?
2. What habits keep your values aligned with your influence?
3. How are you preparing others to lead after you?
4. What does it mean to think generationally as a leader?
5. Where might pride threaten long-term leadership success?
6. Who helps hold you accountable at this stage in your journey?
7. What intentional steps can you take to preserve your leadership legacy?

Week 10: Leading Across All 5 Levels

Chapter 19 & Appendix (Pages 271–297)

Summary:

In the final chapter, Maxwell explains that great leaders operate across all five levels simultaneously, depending on the context and individual. While the goal is to reach Level 5, effective leadership requires awareness of every level.

He encourages leaders to evaluate themselves with humility and seek feedback. Some people may follow them at Level 2, others at Level 4. A good leader adapts, leads with awareness, and continues climbing.

Maxwell also highlights that leadership is a lifelong journey. There's no "finish line." The greatest leaders are the ones who keep learning, giving, and growing even after reaching the pinnacle.

The appendix includes a helpful evaluation tool to assess your effectiveness at each level. This is a great way to end the study by encouraging reflection and a growth plan moving forward.

This final week challenges leaders to lead intentionally, lead well, and never stop becoming.

Discussion Questions:

1. What level do you think most people experience you at today?
2. How can you assess and grow in each level more intentionally?
3. What's your biggest takeaway from this 10-week journey?
4. What part of leadership do you want to keep working on most?
5. How can you invite feedback from those you lead?
6. Who will help hold you accountable to your next step in growth?
7. What's your personal leadership development plan for the next year?