

The 5 Levels of Leadership Field Guide

A Practical Framework for Building High-Impact Teams

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Why Leadership Levels Matter

Leadership isn't about power, perks, or position. It's about **influence**. And in today's fast-moving, trust-deficient, people-driven workplace, influence is the only thing that scales.

Too often, people are promoted into leadership roles without ever being taught what leadership really is. They assume it's about control, charisma, or keeping people happy. But true leadership isn't given — it's earned.

That's why the **5 Levels of Leadership** is such a powerful model. Developed by John C. Maxwell after decades of global leadership experience, the 5 Levels framework maps leadership as a progressive journey. It helps you locate where you are, understand how to grow, and discover how to bring others with you.

Whether you're a seasoned executive or a newly appointed supervisor, this guide will help you evaluate your current level of influence and take practical steps toward greater impact. It's not just a summary — it's a tool for transformation. For clarity. For conversation. And for leaders who don't want to climb alone — but lift others as they go.

If you're reading this, it's likely because you want to lead with more purpose, not just more responsibility. That journey starts now.

Leadership in Action

- Reflect: What do you currently believe leadership is?
- Ask: Do people follow me because they have to, or because they want to?
- Journal Prompt: Describe a leader you admire. What made their influence meaningful?

The Origins of the 5 Levels

The 5 Levels of Leadership emerged from years of observing a consistent truth: **great leaders grow their influence step by step** — they don't stay in one place.

This wasn't about personality. It was about patterns. Maxwell noticed that effective leaders progressed through recognizable stages. They started with a title, built relationships, delivered results, developed others, and eventually earned legacy-level trust. Over time, these insights became a clear, teachable framework — one that has now been taught in businesses, nonprofits, governments, and universities around the world.

The genius of the 5 Levels is its **simplicity and scalability**. It applies just as easily to a high school coach as it does to a Fortune 500 CEO. More than anything, it redefines leadership from being **positional** to being **personal** — from something you're assigned to something you build.

The 5 Levels is not just a model. It's a mirror. And it's an invitation to grow.

Leadership in Action

- Reflect: Where are you currently gaining influence? Where are you losing it?
- Ask: What has shaped your leadership style the most so far — experience, mentors, or assumptions?
- Prompt: Describe the leadership culture of your organization. Is influence earned or expected?

What Are the 5 Levels

Here's the foundation of the framework:

1. **Level 1 – Position:** People follow because they have to. Authority comes from a title, not yet from influence.
2. **Level 2 – Permission:** People follow because they want to. Relationships build trust.
3. **Level 3 – Production:** People follow because of what you've accomplished. Results validate leadership.
4. **Level 4 – People Development:** People follow because of what you've done for them. Leaders are developed.
5. **Level 5 – Pinnacle:** People follow because of who you are and what you represent. Influence becomes legacy.

Each level builds on the one before it. The best leaders operate across all five — flexing their influence depending on what the team, task, or moment requires.

In the chapters ahead, you'll explore what each level looks like in practice. You'll learn how to grow and how to help others grow too.

Leadership in Action

- Reflect: Which of the 5 Levels feels most natural to you right now?
- Ask: Which level do you aspire to grow into next?
- Tool Suggestion: Create a personal “Leadership Level Tracker” to self-evaluate monthly.

Level 1: Position

People follow because they have to.

This is the starting line of every leadership journey. You’re given a title — and with it, a limited form of authority. You may be managing, but you’re not yet leading.

At Level 1, your team may comply, but they’re unlikely to commit. Interactions are shaped by hierarchy and policy. If people follow only because of your title, morale is low, creativity stalls, and turnover is likely to rise.

But Level 1 isn’t bad — it’s just basic. Every leader starts here. This level offers structure and clarity. The key is not to camp out too long. The goal is to grow beyond it.

The shift begins when you stop relying on your role and start building **real relationships**. When you start asking, “How can I serve this team?” instead of “How can they serve me?”

Leadership in Action

- Reflect: Am I leading from my title or from trust?
- Ask: What assumptions am I making about my authority?
- Action Steps:
 - Ask each team member what they need most from their leader.
 - Practice giving credit away publicly and taking responsibility privately.
 - Schedule one meeting this week that’s about connecting, not directing.

Level 2: Permission

People follow because they want to.

At Level 2, leadership shifts from authority to relationship. Influence begins to grow because people feel seen, heard, and valued.

This is where trust is built. When people know you care about them beyond their output, their output often improves. They communicate more openly. They lean into problems instead of avoiding them. They

bring you both ideas and concerns — because they believe you'll listen.

But Level 2 isn't about being liked — it's about being real. Leaders here walk the line between **relational and responsible**. They maintain standards without losing empathy.

The trap at this level is people-pleasing. Some leaders avoid necessary tension or overcompensate for fear of being disliked. But real permission is built on **consistency and care**, not popularity.

Level 2 leaders ask questions, listen without interrupting, and adapt their leadership to the needs of their people — not just the preferences of their own style.

Leadership in Action

- Reflect: Who on my team do I know well? Who do I still need to connect with?
- Ask: Do my people feel safe bringing me problems — or do they stay silent?
- Action Steps:
 - Set up regular 1-on-1 check-ins focused on personal connection.
 - Ask, "What's one thing I can do to support your success right now?"
 - Look for opportunities to serve without being asked.

Level 3: Production

People follow because of what you've done for the organization.

At Level 3, leadership becomes visible through performance. Relationships are still important, but now, results matter more. Your influence is fueled by your ability to help the team win — consistently.

Level 3 leaders drive clarity, accountability, and measurable outcomes. Their teams trust that the work they do together matters — and that their leader can guide them to success. These leaders don't just talk about goals — they build systems, remove roadblocks, and focus the team on what moves the mission forward.

But with results comes pressure. Some leaders burn themselves out trying to be the top performer, while others micromanage to ensure control. The danger is becoming addicted to success at the cost of team health. Winning matters — but not at the expense of people.

The best Level 3 leaders create environments where success is shared. They celebrate wins, learn from losses, and give their people space to lead. Their credibility grows because their presence produces real, lasting momentum.

Leadership in Action

- Reflect: What results am I known for — and what do they say about my leadership?

- Ask: Am I leading through others, or trying to do it all myself?
- Action Steps:
 - Define your team's three most important outcomes this quarter.
 - Identify a task you can delegate to grow another leader.
 - Publicly celebrate a recent team success — and name who made it possible.

Level 4: People Development

People follow because of what you've done for them.

This is the multiplying level. At Level 4, you're not just delivering results — you're developing people. Your leadership becomes about legacy: who you're lifting, not just what you're achieving.

Level 4 leaders intentionally invest in others. They look for potential and create opportunities. They coach, challenge, and empower. They see leadership as a relay, not a solo race — and they pass the baton early and often.

The payoff is exponential: one leader can influence a team — but a team of leaders can transform an organization.

The challenge is staying patient. Development takes time. It's not always efficient. But it's always essential. Some leaders skip this level because it feels slow. Others invest only in their favorites — and lose trust from the rest. The goal isn't perfection. It's visibility and intentionality.

Leadership in Action

- Reflect: Who has grown because of your leadership in the past year?
- Ask: Who on your team is ready for more responsibility — even if they don't see it yet?
- Action Steps:
 - Identify one person to mentor or coach this month.
 - Give them a leadership opportunity, then debrief it together.
 - Ask: "What's one area you want to grow in — and how can I help?"

Level 5: Pinnacle

People follow because of who you are and what you represent.

Level 5 is the rarest level — and it's never self-declared. It's given by others who trust your leadership over time. It's not about being perfect. It's about being consistent, values-driven, and growth-minded for years.

Level 5 leaders influence not just their teams, but their culture. They are vision-carriers, character-builders, and mentors of mentors. Their legacy outlasts their title because they've poured into people —

and those people are now leading well, too.

But this level comes with new risks. The higher you go, the more tempting it is to coast or believe your own press. Level 5 leaders stay grounded by staying teachable. They remain learners, not just leaders.

Ultimately, Level 5 is not a destination — it's a posture. A way of living that says: "It's not about me — it's about who comes after me."

Leadership in Action

- Reflect: What do you want to be remembered for as a leader?
- Ask: Where am I still growing — and who's helping me do it?
- Action Steps:
 - Schedule a meeting with a trusted peer or mentor to ask for feedback.
 - List the top three values you want your leadership to reflect.
 - Begin mentoring a Level 4 leader to expand their impact — and yours.

Moving Up the Levels: Strategies for Growth

Leadership growth doesn't happen by accident. It requires intention, feedback, and aligned action. You can't skip levels — but you can move through them if you're honest about where you are and committed to the climb.

Here are four essential strategies to grow:

1. **Lead Yourself First**

You can't give what you haven't developed. Build habits that reflect discipline, character, and clarity.

2. **Earn Trust Daily**

Trust is the currency of leadership. It's earned through integrity, consistency, and humility — not authority.

3. **Ask for Feedback**

The best leaders seek perspective. They ask their teams what's working — and where they can improve.

4. **Develop Others Intentionally**

Don't just build followers. Build leaders. Start with one person. Then scale your development efforts.

Growth is always uphill. But each step makes you stronger — and brings others along with you.

Leadership in Action

- Reflect: Which of these four strategies do I need to strengthen most?
- Ask: Who can hold me accountable as I grow?
- Action Steps:

- Block time for personal reflection and planning each week.
- Ask your team for one piece of anonymous feedback this month.
- Identify a key development opportunity for someone on your team.

Dangers at Each Level

Every level of leadership brings influence — and risk. When the strengths of a level go unchecked, they can become liabilities. The best leaders recognize these traps before they cost them their credibility, momentum, or culture.

Here's what to watch for:

- **Level 1 – Entitlement**
Believing your position is enough. Using authority instead of earning respect.
- **Level 2 – People-Pleasing**
Avoiding conflict to keep harmony. Sacrificing standards to maintain approval.
- **Level 3 – Overdrive**
Tying your identity to achievement. Burning out yourself — or your team — in pursuit of performance.
- **Level 4 – Favoritism**
Developing only a select few. Creating exclusivity instead of opportunity.
- **Level 5 – Ego**
Believing you've arrived. Rejecting feedback and isolating yourself from growth.

The antidote to each shadow is self-awareness and humility. Influence grows best in leaders who lead with character as much as competence.

Leadership in Action

- Reflect: Which of these shadow sides am I most prone to?
- Ask: What safeguard or habit will help me avoid that trap?
- Action Steps:
 - Name your top leadership blind spot and share it with a peer.
 - Commit to a daily practice (e.g., journaling, reflection, feedback check-ins) to stay grounded.
 -

Leadership Self-Assessment

Before you can grow as a leader, you need a clear understanding of where your influence currently stands. This self-assessment is designed to help you reflect on your leadership behaviors and identify

your strongest and weakest levels of influence.

Instructions

Rate each of the following statements on a scale from 1 to 5:

1 = Rarely True, 5 = Always True

Level 1 – Position

1. People follow me primarily because of my role or title.
2. I rely on formal authority to ensure tasks are completed.

Total (add the two scores): _____

Level 2 – Permission

1. I intentionally build trust and connection with my team.
2. Team members feel comfortable bringing me concerns and ideas.

Total: _____

Level 3 – Production

1. My team consistently delivers strong, measurable results.
2. I set clear expectations and hold others accountable.

Total: _____

Level 4 – People Development

1. I invest time in coaching and developing others.
2. People I've mentored are now leading others themselves.

Total: _____

Level 5 – Pinnacle

1. I am recognized across the organization for my values and leadership.
2. My influence continues even when I'm not directly involved.

Total: _____

Scoring Guide

Use your subtotal in each level to interpret your influence:

- **2–4 points:** Level is underdeveloped
- **5–7 points:** Level is emerging
- **8–10 points:** Level is strong

The **highest scoring level** reflects your current leadership strength. The **lowest scoring level** may reveal where growth is most needed. Keep in mind that strong leaders operate across multiple levels, not just one.

This is not a final grade — it's a growth snapshot. Use it to check your progress and to set clear goals for your development.

Leadership in Action:

Take five minutes to complete the assessment and total each level. Then reflect: Which level needs your attention most right now — and what's one step you can take this week to grow in that area?

Case Studies and Real World Examples

The 5 Levels come alive in real leadership moments. Here are four condensed stories that illustrate key shifts in practice.

Case 1: Positional to Relational

Jennifer, newly promoted, noticed pushback from her team. Her formal authority wasn't earning real buy-in. After scheduling informal check-ins, she began to build trust. Six months later, morale and collaboration had noticeably improved — and her title mattered less than her relationships.

Case 2: From Results to Reproduction

David turned around a stagnant business unit with clear goals and systems. But his breakthrough came when he empowered others. By mentoring two team leads, he multiplied execution — and created sustainable success.

Case 3: Developing Emerging Leaders

Tasha launched a quarterly leadership cohort at her nonprofit. She mentored promising team members and facilitated peer learning. Her organization didn't just grow — it thrived with a deep bench of confident leaders ready to step up.

Case 4: Legacy in Motion

Harold retired after decades in education. His farewell wasn't just about tenure — it was about the people he'd mentored, many of whom were now school principals or nonprofit founders. His leadership echoed far beyond his title.

Leadership in Action

- Reflect: Which case study feels most like your current situation?
- Ask: What practice can I borrow or adapt for my team?
- Action Steps:
 - Choose one leadership behavior from these stories to implement this month.

Team Mapping Exercise

Great leaders don't just know their own level — they understand where their team members are, too. Mapping your team through the 5 Levels lens allows you to coach with precision and grow your culture intentionally.

Step-by-Step Mapping Process

1. List Your Team

Start with your direct reports or key team members.

2. Assess Current Leadership Level

Use observable behaviors to place each person:

- **Level 1:** Relies on authority or title
- **Level 2:** Has strong peer relationships
- **Level 3:** Produces consistent, high-impact results
- **Level 4:** Developing or mentoring others
- **Level 5:** Trusted influencer across teams or departments

3. Capture Evidence

Note one or two examples that justify the level assignment.

4. Identify Growth Opportunities

Name one actionable step to help them move up a level.

Sample Team Map (Table Format)

Team Member	Current Level	Evidence	Growth Opportunity
Jamie	Level 2	Trusted by peers, collaborative	Lead a cross-functional project
Theo	Level 1	Relies on instruction	Take initiative on recurring task
Avery	Level 3	Exceeds goals, team motivator	Mentor a junior team member

Leadership in Action

- Reflect: Which team members are ready for more?
- Ask: Am I matching their development path to their current level?
- Action Steps:

- Complete your team map this week.
- Choose one person and schedule a growth conversation based on your notes.

30-Day Influence Growth Plan

Leadership isn't learned in theory — it's built in practice. This 30-day plan will help you create intentional habits that grow your influence across all five levels.

Week 1: Strengthen Relationships (Level 2)

- Meet 1-on-1 with each direct report.
- Ask about their goals, challenges, and workstyle.
- Share one personal story that shaped your leadership.
- Write down something meaningful you learned about each person.

Week 2: Drive Results (Level 3)

- Clarify top three team priorities for the month.
- Choose one metric to track weekly as a team.
- Celebrate one small win publicly.
- Conduct a “start/stop/continue” review with your team.

Week 3: Develop Others (Level 4)

- Identify one person to mentor or stretch.
- Assign a leadership opportunity with feedback built in.
- Share a growth resource (article, podcast, or book).
- Provide real-time coaching during a live project.

Week 4: Reflect and Recalibrate

- Revisit your Leadership Self-Assessment.
- Ask three people for feedback on your leadership.
- Identify one blind spot that surfaced.
- Set three leadership goals for the next 90 days.

Leadership in Action

- Reflect: What habit had the biggest impact this month?
- Ask: How can I build this rhythm into every quarter?
- Action Steps:
 - Block time each month to repeat this growth cycle.
 - Invite a peer or mentor to join you in the next round.

Creating a Culture of Leadership

Leadership development shouldn't be a side project — it should be embedded in how your team thinks, works, and wins.

Culture is built by what you **tolerate**, **celebrate**, and **replicate**. It starts with your daily actions — not your job title.

Signs of a Leadership Culture

- People are valued beyond their productivity.
- Feedback flows in all directions.
- Mistakes are learning moments, not liabilities.
- Initiative is recognized and encouraged.
- Values aren't slogans — they're visible behaviors.

How to Build One

- **Start small:** Identify one value you want to model consistently.
- **Recognize early:** Celebrate when someone demonstrates leadership, even informally.
- **Invite others in:** Ask, "What do you think?" and "Would you like to lead this?"
- **Use shared language:** Make the 5 Levels part of team conversations and reviews.

Leadership in Action

- Reflect: What behaviors am I reinforcing — intentionally or not?
- Ask: What stories are we telling through the way we work?
- Action Steps:
 - Choose one leadership behavior to celebrate this week.
 - Ask your team: "What does great leadership look like here?"
 - Model one visible act of courage or humility in the next team meeting.
 -

Coaching Conversations at Each Level

Leadership isn't just modeled — it's multiplied. And one of the most effective ways to multiply leadership is through intentional, growth-focused conversation. Not formal evaluations or performance reviews, but real-time coaching that helps people connect the dots between where they are and where they want to be.

The best coaches don't give answers — they ask better questions. They create space for others to reflect, speak honestly, and move forward with greater ownership. But great coaching isn't one-size-fits-all. The kind of conversation someone needs depends on where they are in their leadership journey.

At Level 1, focus your coaching on clarity and confidence. Ask what they need to better understand their role, and help them see where they already add value. At Level 2, shift the conversation toward trust. Ask how they feel supported, where they're struggling, and how you can better align with their work style. At Level 3, focus on results. Invite them to evaluate their wins and identify areas for growth. At Level 4, your coaching becomes developmental — now you're asking who they're mentoring, and how you can help them develop others. And at Level 5, the conversation centers on values, legacy, and scale. What kind of impact do they want to make beyond their team? What will their leadership be remembered for?

In every conversation, the key is presence. Coaching isn't about having all the answers. It's about listening with curiosity, challenging with care, and believing in who someone is becoming.

Leadership in Action

Choose one team member. Reflect on which level they're currently operating from. Then schedule a 15-minute conversation this week using that insight to guide your questions.

Mentorship and Succession Planning

If leadership is about multiplying influence, mentorship is how that multiplication happens. Mentorship is more than sharing tips or giving advice. It's about walking alongside someone, helping them discover who they are as a leader, and guiding them through the challenges and choices that shape them.

The most effective mentors lead with transparency. They share their own mistakes, not just their successes. They listen more than they lecture. And they stay invested over time — not just until the task is done, but until the person is ready to lead on their own.

Every leader should be both a mentor and a mentee. That rhythm of learning from those ahead and lifting those coming behind creates a sustainable leadership culture. Mentorship doesn't have to be formal. Sometimes it begins with a simple question: "Would it help if we talked through this together each month?" From there, trust grows and transformation begins.

Succession planning is the structural side of mentorship. It's what ensures that the work — and the culture — can continue even when the leader steps away. Too many teams are vulnerable because their success is tied to one person. The strongest teams build depth. They identify emerging leaders early, give them real responsibility, and prepare them to lead before they need to.

If you want your leadership to outlive your presence, start mentoring now. And build the kind of systems that make leadership not just scalable — but sustainable.

Leadership in Action

Think about someone who's shown leadership potential. Invite them into a mentoring relationship. Begin by asking about their goals and what kind of leader they want to become.

Building a 5-Level Team

The most effective teams aren't built on followers — they're built on leaders. A 5-Level team is one where everyone is encouraged to grow, and leadership is practiced at every level of the organization.

This begins with shared language. When everyone understands the 5 Levels model, you can have better conversations, clearer expectations, and faster growth. It becomes normal to ask, "What level are we leading from in this project?" or "How can I support you in moving to the next level?"

Next, great teams align responsibility with readiness. When you know where each person is in their leadership journey, you can give them the right kind of challenge — not too much too soon, and not too little for too long. Growth happens when people are stretched just beyond what they've already mastered.

To lead a 5-Level team, you must model the climb. Let your team see your growth — your self-assessment, your feedback conversations, your attempts to mentor and delegate. That authenticity creates permission for others to step up.

Finally, leadership development must be woven into the fabric of how the team operates. It should show up in how you hire, onboard, coach, and review. When growth becomes the goal — not just outcomes — your team doesn't just perform better. They become better.

Leadership in Action

Start using the 5 Levels language during your weekly team meetings. Invite your team to reflect on which level they're currently leading from — and where they want to grow next.

Measuring Leadership Effectiveness

Leadership is part art, part science — but it can still be measured. You don't have to guess whether your leadership is working. If you look in the right places, the results will speak.

Influence can be seen in how people respond to your presence and your ideas. Do they seek your input when they don't have to? Do they implement what you suggest without resistance? That's a sign your leadership carries weight beyond authority.

Results matter too. Great leaders help their teams meet goals. But sustainable leaders build systems that produce those results over time. If everything falls apart without you, that's not success — that's dependency.

Engagement offers another signal. If people are speaking up, volunteering ideas, and staying energized, it shows they're connected to something meaningful — and that your leadership is part of why. High turnover, silence in meetings, or low energy are often symptoms of unclear or ineffective leadership.

And finally, there's your pipeline. Are others stepping into leadership roles because of your investment? Can the team run — and win — without you in the room? That's the clearest sign that your leadership is multiplying, not just managing.

Measurement doesn't have to be formal. Sometimes the best feedback comes in a hallway conversation. But you should create regular moments to ask hard questions, look at patterns, and adjust accordingly.

Leadership in Action

Ask three people for input this week. What's one thing your leadership helps them do better? What's one thing they'd like to see more of from you?

Leadership Resources and Recommended Reading

Leadership growth doesn't end with this guide — it begins with what you do next. The best leaders are committed to learning, reflecting, and stretching into new territory.

Books are a powerful way to go deeper. John C. Maxwell's *The 5 Levels of Leadership* expands on every principle in this guide. His foundational book *Developing the Leader Within You 2.0* offers tools for leading from the inside out. *Multipliers* by Liz Wiseman will challenge you to evaluate whether you're empowering or diminishing your team. *Leaders Eat Last* by Simon Sinek reinforces the idea that culture and trust are your highest-leverage assets. And *The Coaching Habit* by Michael Bungay Stanier will help you turn everyday conversations into transformational moments.

Podcasts and audio content can help leadership growth become part of your weekly rhythm. Whether you prefer *The Maxwell Leadership Podcast*, *Coaching for Leaders*, or *Craig Groeschel's Leadership Podcast*, find a voice that challenges and inspires you — and keep learning on the go.

You might also explore assessments like Gallup StrengthsFinder, 360° feedback tools, or Maxwell Leadership's Growth Plan platform, which offers guided development experiences.

Whatever resource you choose, commit to one: one book, one podcast, one learning experience — and build the habit of continual growth. Leaders who grow consistently lead effectively.

Leadership in Action

Choose one new leadership resource to engage with this month. Then teach one insight from it to

someone on your team. Learning that's shared is learning that sticks.

A Final Challenge

You've explored all five levels. You've reflected on what leadership truly means, what influence looks like in practice, and what it takes to develop others along the way. Now comes the most important part of the journey — what you do next.

Leadership is not a destination. It's a decision — made daily — to grow, to serve, and to multiply your impact. Titles come and go. Circumstances change. But the decision to lead with purpose is always yours.

If you've made it through this guide, it's because something in you wants to be more than just efficient. You want to be effective. You want to lead in a way that matters — not just to your organization, but to the people around you.

Don't wait for a perfect moment. Don't assume you'll grow when things slow down. Begin now. Begin with the next conversation, the next question, the next choice to listen, to coach, to act with integrity when it's not easy.

Start where you are — with the influence you have. Lead yourself well. Earn trust. Drive results. Develop others. And keep your values at the center as you go. Whether you're at Level 1 or Level 4, there is always a next step.

The most transformational leaders aren't those who climb alone. They are the ones who lift as they rise.

Your leadership matters. Your growth matters. So commit to the climb.

Leadership in Action

Write down the one leadership shift you will make this week. Share it with someone you trust — and ask them to hold you to it. Then take the step.

Final Thoughts

This field guide is more than a framework — it's an invitation. An invitation to lead with clarity, to grow with intention, and to develop others with courage. You don't have to be the loudest voice in the room to make the biggest difference. You simply have to lead where you are, with what you have, for the good of those around you.

The 5 Levels of Leadership will give you language, structure, and momentum. But the real transformation happens when these ideas move from the page to your practice.

So go lead. Go listen. Go grow. And wherever this journey takes you next, remember: the most valuable thing you bring to the table isn't your title — it's your influence.

Let's make it count.