

The Myths of Leading from the Middle of an Organization

“Now therefore, let Pharaoh select a discerning and wise man, and set him over the land of Egypt.”
Genesis 41:33

In his book, *The 360° Leader*, Dr. John C. Maxwell states, “Ninety-nine percent of all leadership occurs not from the top but from the middle of an organization.” You do not have to be the Senior Pastor or CEO to lead effectively. You can even learn to make an impact through your leadership if you report to someone who is not an effective leader. What’s the key? Learn to develop your **influence** from wherever you are in the organization or ministry by becoming a **360° Leader**. You learn to lead up, lead across, and lead down.

In the following six lessons, we will study principles that will help you lead effectively from anywhere in your ministry or organization. First, let’s look at some of the myths believed by many people who do not hold the top leadership position.

1. The Position Myth: “I can’t lead if I am not at the top.”

The number one misconception about leadership is the belief that leadership comes simply from having a position or title. Nothing could be further from the truth! A place at the top will not make anyone a leader. In *The 21 Irrefutable Laws of Leadership*, the “Law of Influence” states it well: “*The true measure of leadership is influence – nothing more, nothing less.*” As potential leaders learn the dynamics of how to grow their influence, they soon discover that position has little to do with genuine leadership. Influencing others is a matter of disposition, not position.

Biblical Case Study: Jethro and Moses (Exodus 18:13-26)

Jethro, the father-in-law of Moses, held no official position in the leadership structure established by Moses and the children of Israel. When Jethro saw Moses trying to lead more than a million disgruntled, displaced ex-slaves, he immediately became a major leadership influence in Moses’ life. Even without a title or position, Jethro influenced the top leader and through Moses, Jethro ultimately influenced the entire nation of Israel.

Something wonderful happened to Moses when he heeded wise counsel from Jethro. Moses moved from simply ministering to leading. Instead of doing all the judging himself, he released other leaders to join him and lead according to their gifts. Jethro helped Moses change both his way of thinking and his way of working. As a result, Moses became an effective leader. Here are some changes Moses made:

1. He became a man of _____ . (v. 19)
2. He communicated the _____. (v. 20)
3. He developed an _____ . (v. 20)
4. He selected and trained _____. (v. 21)
5. He released them to do the _____. (v. 22)
6. He did only what they _____ do. (v. 22)

Discussion:

- Have you believed the myth that you cannot lead effectively because you are not in the top position in your organization? Explain.
- What could happen in your organization if you believed that you could lead effectively from your current position?

2. The Destination Myth: “When I get to the top, then I’ll learn to lead.”

Some people seem to think that if they climb into the cockpit of a jet airplane, just being in the cockpit will automatically make them a pilot. How foolish! Becoming a good leader is a lifelong process. There is nothing automatic about it. Good leadership is learned in the trenches. If you don’t develop your leadership skills when the stakes are small and the risks are low, you are likely to get into major trouble if and when you are placed in a high level of leadership. When opportunity comes, it is too late to prepare!

Biblical Case Study: Joshua (Exodus 17:9-10; Numbers 13:1-14:10; Joshua 1:1-9, 18:3, 24:14-15)

Joshua served for many years under the leadership of Moses. His competence as a leader did not happen overnight. He had to be prepared over many years to handle the enormous task given to him. When he stepped into the top leadership role after the death of Moses, he was ready to lead with excellence. Joshua 11:23 states: *“So Joshua took the whole land, according to all that the Lord had said to Moses and Joshua gave it as an inheritance to Israel according to their divisions by their tribes. Then the land rested from war.”* What a tremendous tribute to a leader who learned in the trenches through obedience and faithfulness.

Let’s look at some lessons learned by Joshua on his leadership growth journey:

1. He made _____ and _____ his high priorities.
2. He never waited to see what the _____ wanted to do.
3. He accepted _____.
4. He acted _____.
5. He learned from past _____.
6. He modeled _____ for everyone.
7. He saw the _____.

Discussion:

- Do you tend to daydream today about “one day when I am the top leader?”
Or do you serve and learn today so that you are prepared for tomorrow?
- What can you do to become the leader you desire to be?

3. The Influence Myth: “If I were at the top, then people would follow me.”

You may be able to grant someone a leadership title or position, but you cannot grant him or her real leadership. The position does not make the leader; the leader makes the position. Influence must be earned. A position gives you an opportunity to try out your leadership. Given some time, you will earn your level of influence – for better or worse.

Biblical Case Study: Rehoboam (2 Chronicles 10:6-19)

When Solomon died, his son Rehoboam ascended to the throne. He was now at the pinnacle of power, holding the highest position in the land. But it soon became apparent that the vast majority of the people would not follow him. As a result of his poor leadership, the Bible sadly states, “*So Israel has been in rebellion against the house of David to this day.*” (2 Chronicles 10:19)

His title and position did not cause the people to follow him. To the contrary, his “power trip” resulted in the collapse of his kingdom. Holding the top position does not confer influence upon the leader. Why did he lack influence?

1. He was _____.
2. He had never learned to _____ to wise and experienced leaders.
3. He loved _____ more than he loved his people.
4. He rejected _____ when it did not agree with his personal desires.
5. He never understood that leadership is _____.
6. He never connected _____ with those he wanted to lead.

Rehoboam violated the “Law of Connection” in *The 21 Irrefutable Laws of Leadership*: “*Leaders touch a heart before they ask for a hand.*” He failed to discern and meet the needs of his people.

Discussion:

- What steps are you taking to gain influence with the people you lead?

4. The Inexperience Myth: When I get to the top, I’ll be in control.

Have you ever said to yourself, “If I were in charge, things sure would be different around here?” There is nothing wrong in having a strong desire to improve your organization. However, without experience in being the top person of an organization, you will almost certainly overestimate the amount of control you will have at the top. The higher you go, the more you realize that many factors control the organization. Your position does not give you total control.

Biblical Case Study: King Saul (1 Samuel 13:5-15, 18:5-16)

The Law of the Lid in *The 21 Irrefutable Laws of Leadership* states: “*Leadership ability determines a person’s level of effectiveness.*” God removed all the external lids from Saul’s life when the son of Kish became Israel’s king. Even without any external lids to his leadership, Saul still labored with several internal lids:

1. Saul was full of _____.
2. Saul was often _____ and _____.
3. Saul was often enraged with _____.
4. Saul had a major problem with _____.
5. Saul _____ himself and others.
6. Saul refused to face _____.

Because Saul never removed the lids from his life, his influence in his kingdom was very limited. As a result, God had to remove him from the throne of Israel.

To think that life “at the top” is easier is a serious mistake. Being at the top has its own set of problems and challenges. In leadership – no matter where you are in an organization – the bottom line is influence.

Discussion:

- What lids are currently on your leadership?
- What steps can you take to lift these lids? Do you have lid-lifters in your life?

5. The Freedom Myth: “When I get to the top, I’ll no longer be limited.”

Many people think that leadership is a ticket to freedom. Have you had thoughts like these from time to time?

When I get to the top, I’ll have it made.

When I finally finish climbing the organizational ladder, I’ll have time to rest.

When I control the organization, I’ll be able to do whatever I want.

When I’m in charge, the sky will be the limit.

Such ideas are little more than fantasies. It doesn’t matter what job you do or what position you hold; you will have limits. When you move up in an organization, the weight of your responsibility increases. In many organizations, as you move up the ladder, you may even find that the amount of responsibility you take on increases much faster than the amount of authority you receive. When you go higher, more is expected of you, the pressure is greater, and the impact of your decisions weighs more heavily.

Biblical Case Study: James and John (Matthew 20:20-28)

As Jesus made His way toward Jerusalem to be executed, the mother of James and John requested that her sons be given a preferred seat, next to Jesus, in the kingdom of Heaven. Both the disciples and their families became preoccupied with status, not service. They missed the whole point of Christ-like servant leadership.

Jesus reminded them that His style of leadership stands in stark contrast to the world’s style of leadership. Jesus teaches:

1. The greatest must be the _____ of all.
2. As responsibilities increase, _____ decrease.
3. A leader deliberately _____ rights and options as he grows in leadership.
4. We _____ by serving and _____ by leading.

Discussion:

- Why do you want to be a leader?
- Do you want to serve or be served?

6. The Potential Myth: “I can’t reach my potential if I’m not the top leader.”

Most people want to reach the top of their organization. Few people aspire to reach the middle. Yet, the reality is that most people will never be the top leader in an organization. They will spend their lives somewhere in the middle of the organization. Is that okay?

John Maxwell argues that people should strive for the top of their effectiveness, not the top of the organization. Each of us should work to reach our potential, not necessarily the CEO’s chair. Sometimes you can make the greatest impact from somewhere other than first place.

Biblical Case Study: Joseph (Genesis 37:1-50:22)

Joseph had a dream. It seemed quite egotistical right from the start—his brothers would bow down to him. He expected to be in the top spot. His leadership development journey was long and difficult. Joseph was a slave, a servant, and a prisoner before being elevated to second in command in Egypt. He must have had his days of discouragement and disappointment. Through all his tests and trials, Joseph kept a spirit of excellence.

When Joseph interpreted Pharaoh’s dream, the king put royal robes on Joseph’s back, the signet ring on Joseph’s finger, and allowed Joseph to ride in the second chariot. Joseph could have retaliated against his brothers who rejected and mistreated him, but he extended grace and forgiveness to his brothers who bowed before him in fear for their lives. Joseph never reached the top spot in Egypt, but as the second in command, he used his influence and authority to save Egypt and his family. His dreams came true—he reached his full potential—without holding the top leadership position.

In their book, *Second in Command*, Dutch Sheets and Chris Jackson list the following reasons why Joseph was a success:

1. The _____ was with him.
2. He never relinquished his _____.
3. His _____ won the hearts of his leaders.
4. He was _____ enough to notice sad eyes in the cell beside him.
5. He served as a _____ for the dreams of others.

Discussion:

- Do you know someone who is an effective 360° Leader?
- What qualities and skills do you see in this person?

7. The All-or-Nothing Myth: “If I can’t get to the top, then I won’t try to lead.”

The reality is that most leaders will never be the CEO. Does that mean they should just give up leading altogether? That’s what some people do. They have defined success as being “on top.” Because they are not at the top, they become disillusioned, bitter and cynical. They even become a hindrance to their organization.

You do not have to be the top leader to make a difference. As we have seen from biblical examples, it is not easy to lead from the middle, but it can be done! Becoming an effective 360° Leader requires skills to lead the people above, beside, and below you. You can learn these skills, and you can learn to influence people at every level of your organization – even if you never get to the top.

Biblical Case Study: Jonathan (1 Samuel 19:1-23:18)

Jonathan was the son of the king. He probably felt that he should follow his father to the throne. Even though he knew God had chosen David – and not him – to rule Israel, Jonathan remained faithful to his friend David until the end of his life. At great risk to himself, again and again Jonathan served David. Jonathan was available, dependable, vulnerable, and responsible. He teaches us many principles about leading and serving, even if we never have the highest position:

1. Have faith and courage.
2. Take initiative.
3. Accept responsibility.
4. Know the heart of the senior leader.
5. Encourage the senior leader.
6. Earn the trust of those above, beside, and below you.
7. Serve and add value to others.
8. Ably communicate the senior leader's vision.
9. Embrace the dreams of the senior leader.
10. Maintain a positive attitude.

Discussion:

- What are some changes you will need to make in order to become an effective 360° Leader?

Assessment and Application**Assessment:**

Are you trapped by any of the seven myths discussed in this lesson? If so, which ones?

Application:

List three specific steps you can take to overcome these myths and become an effective 360° Leader.