

The 4 Levels of Leadership

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What's the fastest way to understand how leadership works and to learn how to lead others? What's the fastest way to teach it to others? Those are questions I've been asking myself for over 40 years. Maybe you've been asking yourself those kinds of questions, too.

To some people, leadership is intuitive. It comes fairly easily. They act on instinct; what they do works and they can't easily explain it. To other people, leadership is a mystery. They have no idea what dynamics are at play. All they know is that sometimes people listen to what they have to say and work with them, and other times they're alone scratching their heads.

Leadership is dynamic. It's fluid. It changes from person to person, from moment to moment. But that doesn't mean it doesn't follow a pattern. And it doesn't mean you can't develop a level of mastery, even if you don't possess abundant natural leadership gifts.

I want to acquaint you with a way of looking at and teaching leadership that I've used to train leaders for nearly 30 years. It's called The Five Levels of Leadership. It is by far the most requested topic people want me to speak about—from small teams to huge corporations like Delta Airlines. And I've finally written a book about it that teaches a potential leader how to move from an entry-level position to the pinnacle of leadership.

Here's how it works. Influence is gained with people in levels—five levels to be exact. Every person who leads others has to start at the bottom level with another person and work his or her way up to higher levels one at a time.

Level 1—Position

Position is the lowest level of leadership—the entry level. The only influence a positional leader has is that which comes with the job title. People follow because they have to. Positional leadership is based on the rights granted by the position and title. Nothing is wrong with having a leadership position. Everything is wrong with using position to get people to follow. Position is a poor substitute for influence.

People who make it only to Level 1 may be bosses, but they are never leaders. They have subordinates, not team members. They rely on rules, regulations, policies and organizational charts to control their people. Their people will only follow them within the stated boundaries of their authority. And their people will usually do only what is required of them. When positional leaders ask for extra effort or time, they rarely get it.

Positional leaders usually have difficulty working with volunteers, younger people and the highly educated. Why? Because positional leaders have no influence, and these types of people tend to be more independent.

Position is the only level that does not require ability and effort to achieve. Anyone can be appointed to a position.

Level 2—Permission

Level 2 is based entirely on relationships. On the permission level, people follow because they want to. When you like people and treat them like individuals who have value, you begin to develop influence with them. You develop trust. The environment becomes much more positive—whether at home, on the job, at play or while volunteering.

The agenda for leaders on Level 2 isn't preserving their position. It's getting to know their people and figuring out how to get along with them. Leaders find out who their people are. Followers find out who their leaders are. People build solid, lasting relationships.

You can like people without leading them, but you cannot lead people well without liking them. That's what **Level 2** is about.

Level 3—Production

One of the dangers of getting to the permission level is that a leader will stop there. But good leaders don't just create a pleasant working environment. They get things done! That's why they must move up to Level 3, which is based on results. On the production level leaders gain influence and credibility, and people begin to follow them because of what they have done for the organization.

Many positive things begin happening when leaders get to **Level 3**. Work gets done, morale improves, profits go up, turnover goes down and goals are achieved. It is also on Level 3 that momentum kicks in.

Leading and influencing others becomes fun on this level. Success and productivity have been known to solve a lot of problems.

Level 4—People Development

Leaders become great not because of their power, but because of their ability to empower others. That is what leaders do on Level 4. They use their position, relationships and productivity to invest in their followers and develop them until those followers become leaders in their own right. The result is reproduction; Level 4 leaders reproduce themselves.

Production may win games, but people development wins championships. Two things always happen on Level 4. First, teamwork goes to a very high level. Why? Because the high investment in people deepens relationships, helps people to know one another better and strengthens loyalty. Second, performance increases. Why? Because there are more leaders on the team, and they help to improve everybody's performance.

Level 4 leaders change the lives of the people they lead. Accordingly, their people follow them because of what their leaders have done for them personally. And their relationships are often lifelong.

Level 5—Pinnacle

The highest and most difficult level of leadership is the pinnacle. While most people can learn to climb to Levels 1 through 4, Level 5 requires not only effort, skill and intentionality, but also a high level of talent. Only naturally gifted leaders ever make it to this highest level. What do leaders do on Level 5? They develop people to become **Level 4** leaders.

Developing leaders to the point where they are able and willing to develop other leaders is the most difficult leadership task of all. But here are the payoffs: Level 5 leaders develop Level 5 organizations. They create opportunities that other leaders don't. They create legacy in what they do. People follow them because of who they are and what they represent. In other words, their leadership gains a positive reputation. As a result, Level 5 leaders often transcend their position, their organization and sometimes their industry.

