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Common Purpose

How Great Leaders Get Organizations to Achieve the Extraordinary

THE SUMMARY IN BRIEF

What is common purpose? It is that rare, almost palpable experience that happens when a leader coalesces a group, team or community into a creative, dynamic, brave and nearly invincible *we*. It happens the moment the organization's values, tools, objectives and hopes are internalized in a way that enables people to work tirelessly toward a goal. Common purpose is rarely achieved. But when a leader is able to bring it about, the results are outsized, measurable and inspiring.

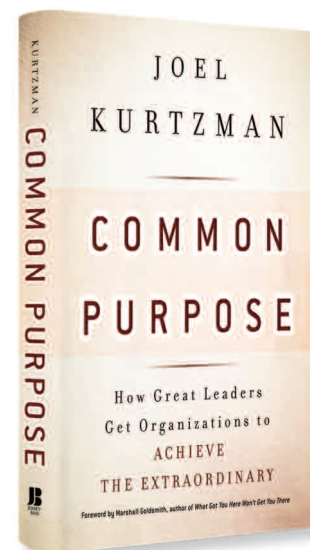
Common Purpose features personal interviews with some of the most dynamic, successful and enduring leaders, including Gordon Bethune of Continental Airlines, Richard Boyatzis of Case Western Reserve University and John Tyson of Tyson Foods.

With new insights on how to approach a leadership mindset, as well as how to implement it, Joel Kurtzman sheds new light on the meaning of leadership, the crucial qualities of leaders and, most importantly, how to lead.

The road to common purpose in leaders and leadership is not an easy one. *Common Purpose* provides a road map to stay on that journey — and to succeed along the way.

IN THIS SUMMARY, YOU WILL LEARN:

- How excellent leaders create a feeling of “we” among the members of their group, team or organization.
- How to get people to do the right thing on their own and then get them to do it again.
- How to build a common purpose in a world besieged by failures of leadership.
- How to create sustainable, healthy organizations.



by Joel Kurtzman

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THE COMPLETE SUMMARY: COMMON PURPOSE

by Joel Kurtzman

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No One Leads Alone

Leaders are people who rise to prominence. But leadership is different. Leadership is about what leaders do. A leader who mistakes one for the other can suffer a dangerous fall.

Leadership is akin to a contract between the leader and the group. To use a common analogy, if leaders are the captains of the ship, they sign a contract with the board of directors (or its equivalent, depending on the leader's level in the organization) and also with those who are furling the sails, coiling the ropes, hoisting the anchors and sweeping the decks. It's those people — the deckhands and swabbies — as much as the board who can eject any leader from his or her job.

The contract that leaders sign stipulates they are to select the destination; plot a course to it; arrive with crew, cargo and ship intact; and put down mutinies should they occur along the way. If the wind changes, they have to tack. But if the seas rise, they are not free to change destinations. They are hired to achieve a goal, no matter the odds.

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Great leaders motivate people by building a sense of inclusiveness, which is how they connect with and become accepted by the group. They create a sense of *we* by using their emotions as well as other tools — ideas, arguments, numbers and so on — in strategic and disciplined ways. A leader's authority derives from effectively balancing what can only be called the near-schizophrenic task of being a genuinely accepted member of a group, while having sufficient detachment to constantly adjust course. To do that, leaders must be conscious about which emotions to display and when to display

them. They must use their full set of leadership tools to create common purpose, which is how one person impels another to act without directing that person's every move. Common purpose is what turns *me* into *we*.

Common purpose is a force you can almost feel. It animates great companies and great movements, and it can be summoned to propel a politician forward. When cared for, nurtured and protected, it produces an almost palpable sense of “we” that can be felt inside the company. It is the feeling that we're all in this together and that we all know and understand what to do, why we're here and what we stand for. ●

The Leadership Disconnect

A major disconnect exists today on the topic of leadership. Senior leaders in business, government and nonprofit organizations talk about the need to push decision making down in their organizations. They do this with the goal of making their organizations more responsive to their customers and constituencies, and more competitive against rivals. Rather than wait until a problem moves up through the management levels, quality- and quick-response-minded organizations need people who can solve problems and pursue opportunities as soon as they arise. Minimizing response time has never been more important.

And yet, while organizations need leaders at every level and in every function if they are to quicken their response time, senior executives still talk — and, even worse, think — in terms of leaders, followers, subordinates and direct reports. Although these executives might espouse the value of flatness, they still think in hierarchical terms.



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Leadership Determines Results

Leadership matters not just when it comes to preventing calamities and seizing opportunities. It matters when it comes to retaining an organization's most precious resource: talent. Richard Boyatzis, a professor of business at Case Western Reserve University and a noted researcher regarding individuals and organizations, has said that some firms actually become emotionally toxic places to work because of the way they are led.

Leaders within toxic organizations create cultures, or allow toxic cultures to develop, that harm the organization's talent. Badly led, toxic organizations not only dispirit the individuals who remain in place (the best people usually leave), they create environments of low productivity, low expectations, poor morale and flagging creativity. According to Boyatzis, some organizations are so badly led, so stifling to the dreams of employees, so damaging to their abilities and passions, that they can take a toll on their employees' health. ●

Leaders at All Levels

Great leaders put their stamp on an organization and that stamp is replicated throughout the organization. Gordon Bethune turned around Continental Airlines, once viewed as the worst in the industry, with a high level of integrity and simple ideas everyone could understand.

Bethune became CEO in 1995. He was famous at Continental for inviting people into his office for a pizza lunch to discuss ways to make the airline better. He got great ideas this way, but he was also able to change the culture of the airline through the strength of his personality. His authenticity counted for a lot — so much so, that after he retired in 2004, the company's performance deteriorated, a powerful indicator of the importance of leadership and a reminder that each generation of leaders must do its part to maintain its lead.

Bethune, who began his career as an aircraft mechanic, understood that, after safety, the most important metric in the industry was an airline's on-time performance. By focusing on this single metric, everyone's behavior changed. To succeed, Bethune said, your customer's definition of success has to be your definition of success. And since customers valued on-time performance above everything else — even price — he made it the measure of the company's success.

But you can't just pick a metric and expect to create a sense of common purpose around it. You need to communicate the importance throughout the organization in

How to Retain Leaders

To retain leaders, do the following:

- Identify them early and make sure they know it.
- Celebrate their accomplishments.
- Educate them about the organization and its capabilities.
- Give them access to the team at the top.
- Respond quickly with a counteroffer if they plan to leave.
- Reward them with new challenges, not just with more money.

a way everyone understands. So, beginning when he took over as CEO, Bethune decided to send every employee a check each time the airline was No. 1 in on-time performance. Rewarding the entire company without exception when the airline succeeded made everyone not only realize, but feel “we're in it together,” Bethune said.

Common purpose requires common goals. It also requires communicating what's expected and providing feedback when people get it right. ●

Internalizing What the Organization Stands For

Embedded in a firm's language is a set of assumptions that enable people to discuss and solve problems in a kind of shorthand. These commonly held assumptions have power and help make each organization unique. They also make it difficult for one organization to copy another's business model. And they offer clues to each organization's hidden vulnerabilities.

Microsoft

All organizations have embedded assumptions. At Microsoft, for example, these assumptions focused on the belief that superior intelligence, combined with tenacity and aggressiveness toward the accomplishment of a goal, could solve any problem. At Microsoft, people were hired based on how smart they were and how aggressively they pursued goals. They were promoted for the same reasons. Leaders at Microsoft were often ferocious in meetings and rarely cared about feelings or even group cohesiveness. Many meetings at Microsoft in its early days were animated mixtures of raw intelligence and high levels of aggression. It was not uncommon for people to call each other stupid or to dismiss someone's

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ideas with groans. The belief was that intelligence and aggression could solve any problem.

These types of embedded assumptions might have worked in Microsoft's early days, but when its objective was to capture the desktop, they did not work as the company matured. Lawsuits were brought against the company for unfair business practices, and the Justice Department nearly broke up the company. As a result, the culture and the firm's faith in unbridled aggression was forced to change.

People hired a decade or two ago at the company might be passed over today for being too raw. In fact, at a recent meeting at Microsoft, one of the firm's leaders told the group, "I think, as a company, we need to be humble." This remark was vastly different from those made in the company's early days and shows how an organization's assumptions can change over time. ●

The Best Leaders Are Part of the Group

Leadership must permeate an organization at all levels if it is to be successful. This challenges an outdated assumption about leadership that is essentially military in nature: that a leader is in command of others. And while sometimes that type of leadership is what we get, it's rarely what we need. The world is simply too complicated for a command-and-control type of leader.

Consider Tyco under the iron hand of Dennis Kozlowski and Enron under the leadership of Jeffrey Skilling. Within these organizations, bad behavior occurred in large measure because the leaders at the top not only condoned it, they did it themselves. Even the military has largely abandoned the idea that leadership and command are synonymous.

Inspirational Leadership

Leadership is really about guiding, coaching and inspiring others to reach a goal. Sometimes a leader stands in front, sometimes to the side, sometimes even behind the people he or she is trying to help reach a goal. This approach to leadership means that it's not just the man or woman at the top who is responsible. Instead, everyone in an organization shares responsibility for reaching a goal. Sometimes, of course, the structure of the organization can get in the way of leading. At other times, people can have that effect. The point is that while great leadership is never easy, now, more than ever before, it is distributed.

Individuals take their cues from the way other people in the organization behave. They look to the right and

left, but they also look at the top leaders of their organizations for ways to model their behavior. They look at the top team, because even though modern organizations require leadership at all levels, the people at the top have the most leverage. People within organizations tend to model the behavior of the people at the top. ●

Cultivating Curiosity, Not Complacency

An organization's leaders at all levels are its rock stars. But it's not enough to tell them that or even pay them well in appreciation. They also need to be celebrated for what they add to the organization's overall endeavor.

At Wynn Resorts, a bellman can be celebrated for his accomplishments in taking care of a guest. He can post his story on the internal Web site and become a hero. At Colgate-Palmolive, the company's next generation of leaders are celebrated in ways that integrate them more closely into the firm — meetings with people from around the world and presentations for the top executives followed by dinner with the CEO. These are perks given to people with talent whose impact will reverberate around the organization.

Organizations are really nothing more than ways people have devised in order to accomplish goals larger than an individual can pursue on his or her own. Even so, people often lose sight of the fact that the individuals working in the organization are the ones who actually accomplish goals. An IBM or Xerox can accomplish nothing without a talented group of people working side-by-side. These individuals must be free to pursue their purpose within the organization; they must feel valued and feel that they own their job. At Colgate/Palmolive, people feel that way. They are celebrated as new leaders not just because they are talented, but because they contribute to the common purpose of the organization. ●

Creating a Culture of Leadership

Fit is an incredibly important and difficult-to-define attribute to select for when bringing people into an organization. In interviews, everyone is in sales mode. A check of references often turns up little. Character, honesty and integrity are all very important aspects of a leader's personality, but two people who look the same and test the same way on paper are never interchangeable.

You cannot lead if you do not know the people you are leading. And the best way to get to know them is informally.

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At the beginning of every year, in good times and in bad, senior executives from the engineering firm FM Global travel to each of the firm's offices around the world to discuss the year's strategy, answer questions and do something fun. So important are these meetings that FM Global decided to continue to hold them even in the economic downturn of 2009. In addition, they hold big conferences where people can get together on a grand scale.

All of these events, and the expenses that go with them, are critical elements in how FM Global builds its common purpose culture. That culture is actually a set of relationships among leaders at every level. These relationships are complicated networks that transfer best practices. And, as an organization, FM Global has gone to great lengths to help its employees create their networks, a conclusion that researchers Robert Kelly and Janet Caplan say is a requirement for firms wishing to develop stars.

Clear Vision

At FM Global, helping people develop these networks is not something that took place on its own. It developed because its leaders began with the understanding that FM Global is something special and that people within the firm are better off if they know each other and understand how they think and work.

"Leadership begins with a clear vision," FM Global Executive Vice President Tom Lawson said. "Then you have to communicate what you have to do to make that vision happen. But after you define that vision, you also have to examine where it breaks down and what you have to do about it when it does. And once you understand that, you have to create a business environment where people can be successful so they can execute against that vision." ●

We're All in This Together

When referring to competitors, leaders often resort to an us-versus-them strategy to rally the troops. And although this strategy might work in baseball or football, it doesn't work outside the realm of sports. This approach to leadership is doomed to fail. If leaders at Lowe's think only about Home Depot, or if Ford cannot get Toyota out of its mind, ultimately their enterprises will be doomed because they're focusing on the wrong thing. Rather than obsessing about the competition, organizations should focus on the people they want to serve.

High Road to Leadership

Standing up for what you believe, versus standing up in an effort to prove you're not someone else, is the high road to leadership. It is also practical.

When you've taken on an opponent and develop an us-versus-them culture, your opponent gets energized. Not only that, but your opponent then sees a justification and an opportunity to create a coalition against you.

Great leaders are not those who press ever onward. They are people who are sensitive enough to know when to march and when to hold back. Great leadership is not about keeping your competition in your sights and relentlessly pushing back your rivals. It is about keeping your customers or clients in your sights and doing everything you can, in a flexible way, to ensure you are committed to solving their problems.

In a common purpose organization, the truth is that highly competitive people hardly ever think about the competition. They are aware of their rivals, but they keep them in their peripheral vision. What great leaders think about are better ways to make their own organization more responsive, flatter, better and faster at achieving their goals.

Not the Art of War

A great disservice was done to the field of leadership by pressing people to read *The Art of War* by Sun Tzu, which was trendy in the 1980s. While this is a great book with a powerful message and page after page of elegantly set out tactics, the problem is that most people look at this book and mistake a rival for the enemy. War is war — and very different from business. In war, your enemy is hidden on the other side of the hill and is waiting there to surprise or destroy you. Your enemy is an army or air force or navy, like you, and the match is like chess.

But in business, the enemy is more like what the old comics strip character Pogo once said: "We have met the enemy and it is us." Meaning that one company or firm succeeds against another not by attacking that company but by satisfying its own clients' needs.

Need for Discipline

Fixing organizations that have descended into the pit of us-versus-them thinking is not easy. In most cases, it requires getting rid of the people who have created the toxic environment in the first place. People whose default setting is anger or confrontation or excessive negativity need more than a training program, a few directives and a pat on the back. For the good of the organization, these people should go and be allowed to find a place where their unique set of skills, not to men-

tion their temperament, is needed, although, such places may not exist. ●

How Leaders Stay Positive and Determined

Organizations without common purpose are far weaker than those with it. And why not? If powerful emotions like caring and compassion, along with values like authenticity, are the forces that hold these organizations together, what holds together non-common purpose organizations?

For the most part, they are held together not with the glue of caring and compassion, but with the paste of interesting work, various types of incentives and money. Non-common purpose organizations need powerful retention packages where payments for an employee's accomplishments are stretched out into the future. But common purpose organizations need far less when it comes to these packages.

When it comes to common purpose and resonant leadership, one size does not fit all. People are individuals, and those who thrive in one firm might not thrive in another. Chemistry, fit, values and many other qualities are in the eye of the beholder. And whereas some people might feel warm, fuzzy and perfectly at home swimming in a shark tank, others need the warmth and calm of the beach. Resonant leaders can create harmony only if the people they work with share a sufficient number of traits. That puts the selection process, whether for a team or an organization, into high relief.

Positive Stress

We should not just tolerate our jobs, the way we tolerate a bad-tasting medicine when we're sick. We should enjoy them. Our jobs take up a large portion of our lives. What this says is that we shouldn't just put up with them. We should find them exciting and challenging, and although there is no such thing as stress-free work, the majority of that stress should be positive.

In a recessionary period or even in a run-of-the-mill downturn, our choices are often limited. But when jobs are plentiful and the world is growing, it behooves us to lead in a positive way and to work with leaders who do the same. And while we might not all be geniuses, most of us are sufficiently capable that our talents can find a worthy home in more than one setting. If that is true, then why accept working with people who create a toxic environment? Why not seek out people whose aim is to create a common purpose organization? ●

Leading Is a Mental Game

Michael Maccoby, a brilliant student of leadership and psychology, and a psychoanalyst, said that the definition of a leader should be simple. A leader, he said, is someone whom people follow.

And while common purpose leaders are people whom others align with in the pursuit of common goals, Maccoby's definition makes sense. Leaders have followers, or, at least, leaders have people who join them in pursuit of a goal.

Leaders who help their teams achieve aims beyond their expectations find that they have no difficulty recruiting people to join them. And why not? In our free-agent, new-employment-compact world, where loyalty is no longer the virtue it once was, being a member of an organization's top-performing team means you will always be in demand.

It is no surprise, for example, that the three runners-up to succeed Jack Welch at GE all became CEOs of large companies. Working on a great team, with great leaders, provides a boost to any individual's career.

Maccoby suggests that there are three distinct types of leadership roles within organizations:

- **Strategic leaders.** Strategic leaders are people within organizations who plot the course. They are the longer-term thinkers. Strategic leaders generally can think far into the future. The best of these people understand where the future is going and how to get there. They love trying to figure out tomorrow's challenges long before they happen.

- **Operational leaders.** Operational leaders make certain the trains run on time, the manufacturing processes are adequate, the logistics systems work, the technicians are well trained and the trucks are where they are supposed to be. Like strategic leaders, operational leaders are vital to an organization's success.

- **Bridge-building leaders.** These are people who connect people together, transfer knowledge and information, make introductions and help others achieve their goals. Bridge-building leaders are extremely important within organizations as well.

All three leadership roles — strategic, operational and bridge building — are vital to creating a common purpose organization. Setting a goal (strategic leadership), making certain everything is being done that is needed to reach that goal (operational leadership) and ensuring that everyone is working together to achieve the same aims (bridge-building leadership) are essential to the success of any endeavor. ●

Different Strokes for Different Generations

Common purpose leadership, at its most basic level, is about recognizing people as individuals. It doesn't matter if they are young or old, if they play in a band on weekends, if they are extremely intense and focused or if they multitask, if they're outdoors people or bookworms. Common purpose leadership begins with respect for individuals and their differences, and it goes on to celebrate their strengths. Since it is about individuals aligning themselves together to achieve goals, common purpose leadership is also about making up for each other's weaknesses.

Members of Gen X and Y are uniquely qualified to lead. And yet, because of accidents of fate and economics, they have not yet gotten the chance. Many were hired on Wall Street, only to be let go when the economy tanked, beginning in 2007. Others were working in traditional industries when the economy teetered.

Zigzagging Career Paths

For Gen X and Y individuals, says CEO and Chairman of Tyson Foods John Tyson, the career path has to "zigzag rather than go in a straight line." Young people, especially these young people, are used to change. As a result, leaders must set up programs to develop them, that move them around the organization and have them interact with lots of different groups.

Gen X and Y think differently about work, because, said Tyson, "they saw their moms and dads get on a career train and stay on it for 30 years. They also saw that it didn't quite work out and that their moms and dads were frustrated. And they also saw their moms and dads being happier when they were off work — you know, having a little barbeque on the weekends — than when they were working." These observations formed the basis of Gen X and Y's relationship to work. They don't want to get caught in a rut or trapped in a job without meaning to them. And they certainly don't want to create common purpose inside an organization that doesn't have a higher purpose.

It is important for organizations to stand for more than the bottom line.

In many cases, the organizations for which we work express an entirely different set of values from the homes in which we live. And yet, for the most part, we are far more accepting of work behaviors than of the types of behaviors we experience at home. In fact, if we have children, we usually spend hours teaching

What Great Leaders Do

Great leaders do the following:

- They make certain the mood of the organization is positive and accomplishment oriented.
- They remove toxic emotions from the organization, not by being a Pollyanna, but by focusing on the positive application of effort.
- They distinguish between chronically negative people and people who might engage in creative disagreements for the long-term good of the organization.
- If they fail at changing chronically negative people into people who are positive, they remove the negative people from their teams.

them not to perpetuate the types of behaviors we experience routinely at work.

Leaders must take it on themselves to make certain that the values their organizations express are the right ones. A further conclusion of an early study of systems was that values determine whether an organization will survive or fail. ●

You Don't Have to Be Ruthless to Lead

What's more important to the success of a company: competent leaders or nice leaders?

While brains, raw talent, education and training matter, none of these factors on their own explains success. In the view of William Baker, a professor at Columbia University who teaches about social intelligence, kindness, caring and empathy are powerful factors for success. When leaders exhibit these types of emotions, they are clearing the air of the type of emotional toxicity that dulls focus and blunts productivity.

Caring is an important leadership tool no matter who the followers are. According to Colin Powell, who led the United States and its allies in the first Gulf War, "The day soldiers stop bringing you their problems is the day you have stopped leading them. They have either lost confidence that you can help them, or concluded you do not care. Either case is a failure of leadership."

Leading With the Heart

The leaders who are most admired at all levels are those who care about people and lead with their hearts. They are men and women who know that one of their

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jobs is to rid their team, and their organization, of negativity. And they understand the massive difference between creating an environment where creative disagreement is fostered in pursuit of the best solution, and allowing an environment to develop where negativity builds up and becomes toxic. ●

Ideas Matter

Ideas do more than matter; they are competitive differentiators. Companies that embrace thought leadership win because they are fearless when it comes to assessing their strengths and weaknesses. And even more important, companies that embrace thought leadership win because they recognize that the world is not static. Rather, they understand that it is constantly changing and that in order for them to keep pace, they must do what Socrates said everybody should do: Question all assumptions.

True Leadership

Leadership is about working with your team to achieve goals. A great deal of time those goals are stretch goals and not easy to achieve. Progress requires hard work and dedication. It takes strategy and a thoughtful analysis of all the tactics that are available. Good leadership requires an active mind.

What this means is that one of the worst mistakes a leader can make is to become intellectually lazy. Real leaders need to take in enormous amounts of information and knowledge and to process what they take in from the vantage point of their teams and from the point of view of their organization and its mission. They must pore over newspapers, magazines and books. They must review what's on the Web. Leaders must spend a lot of time searching for ideas.

It may sound like a truism, but learning organizations must make learning available to everyone who works there — and that can take many forms, from office book clubs to budgets for seminars and conferences to paying for advanced degrees.

Thought leadership is not an add-on; it should be part of every firm's strategies. And although a lot of companies have adopted the words, few firms have really embraced them. Thought leadership is a powerful form of leadership, but it is not an easy form.

To be successful, companies must be open enough and transparent enough to question everything. Ideas must be transmitted if they are to make a difference. The more widely they are disseminated, the more powerful their effect. ●

Epilogue: The Future of Leadership

We no longer need managers in the traditional sense — those who organize and execute on behalf of the leaders. What we need instead are leaders who can create a sense of common purpose so everyone executes and everyone leads. We need people who are well-trained, who embrace thought leadership, who are positive and who are willing to work toward a common goal. We need *individuals*, in the best sense of the word, who can lead alongside a group of peers. We need people with a wide range of skills and true mental agility. We need people who have internalized the values of the company — its brand, mission and values — and can make decisions based on what they know.

We don't need managers in the old-fashioned sense of people whose responsibility derives from someone else — people who must constantly seek permission before they can act.

What we need are people like the bellman at the Wynn Resorts who hopped into his car and drove from Las Vegas to Los Angeles to retrieve a guest's pills, entirely on his own initiative. What we need are more CEOs like FM Global's Shivan Subramaniam, who has the discipline to let others do jobs he enjoys, like poring over spreadsheets, so they will continue to grow and develop their sense of leadership and autonomy. We need to train people and work with people to achieve these ends.

These two individuals are united in their respective organizations through the power of common purpose. They do what they need to do, go where they need to go and help people in their organizations they need to help because they have disciplined and trained themselves to think from the point of view of *we*, and not just *me*. These two individuals are as different as any two people can be with regard to education, capabilities, skills and point of view, but they are united in the sense that both act out of a sense of common purpose. ●

RECOMMENDED READING LIST

If you liked *Common Purpose*, you'll also like:

1. ***True North* by Bill George and Peter Sims.** Just as a compass points toward a magnetic field, your True North pulls you toward the purpose of your leadership. Read how to find your compass and get others to follow.
2. ***Corporate Reputation* by Leslie Gaines-Ross.** Gaines-Ross explains why reputation matters to a company's valuation and well-being and identifies the roles corporate leaders must play in reputation sustainability.
3. ***Leadership Gold* by John Maxwell.** The renowned leadership expert shares a lifetime of leadership truths with readers. Maxwell guides leaders to success achieved through making a difference in the lives of others.