

Earning the Right to Lead

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John C. Maxwell poses that “the true meaning of leadership is influence, nothing more and nothing less.” I believe it is true that titles, positions and status do not have much value when it comes to leading, managing and directing others. The only thing a title or position can do is buy a little time to either increase your level of influence or erase it. I found this principle to be true early on in my first year as the Director of the Drake Relays. While it is very fulfilling for me to hold the title of Director of one of the most significant sporting events in the history of the state of Iowa, the title does very little when it comes to gaining buy-in from those I manage.

True and effective leadership cannot be awarded, appointed or assigned. It comes from influence which can't be mandated. It must be earned. In fact, in order to “Earn the Right to Lead” it is a matter of 1) Actions, 2) Vision, 3) Sacrifice, 4) Character, and 5) Service.

Actions

It was Martin Luther King, Jr. who suggests that “It is always the right time to do the right thing.” Doing the right thing takes courage and the willingness to stand alone for what is right rather than side with the majority. In my role as the Relays Director, there are many competing interests of fans, coaches and associations. What I've found to be critical in leading others is the commitment to doing what is right regardless of how popular or widely acceptable the decision may be. For example, currently, the Drake Relays is only accessible for high schools in the state of Iowa. Many would like to see the event open to regional states and other high schools; however, as I have observed, over 85% of the paid attendance are moms, dads, grandparents and friends of high school athletes. It would be a disservice to take away opportunities to compete in this historic event from local young men and women in our Iowa high schools.

What you do speaks much louder than what you are saying. I have publicly stated my position and intent to remain committed to the high school athletes and fans. It remains important for me to continue to earn their support and loyalty which has much to do with my actions. People tend to go along with people they get along with.

Vision

Earning the right to lead involves a clearly articulated vision. To formulate vision, you must learn to look in several places:

- Look Behind You (what have you learned)?
- Look Within (what do you feel)?
- Look Around You (what's happening to others)?
- Look Ahead of You (what's the big picture)?
- Look Beside You (what resources are available to you)?

Sacrifice

Lawrence D. Bell wrote, “Show me a man who cannot bother to do the little things and I’ll show you a man who cannot be trusted with the big things.” Earning the right to lead requires a humble spirit and willingness to sacrifice time, effort and position. Effective leadership is developed over a period of time. Sometimes it is the little things we do that affirm our position as the leader opposed to the big things. An effective leader who earns the right to lead understands that a leader is meant to be a river and not a reservoir. In other words, most leaders expect everything to flow into them, like a reservoir. However, leadership that flows and pours into others like a river is undeterred by titles, positions or status. The most important aspect of this form of leadership is empowerment of others and a willingness to sacrifice. If you use your power and influence to empower others, your leadership will extend far beyond your grasp. Mark Twain once remarked that “Great things can happen when no one cares who gets the credit.” For this reason, I intentionally look for opportunities to recognize and honor others that perform at a high level within the Drake Relays organization. Whether big or small, I realize that I will gain more respect and earn more influence if I focus on providing for others what they cannot provide for themselves.

Character

I have often heard it said that “The ultimate measure of a person is not where one stands in the moment of comfort and convenience but rather where one stands in moments of challenge and controversy.” There are challenges to every plan. Unfortunately, there are challenges that surface regardless of the plan. What is most telling and profound about challenge and struggle is the manner in which one leads under pressure. It is the demonstration of absolute resolve and control exemplified by the leader that provides hope and direction for those being led. Character may be manifested in the great moments, but it is made in the small ones. Character is evident when no one else is around and you still do the right thing.

Service

John C. Maxwell tells us that “You’ve got to love your people more than you love your position.” Earning the right to lead requires an attitude of servitude by the leader. The leader has a willingness to serve and support the needs of those around him. In some settings, service is often viewed as menial or subservient; however, I believe that leaders who stand out in serving others experience the most success in getting others to serve. The Drake Relays has over 600 volunteers – men, women and children that have a willingness to serve. In efforts to increase the level of influence as the leader, it is vital that I spend time with those serving by being willing to join in and help where I can. I have learned to value the lower level worker, volunteer and helper the same if not more than the head or leader in the organization. If others see the value and worth put on people rather than the position, it will endear others to the organization. People don’t care how much you know until they know how much you care.