

Maximum Leadership: Improve Yourself

by John C. Maxwell

Daily growth is the passion of every great leader.

Time for a history lesson: The Stone Age didn't end because humans ran out of rocks. It ended because we kept learning and improving. If you think about it, the desire for self-improvement is written into our DNA. Through the ages, the most successful people have been those who could tap into their deep drive to improve themselves. Learning to perform better day by day and studying those who share that commitment is a special passion for me, and I believe it's important for any leader. In this second adaptation from my new book *Sometimes You Win, Sometimes You Learn*, I'll share some of what I've discovered about self-improvement.

1. It's the first step to improving everything else.

The world whizzes by at an incredible pace. I joked about the end of the Stone Age. Some archaeologists believe that period lasted millions of years. But the Bronze Age, which followed, lasted only 2,000 years. Then the Iron Age, less than 1,000. Each period in technological history comes faster and faster—a testament to our drive for progress.

Now, in the Information Age, advancements accelerate at incomprehensible rates. According to a University of California at Berkeley study, the amount of information produced worldwide in 2002 was five exabytes—the equivalent of 37,000 digitized copies of the 17 million books in the Library of Congress. And that was before Twitter, Facebook, YouTube and others took the exponential growth of human expression to a new level. Hewlett Packard estimates that by 2020, 50 zettabytes of new information will be created each year. A zettabyte is 1,000 exabytes!

The bottom line is clear. If you are not moving forward, the world is passing you by.

2. It requires leaving your comfort zone.

In *Crime and Punishment*, Fyodor Dostoyevsky's protagonist observes, "Taking a new step, uttering a new word, is what people fear most." Instead people should most fear the opposite—not taking that step. If we don't step out of our comfort zone and into the unknown, we will not grow.

Security does not take us forward. It does not help us overcome obstacles. It does not lead to progress. You'll never get anywhere interesting if you always do the safe thing. Instead you must surrender security to improve.

Progress is not a single step. You've got to keep marching—committing to the improvement you've pledged to make. Speaker Peter Lowe once told me, "The most common trait I have found in successful people is that they conquered the temptation to give up." Face your fears. Get out of your comfort zone and try new things.

3. It's not about quick fixes.

We live in a society with what I call "destination disease." People want to do just enough to "arrive," and then they want to retire.

My friend Kevin Myers says it this way: "Everyone is looking for a quick fix, but what they really need is fitness. People who look for easy solutions stop doing what's right as soon as pressure is relieved. People who pursue fitness do what they should *no matter what*." That's the truth. Losers don't lose because they focus on losing: They lose because they focus on just getting by.

Where do you stand? Are you fixated on the easy way out? Or are you the slow-but-steady type who keeps

working to get better? Those are the people headed toward success.

4. It's a daily commitment.

David D. Glass, the former president and CEO of Wal-Mart, was once asked why he admired company founder Sam Walton. He responded, "There's never been a day in his life, since I've known him, that he didn't improve in some way." Now *that* is an accomplishment.

Pretty early on my own journey, I heard something from the personal development speaker and author Earl Nightingale that changed my life. He said, "One hour per day of study will put you at the top of your field within three years. Within five years you'll be a national authority. In seven years, you can be one of the best people in the world at what you do." That was when I made the daily commitment to understanding leadership.

Some things simply have to be done every day. You know that old saying, "An apple a day keeps the doctor away"? Well, eating seven apples at once every Monday morning isn't going to give you the same benefit. If you want to improve, intentional growth needs to be a daily habit—it's not a once-in-a-while, when-you-have-time sort of thing.

As I've worked to improve myself on a day-by-day basis, two words have helped me stay on track. The first is *intention*. Every morning I promise myself to learn something new. As I go about my day, I'm consciously looking for things that will help me improve.

The other word is *contemplation*. Time alone is essential for self-improvement. When I spend time thinking about my challenges, experiences and observations, I gain perspective. I can evaluate my losses and mistakes, and learn from them. These quiet moments are also my time for positive self-talk. Motivational humorist Al Walker said, "The most important words we will ever utter are those words we say to ourselves, about ourselves, when we are by ourselves." During these solo conversations, we can beat ourselves up or build ourselves up.

Need your own conversation starter? Ask yourself these few questions before bed, as I do.

- What did I learn today? What spoke to both my heart and my head?
- How did I grow today? What touched me and affected my actions?
- What will I do differently? Unless I can state this specifically, I haven't learned anything.

One of the things I *never* do during that private conversation is compare myself to others. There's a reason for that. My desire is not to become superior to anybody else. I want to be superior only to my former self. Intention and contemplation help me do that.