

Why Gratitude Makes You a Better Leader

By [John C. Maxwell](#)



I typically don't spend a lot of time in the kitchen—[play to your strengths](#), remember? But I've always thought cooking is a bit magical. Each ingredient, distinct on its own, blends with others to create something new. The spices add richness, the butter depth, the salt complexity. Start peeling away ingredients, and your dish gets blander until you're left with something like pureed squash. *Yuck!*

We're no different, are we? Sure, we're born with certain traits and characteristics, but from the minute we enter this world, other people are pouring ingredients into us. Our parents provide our base—flour and eggs—and then everyone else we encounter adds flavorings. Some are bitter, and we hope

the aftertaste bakes out of the final product. Some contribute a hint of flavor, a mere dash of pepper. Some help transform us from a weekday casserole into Michelin-worthy fare.

As we [celebrate another season of gratitude](#), I'm reminded of the people who helped me build a life that is anything but meat-and-potatoes. I want to reflect on those people, remember to show my thankfulness toward them and then imagine how I can become the resident chef, helping others rise so they don't end up like a flat soufflé.

A few years ago, I made my first gratitude list, naming those who bring out the best in me. They include:

- My dad, who showed me how to live and lead.
- My mom, who made me feel loved every day of my life and taught me to pass on that love to others.
- My wife, Margaret, who fills my life with joy.
- Elmer Towns, Theologian, who sparked my dream of building a great church.
- [John Wooden](#), the legendary basketball coach, who encouraged me to make every day my masterpiece.
- My workplace team, who inspire me to keep reaching, turn visions into reality, and rein me in when I am out of control.

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I wrote for 30 minutes straight that day, filling line after line. I could have written for three hours and still not included everyone who has touched my life. That's why I add to it periodically—sometimes in writing but more often in simple reflection. It's my way of [acknowledging the gifts people offer](#) me daily, from those who inspire my wildest dreams to the server who takes a minute to deliver a kind word with my cup of coffee.



This reflection time allows me to see that gratitude is the antidote to the three deadly diseases that can ruin a leader: pride, isolation and selfishness. When your name graces a company, it's easy to develop an [inflated sense of self-importance](#). How quickly we forget the many hands that contribute to our success. Such arrogance drives us away from people. The resulting isolation blinds us to the needs of others. From such a cauldron, selfishness percolates and ultimately spills over into every decision we make.

Gratitude counteracts those tendencies. When we thank people, we're reminded of our dependence on them and inspired to serve their needs instead of insisting they meet ours.

“Thank you’ is the best prayer anyone could say,” author Alice Walker says. “I say that one a lot. Thank you expresses extreme gratitude, humility, understanding.”

If you're not in the habit of showing appreciation, now is the perfect time to start. I'm not talking about buying expensive gifts or throwing lavish parties. I'm talking about acknowledging the contributions of a staff member. Or thanking your dad for the countless Saturday afternoons sacrificed to Little League—even when it's years after the fact. Or praising your spouse for cooking dinner, folding laundry or tackling the kids' algebra homework.

“People who matter,” said publisher Malcolm Forbes, “are aware that everyone else does, too.”

But the greatest show of gratitude comes from [nurturing other people's development](#). This is my greatest passion. Some of you might do this automatically. That's a great start. Consider now doing it more intentionally, contemplating more and better ways to inspire. Here are some options to consider:

- [Listen to the stories of others](#). Know about their families, their interests, their hopes and dreams. Shift the focus of conversations from you to them.
- Harness your gifts for the benefit of others. Are you a powerful speaker? Coach an associate before her major presentation. A gifted writer? Help a fledgling entrepreneur articulate his business plan.
- Solicit ideas. People grow—in confidence and in skills—when they are asked to contribute to a project.

[Offer opportunities](#). You've been there, done that. It's time to pass the mantle to someone else.

I had an epiphany around the time of my 40th birthday. I had accomplished a lot by then, but I remember feeling strangely dissatisfied. It hit me: I had been training other leaders. I had taken them along on my journey, but I had kept them in the background. They were prep cooks who had the potential to be head chefs. I finally understood that life isn't made by what you can accomplish. It's made by what you can accomplish with others. In my kitchen, I'm not sure there can ever be too many cooks.