

The Difference Maker: Making Your Attitude Your Greatest Asset

By John C. Maxwell

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From time to time orientation professionals can find valuable insight from sources outside the traditional academic arena. Such is the case with *The Difference Maker* by John C. Maxwell. Maxwell is a prolific writer, speaker, businessman, and an international leadership expert. Written for the mass market, this book is a very quick read.

As orientation professionals, we strive to develop engaging programs and well-rounded orientation team members. For those who supervise professional staff, it is important to create an office environment that is both supportive and productive. Maxwell holds that our attitude is a factor in determining our success.

Fighting off the old cliché that “attitude is everything” (p. 1), Maxwell holds that “attitude isn’t everything, but it is one thing that can make a difference in your life” (p. 2). For instance, if two applicants are ranked equally for the same position, attitude could be the deciding factor. Maxwell’s comment may seem simplistic and self-evident, but he goes further. He divides the concept of attitude into what attitude can and cannot do for you and concludes this section with a thorough discussion of what defines as attitude obstacles. Overall, Maxwell holds that one’s attitude is shaped by personality, environment, feelings, self-image, exposure to growth, opportunities, association with peers, ideas, and personal choices.”

Maxwell devotes a large part of his book to five attitude obstacles: discouragement, change, problems, fear, and failure. Discouragement is a part of everyone’s life at some point. No one is immune. The difference between those who effectively deal with discouragement and those who do not is having the right attitude. In order to effectively handle discouragement, he states that one should get the right perspective, see the right people, say the right words, have the right expectations, and make the right decisions.

Maxwell believes that attitude cannot substitute for competence. “Some people seem to confuse confidence, which is a function of attitude, with competence, which is a function of ability” (p. 20). Attitude cannot substitute for experience,

and it cannot change the facts. "If you want to play center in the NBA and you're only 5 feet 4 inches tall, forget about it" (p. 24). Attitude is not a substitute for personal growth and will not automatically stay positive as you have to develop and maintain a positive attitude.

Maxwell holds that attitude can make a difference in your approach to life, in your relationships with people, and in how you face challenges. "Your attitude has a profound influence on how you see the world—and thus on the way you live out your life," he claims (p. 43).

In discussing change, he holds that people resist change because of personal loss, fear of the unknown, wrong timing, a sense of awkwardness, and because of tradition, which may inhibit change. Change is a big part of orientation programs. When an orientation professional is trying to make changes within an orientation program, there are often individuals who are not willing to change and espouse the concept that "we have always done it this way." For moments like these, Maxwell holds that without change there cannot be improvement. He also maintains that change must begin within before it can alter one's surroundings and influence others. The concept of change is addressed in another aspect of an orientation professional's work, specifically in addressing expectations of staff and other behaviors which are to be adopted by the student team. Orientation/student affairs professionals might ask themselves, "Am I modeling the behavior that I want my student team or those I supervise to demonstrate?" If not, perhaps there is a need to change within. In other words, what your team sees demonstrated through your attitude is a reflection—positive or negative—of what is going on inside of you.

Maxwell holds that we cannot avoid problems; they are everywhere, and everyone has them. He adds that our success or failure usually is determined by our perspective on the problem, not by the problem itself, and that there is a difference between problem spotting and problem solving. He also states that responding correctly to a problem can help us change, grow and mature so that we can advance forward in life.

But with any change or advancement forward in life comes fear. "Fear is part of the human condition," according to Maxwell (p. 123). Fear breeds more fear, causes inaction, weakens us, and wastes energy, and fear keeps us and others from reaching our potential. Maxwell suggests that in order to manage fears, we should admit them, discover their source, realize how they can limit us, accept normal fear as the price for progress, convert fear into desire, focus on things we can control, and give today our attention, not yesterday or tomorrow.

In addressing failure, Maxwell holds that "Most people don't need to learn more about how to overcome their rivals. They need to learn how to get out of their own way" (p. 147). He states that we get in our own way by expecting failure, personalizing failure, refusing to take a risk, and letting failure defeat us. To combat this, Maxwell suggests that we should change our attitude and vocabulary when talking about failure. He encourages the reader to pay little attention to the odds, let failure point us to success, to hold on to our sense of humor, and to learn from our mistakes. He advises us to make failure our gauge for growth, maintain our perspective, and never give up.

As stated earlier, the book is an easy read, but it is extremely heavy on inspirational quotes from people representing all walks of life, hailing from all over the world. If that makes for a laborious reading experience for you, then pass on this book. Maxwell does include tasks or little tests which you can complete as you read. These tasks should give you more insight into the current state and quality of your attitude. For some, this book may feel like a statement of the obvious. I do agree. However as orientation professionals, we serve as models of leadership and integrity for many people. It never hurts to have a gentle reminder about attitude adjustment from time to time. This book definitely serves a healthy dose of reminding.