

ON THE JOB

Practice leadership skills even if you're not a boss, author says

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Can you be a leader at work if you don't have the "boss" title somewhere near your name?

John Maxwell says it's possible. "Leadership is more — if not much more — influence, rather than position," he says.

Maxwell, a leadership guru and author of a number of books on the subject, says employees need to understand that even if they don't hold the top title at work, they can still have a great impact on an organization.

"The reality is that 99 percent of all leadership occurs not from the top but from the middle of an organization," Maxwell says. "You can learn to develop your influence from wherever you are in the organization."

The key, he says, is understanding that you can't give up. That's not only bad for your career, but also your employer. He says that by striving to increase your influence at work you increase the chances of improving your position and at the same time, help the company's bottom line through your improved attitude and performance.

Maxwell, who has written a new book, "The 360-Degree Leader: Developing Your Influence from Anywhere in the Organization" (Nelson Business), says that leadership must be something that employees strive to reach no matter what position they hold. Waiting for the "official" title doesn't make sense.

"Good leadership is learned in the trenches," Maxwell says. "You don't wait to become a leader. It is a lifelong learning process."

He says that trying out leadership skills at lower levels is less risky. You should use it as a chance, he says, to hone and develop skills so that when you achieve higher profile positions you are less likely to make mistakes. And, he says, those higher profile positions will come to someone who works at improving leadership and influence.

"People shouldn't be afraid to try it," he says. "Wherever they are now in the pack, they don't have the (leader) title now, anyway. But if they try to increase their influence 360 degrees, then their chance of getting a title, a higher salary and more prestige is better than what they had before."

In his book, Maxwell outlines several ways an employee at any level can increase his or her influence.

For example, if you want to take a leadership position with co-workers, then strive to avoid office politics and be committed to seeing the best idea win. If you want to influence those above you, be willing to lighten the boss's load and pitch in to do what others won't. And to influence those below you, always be supportive of individual development and reward results.