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Michael D. Felt

Grace Church, Desert Hot Springs, CA

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Book Reviews

The 21 Irrefutable Laws of Leadership: Follow Them and People Will Follow You

Reviewed by Michael D. Felt

Maxwell, John C. The 21 Irrefutable Laws of Leadership: Follow Them and People Will Follow You. Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1998. 234 pp. \$22.99.

John Maxwell began his career as a pastor, shepherding three successively larger churches and guiding each to unprecedented levels of growth before branching off into his own ministry of equipping leaders. He is the author of twenty-four books on various aspects of leadership, as well as the CEO of three leadership organizations (INJOY, INJOY Stewardship Services, and Equip). John Maxwell's goal is to make a positive impact in every aspect of people's lives by helping them to become better leaders. In addition to his many books, John Maxwell is a dynamic speaker who addresses over 250,000 people a year. He is widely considered one of the leading authorities on leadership in the United States. His organizations help develop effective Christian leaders worldwide by partnering with existing organizations and providing them with leadership training products, publications, and programs.

The 21 Irrefutable Laws of Leadership is a practical guide to twenty-one fundamental principles of leadership. In many ways John Maxwell writes like the preacher he used to be, fleshing-out his laws of leadership with introductions and practical applications containing actual stories of real leaders so the reader can "see" the laws in action. These stories cover leaders from a myriad of different arenas such as religion, military, politics, sports,

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business, and even exploration because Maxwell contends that genuine leadership is ultimately the same regardless of time, occupation, or position. Maxwell attempts to distill the essence of leadership into twenty-one principles that are so sound that he can call them “irrefutable laws” and guarantee that people will follow leaders who follows these principles.

In terms of merely providing a definition and explanation of his twenty-one laws, Maxwell probably could have adequately covered them in about a dozen pages. Most of his laws are so simple that they can be fully explained in no more than one or two sentences. But Maxwell wants to do more than merely provide definitions for a collection of abstract principles: he wants to make them come alive by providing real-life examples that allow his readers to visualize the concepts and therefore have a better grasp of them; he wants to help his readers buy-in to the laws by showing that they really do apply to real-life situations; he wants his readers to connect with the laws by providing true stories of real human beings; and he wants to encourage his readers to believe that they themselves can actually succeed in becoming better leaders. In short, John Maxwell is practicing some of the very principles that he sets out to describe in his book!

John Maxwell wrote *The 21 Irrefutable Laws of Leadership* with the idea of boiling everything he had learned about leadership into a short list (xx), and he has clearly succeeded in this regard. Maxwell seeks to unveil timeless principles that transcend particular circumstances, avoiding the morass of specific situational details by providing his readers with an eagle's eye view of the quintessential essence of leadership. This is a unique view, as only one who is a great leader could look down upon the full panorama of leadership through all of its supposed styles, techniques, and hype and be able to see it for what it really is. While most other leadership writers take the approach of helping the reader look up at this complicated thing called leadership and then help him or her navigate through the maze, John Maxwell seeks to lift the reader up to this mountaintop view of what it means to lead.

In evaluating John Maxwell's book, *The 21 Irrefutable Laws of Leadership*, this particular reader found the book a fascinating and fast-moving read. Each of the twenty-one chapters were short (averaging only ten to twelve pages each), which made it easy to want to read just one more chapter, and then just one

more after that. Each of the chapters were also filled with genuinely interesting details and insights into great people and events that in and of themselves made the book a worthwhile read even for a person who did not care one whit about leadership. But leadership, and not engaging stories, is John Maxwell's passion: *The 21 Irrefutable Laws* has the almost magical ability of taking those readers who might be only somewhat interested in developing their leadership ability and moving them toward a genuinely passionate desire for leadership. Maxwell is somehow able to make his readers *feel* the importance of leadership.

An even more magical result of reading *The 21 Irrefutable Laws* is that even less confident readers are somehow able to begin to believe that they could actually become leaders. Maxwell has a way of encouraging his readers that they can grow even as he describes for them how far they have to go. Even during his description of his most difficult law of leadership - the law of intuition - Maxwell urges his readers onward by assuring them that virtually everyone can develop this skill (85). Maxwell has the wonderful ability to help his readers to buy-in to themselves as well as his vision for building better leaders.

The 21 Irrefutable Laws of Leadership preaches leadership, not religion. Apart from acknowledging that he had been a pastor and drawing on some of his experience in churches to provide examples for his principles, this is pretty much a non-sectarian book. This reader would have preferred to see Maxwell scripturally build a theology of leadership, but one can readily see what the author is trying to accomplish by not doing so. Virtually anyone from any religious background (or lack thereof) could read this book from cover to cover without being offended. Yet at the same time, the book is by and large quite biblical. One learns from reading *The 21 Irrefutable Laws* that character counts, that a leader is one who sacrifices, that the best leaders care about their followers, and so on. Maxwell's goal seems to be to set forth a Christian worldview of management for a wide array of leaders. Given the headlines with Tyco, Enron, and Worldcom, it appears that the business community in particular could really benefit from Maxwell's *21 Irrefutable Laws*!

Still, with the above having been said, there were points in which one might wonder if Maxwell's view of leadership has been driven more from the secular world than from the Bible. The author mentions that when he arrived at Skyline Church he saw that the staff, while being good people, were not strong

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leaders, and he immediately decided to fire the vast majority of them as soon as it was possible. This not only seems to fly in the face of his prior promise that anyone can become a better leader (xxi), but it also seems to be biblically unjustified. His firing policy might make good tactical sense in the business world, but surely the church is more than merely a business in which strictly utilitarian rules apply.

One other thing that seemed to permeate the book was a sense of superiority regarding the gift of leadership. An example of this tendency was seen when Maxwell stated that the talent of sports teams is rarely the issue (8). He seems to want to have us believe that it was merely Michael Jordan's leadership ability, and not the fact that he was one of the most physically talented human beings on the face of the earth, which prompted the bulls to win six championships. In light of the many CEO's who have plundered their corporations out of a belief that they were the sole cause of their companies' success, and in light of the prevailing attitude in business that it is appropriate to pay executives increasingly mind-boggling sums compared to the rank and file, this reader found that mindset troubling. Are leaders indispensable to an organization? Yes they are. But so are janitors. To tweak Maxwell's illustration of a hockey team consisting of only goalies (161), imagine a tribe of Indians consisting of only chiefs! We find in 1 Timothy 3:1 that it is good to desire to lead. But this desire must be humbly balanced with the recognition that every gift of God is necessary (1 Cor. 12:17-25).

On the balance, Maxwell's book is a truly inspirational read for Christians desiring to improve their leadership skills to better serve their Lord. John Maxwell brought his experience, wisdom, and vision to life in a marvelous manner resulting in a truly unique "mountaintop experience" on leadership.

In conclusion, I must say that when I put this book down, I realized that I had not just instantly become a great leader simply by having read it. I realized that I probably had not even become a better leader. But at the same time, I realized that I had a much greater sense of passion for becoming a better leader than I had prior to picking up the book. I also realized that I had a much sharper focus on what I could do to become a better leader, and I had much more confidence that I could master at least some of these important skills. This is where the real power of this book lies, and why I heartily recommend *The 21 Irrefutable Laws of Leadership* to anyone who wants to lead.

Reviewer

Felt, Michael Douglas. Address: 1865 W. Greenleaf Ave #E, Anaheim, CA 92801. Title: Pastoral intern at Grace Church, Desert Hot Springs, CA. Michael Felt holds B.S. degrees from Portland State University and a M.Div. from Talbot School of Theology.