

New York Times BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF
The 21 Irrefutable Laws of Leadership AND *Thinking for a Change*

JOHN C.
MAXWELL

Includes
In-depth
Self-discovery
Exercises

TODAY
MATTERS

12 DAILY PRACTICES TO
GUARANTEE TOMORROW'S SUCCESS

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About the Author

Today Matters is dedicated to Madeline Elizabeth Miller, our first grandchild. Her mother is the apple of my eye, and Madeline is our sunshine. As she grows, it is our desire that she value the potential of each of her days.

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and Linda Eggers, my assistant.

Just for Today . . .

Just for today . . . I will choose and display the right attitudes.

Just for today . . . I will determine and act on important priorities.

Just for today . . . I will know and follow healthy guidelines.

Just for today . . . I will communicate with and care for my family.

Just for today . . . I will practice and develop good thinking.

Just for today . . . I will make and keep proper commitments.

Just for today . . . I will earn and properly manage finances.

Just for today . . . I will deepen and live out my faith.

Just for today . . . I will initiate and invest in solid relationships.

Just for today . . . I will plan for and model generosity.

Just for today . . . I will embrace and practice good values.

Just for today . . . I will seek and experience improvements.

Just for today . . . I will act on these decisions and practice these disciplines,
and

Then one day . . . I will see the compounding results of a day lived well.

CHAPTER 1

Today Often Falls to Pieces— What Is the Missing Piece?

A few weeks ago I was going through a box of old books in the basement looking for something to read to my grandchildren, and I came across a book my wife, Margaret, and I used to read to my daughter, Elizabeth, when she was little. It's called *Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day* by Judith Viorst. It's the story of a little boy whose day falls to pieces. It begins,

I went to sleep with gum in my mouth and now there's gum in my hair and when I got out of bed this morning I tripped on the skateboard . . . and I could tell it was going to be a terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day.¹

From there, Alexander's day just keeps getting worse as he goes to school, finds himself at the dentist's office, and has to go shopping for clothes with his mother. He has a miserable day. Even the family cat seems to be against him.

What Is the Missing Piece?

Our kids always liked Viorst's book. And I think we adults had as much fun reading little Alexander's grumpy complaints as they did listening. But it's no fun when your own day feels like Alexander's. Who looks forward to a day filled with obstacles, trials, and setbacks, where each bend in the road seems to hold something worse?

When it comes to approaching the day, we often are more like Alexander than we would care to admit. We may not wake up with gum in our hair or feel that our family and friends are out to get us, but our days often fall to pieces. And, as a result, they seem like very bad days.

How often do you have a *great* day? Is it the norm or the rare exception for you? Take today, for example. How would you rate it? So far, has today been a great day? Or has it been less than wonderful? Perhaps you haven't even thought about it until now. If I asked you to rate today on a scale of 1 to 10 (with 10 being perfect), would you even know how to score it? Upon what would you base your rating? Would it depend on how you feel? Would it be determined by how many items you've checked off your to-do list? Would you score your day according to how much time you've spent with someone you love? How do you define success for today?

How Does Today Impact Tomorrow's Success?

Everyone wants to have a good day, but not many people know what a good day looks like—much less how to create one. And even fewer people understand how *the way you live today impacts your tomorrow*. Why is that? The root of the problem is that most people misunderstand success. If we have a faulty view of success, we take a faulty approach to our day. As a result, today falls to pieces.

Look at these common misconceptions concerning success and the responses that often go with them:

WE BELIEVE SUCCESS IS IMPOSSIBLE— SO WE CRITICIZE IT

Psychiatrist M. Scott Peck opened his best-selling book *The Road Less Traveled* with the words “Life is difficult.” He went on to say, “Most do not fully see this truth that life is difficult. Instead they moan more or less incessantly . . . about the enormity of their problems, their burdens, and their difficulties as if life were generally easy, as if life *should* be easy.”² Because we want to believe life should be easy, we sometimes assume anything that’s difficult must be impossible. When success eludes us, we are tempted to throw in the towel and assume it’s unattainable.

That’s when we begin to criticize it. We say, “Who wants success anyway?!” And if success is achieved by anyone whom we consider less worthy than ourselves, then we *really* get steamed. Like journalist and short-story writer Ambrose Bierce, we see success as “the one unpardonable sin against one’s fellows.”³

WE BELIEVE SUCCESS IS MYSTICAL— SO WE SEARCH FOR IT

If success has escaped us, yet we haven’t entirely given up on it, then we often see it as a big mystery. We believe that all we have to do to succeed is find the magic formula, silver bullet, or golden key that will solve all our problems. That’s why there are so many diet books on the best-seller lists and so many management fads employed in corporate offices each year.

The problem is that we want the rewards of success without paying the price. Seth Godin, author of *Permission Marketing*, recently wrote about this problem in the business world. He believes that business leaders frequently look for quick fixes for their companies. But he admonishes that “we need to stop shopping for lightning bolts.”

“You don’t win an Olympic gold medal with a few weeks of intensive training,” says Godin. “There’s no such thing as an overnight opera sensation. Great law firms or design companies don’t spring up overnight. . . . Every great company, every great

brand, and every great career has been built in exactly the same way: bit by bit, step by step, little by little.”⁴ There is no magic solution to success.

WE BELIEVE SUCCESS COMES FROM LUCK— SO WE HOPE FOR IT

How many times have you heard people say something like “He was just in the right place at the right time” to explain away someone else’s success? It’s a myth, just like the idea of the overnight success. The chances of becoming a success due to luck are about as good as of winning the lottery—50 million to 1.

Every now and then, we hear about a Hollywood star who was discovered while working as a drugstore clerk or an athlete drafted by a pro team even though he didn’t begin playing the sport until late in high school and we get excited. What luck, we think. That could happen to me! But those are rare occurrences. For every person who makes it under such circumstances, there are thousands and thousands of people who have spent a dozen years toiling at a craft to get their chance. And there are tens of thousands more who have put in the years of work but who still aren’t good enough to make it. When it comes to success, you’re better off hopping to it than hoping for it.

WE BELIEVE SUCCESS IS PRODUCTIVITY— SO WE WORK FOR IT

I once saw a sign posted in a small business that said,

The 57 Rules of Success

#1 Deliver the goods.

#2 The other 56 don’t matter.

There’s something about working hard and producing results that feels very rewarding. And many people regard that feeling so highly that they define it as success. Former U.S. President Theodore Roosevelt observed, “Far and away the best prize that life offers is the chance to work hard at work worth doing.”

But seeing hard work as success is one-dimensional. (Is a day that contains no work unsuccessful? Is someone who retires unsuccessful?) Besides, it’s not always true. A strong work ethic is an admirable trait, but hard work alone doesn’t bring success. There are plenty of people who work hard and never see success. Some people give their energy to dead-end jobs. Others work so hard that they neglect important relationships, ruin their health, or burn out. Success may not come to those who don’t work hard, but hard work and success are not one and the same.

WE BELIEVE SUCCESS COMES FROM AN OPPORTUNITY—SO WE WAIT FOR IT

Many of the people who work very hard yet don’t seem to get anywhere believe that

the only thing they need is a break. Their motto begins with the words “if only.” If only my boss would cut me some slack . . . If only I could get a promotion . . . If only I had some start-up capital . . . If only my kids would behave . . . then life would be perfect.

The truth is that people who do nothing more than wait for an opportunity won’t be ready to capitalize on one if it *does* appear. As basketball legend John Wooden says, “When opportunity comes, it’s too late to prepare.” And for those who receive their wish—of a promotion, start-up money, or anything else—it rarely changes anything in the long term if they haven’t already done all the groundwork to be successful.

“When opportunity comes, it’s too late to prepare.”

—JOHN WOODEN

Besides, we’re all fickle. The thing we believe will solve our problems or make us happy isn’t lasting. It’s like when I was eight years old and I said, “If only I had a new bike.” When Christmas rolled around, I got my new Schwinn with all the bells and whistles. And I loved it—for about a month. Then I had a new “if only” that I thought would make me happy. An opportunity may help you, but it won’t guarantee your success.

WE BELIEVE SUCCESS COMES FROM LEVERAGE— SO WE POWER UP FOR IT

Some people associate success with power. Their viewpoint is reinforced by the words of powerful people like industrialist Andrew Carnegie, who asserted, “Success is the power with which to acquire whatever one demands of life without violating the rights of others.” Many people take their view of success and power one step further, assuming that successful people have taken advantage of others to get where they are. So to get what they want, they look for an angle to exploit or for leverage over someone else. They believe they can force their way to success.

Saddam Hussein, Iraq’s longtime dictator, took that approach by using power, manipulation, and brute force. He got his start politically as an enforcer. He committed murder for the Ba’ath Party in order to rise through its ranks, eventually becoming vice president of Iraq following a coup by the Ba’aths. When Hussein grew unsatisfied with serving as vice president, he simply seized power and made himself president.

For decades he used torture, oppression, and murder to retain power. His vision was to become the hero of the Middle East, its unifying ruler, a modern-day Nebuchadnezzar. But like all people who use and abuse power to get ahead—whether an arrogant corporate CEO or a bloody dictator—he failed in the end. No amount of

power, no matter how ruthlessly wielded, can guarantee success.

WE BELIEVE SUCCESS COMES FROM CONNECTIONS— SO WE NETWORK FOR IT

Which do you think is more important for getting what you want in life: *what* you know or *who* you know? If you believe the answer is *who*, then you probably believe that success comes from connections.

People who believe in connections think they would have it made if only they had been born into the right family. Or they think their fortunes would suddenly improve if they met the right person. But those beliefs are misplaced. Relationships are certainly satisfying. And knowing good people has its rewards. But connections alone will neither improve the life of someone who is off track nor guarantee success. If they did, the children of every successful businessperson would have it made. And the siblings of every U.S. president would be highly successful. But you know that's not true. Remember Billy Carter? Ultimately, no one can network himself to success unless he has something to offer in the first place.

WE BELIEVE SUCCESS COMES FROM RECOGNITION— SO WE STRIVE FOR IT

In your profession, is there a sure sign that you've made it? Would your peers be impressed if you were recognized by *Fortune* magazine, became a chess grand champion, or won the Lombardi Trophy? If you were named teacher of the year or awarded an honorary doctorate by a prestigious university, would that mean success? Perhaps you have quiet dreams of someday winning an Oscar, an Emmy, or a Grammy. Or do you picture yourself accepting a Pulitzer prize, Fields Medal, or Nobel prize? Every profession or discipline has its own form of recognition. Are you striving to achieve recognition in yours?

In France, a nation of food lovers where chefs receive the highest honors, one of the highest marks of recognition anyone can receive is a three-star rating for his restaurant from the Michelin guide. At present, only twenty-five restaurants in all of France hold that honor. One of them is an establishment in the Burgundy region owned by Bernard Loiseau called the Côte d'Or.

For decades, Chef Loiseau was said to be obsessed with creating the perfect restaurant and receiving the highest rating awarded by Michelin. He worked tirelessly; it takes great work to earn even a two-star rating, but Loiseau achieved it in 1981. And then he worked harder. He perfected each dish on his menu. He improved the restaurant's service. And he went \$5 million in debt to improve and expand his facility. And finally, in 1991, he received his third star. He had accomplished what only a handful of others could.

“We are selling dreams,” he once said. “We are merchants of happiness.”⁵ But the recognition he received didn’t keep him happy. In the spring of 2003, after the lunch service, he committed suicide by shooting himself. He didn’t warn anyone, nor did he leave a note. Some say he was disconsolate because his rating in another restaurant guide had fallen from nineteen to seventeen (out of twenty). Others described him as a manic-depressive. No one will ever know why he killed himself, but we can be sure that the great recognition he had received in his profession wasn’t enough for him.

WE BELIEVE SUCCESS IS AN EVENT— SO WE SCHEDULE IT

I’ve dedicated more than thirty years of my life to speaking at events and putting on conferences to help people be more successful and become better leaders. But I’m very realistic about the limited impact an event can make in a person’s life, and I frequently remind conference attendees of those limitations. Events are great places for receiving inspiration and encouragement. They often prompt us to make important decisions to change. And they can even provide knowledge and tools to get us started. However, real, sustainable change doesn’t happen in a moment. It’s a process. Knowing that has always compelled me to write books and record lessons so that people who have made the decision to change have access to tools they can use after the event to help facilitate the process.

Real, sustainable change doesn’t happen in a moment. It’s a process.

We use that process orientation at EQUIP, the nonprofit organization I founded in 1996 with the goal of training and resourcing one million leaders overseas. We don’t simply drop in, put on an event, and disappear. We use a three-year strategy. We begin by translating books and lessons into the local language. After the first teaching event, we give leaders books and tapes to use for their ongoing growth. And teams go back to the country every six months to teach more skills and follow up with leaders.

Don’t get me wrong. Events can be very helpful—as long as we understand what they can and cannot do for us. I want to encourage you to attend events that can be catalysts for change in your life. Just don’t expect them to suddenly bring you success. Growth comes from making decisions *and* following through on them. And that’s what this book is all about.

Today Matters

People create success in their lives by focusing on *today*. It may sound trite, but today is the only time you have. It’s too late for yesterday. And you can’t depend on

tomorrow. That's why *today matters*. Most of the time we miss that. Why? Because . . .

WE OVEREXAGGERATE YESTERDAY

Our past successes and failures often look bigger to us in hindsight than they really were. Some people never get over their past accomplishments: the high school basketball stars or homecoming queens look back at their glory days and define themselves by those accomplishments for the next two decades. The person who receives a patent for an invention might live off the proceeds for the rest of his life and never work another day. A salesperson stays in a five-year slump after being recognized as Employee of the Year. Why? Because he'd rather spend more time thinking about when he was at the top instead of trying to reach that level again.

It may sound trite, but today is the only time you have. It's too late for yesterday. And you can't depend on tomorrow. That's why *today matters*.

Even worse are the people who exaggerate what they *could have* done. You've probably heard the saying "The older I am, the better I was." It's a curious phenomenon: People who were mediocre high school athletes reach their thirties, and they suddenly believe they could have gone pro. Average businesspeople in dead-end careers at forty believe they could have been Wall Street tycoons if only they had been given a chance. Almost any opportunity that went unpursued looks golden now that it's too late to go after it.

Then there are the people whose negative experiences shape them for their entire lives. They relive every rejection, failure, and injury they've received. And they let those incidents tie them into emotional knots. My friend's mother still laments that on her fifth birthday, her father gave the best lollipop to her younger sister instead of to her as a present. It still bothers her—and she's eighty-three years old!

For years I kept a sign on my desk that helped me maintain the right perspective concerning yesterday. It simply said, "Yesterday Ended Last Night." It reminded me that no matter how badly I might have failed in the past, it's done, and today is a new day. Conversely, no matter what goals I may have accomplished or awards I may have received, they have little direct impact on what I do today. I can't celebrate my way to success either.

Yesterday ended last night.

WE OVERESTIMATE TOMORROW

What is your attitude toward the future? What do you expect it to hold? Do you think things will get better or worse for you? Answer the following questions related to your expectations for the coming two to three years:

1. Do you expect your annual income to go up or down? Up / Down
2. Do you expect your net worth to increase or decrease? Increase / Decrease
3. Do you expect to have more or fewer opportunities? More / Fewer
4. Do you expect your marriage (or most significant relationship) to get better or worse? Better / Worse
5. Do you expect to have more or fewer friendships? More / Fewer
6. Do you expect your faith to be stronger or weaker? Stronger / Weaker
7. Do you expect to be in better or worse physical condition? Better / Worse

If you're like most people, your answers reflect that you expect the days ahead to be better. Now, let me ask you one more question: *Why* do you think that? Is your expectation based on anything other than a vague hope that your life will get better? I trust it is. For many people, it's not. They just figure that tomorrow is bound to be better, but they have no strategy for *making* it better. In fact, the worse some people feel about today, the more they exaggerate how good tomorrow is likely to be. They have a lottery mind-set.

Pulitzer prize-winning journalist William Allen White observed, "Multitudes of people have failed to live for today. They have spent their lives reaching for the future. What they have had within their grasp today they have missed entirely, because only the future has intrigued them . . . and the first thing they knew the future became the past." Hoping for a good future without investing in today is like a farmer waiting for a crop without ever planting any seed.

WE UNDERESTIMATE TODAY

Have you ever asked someone what he was doing and heard him respond, "Oh, I'm just killing time"? Have you ever really thought about that statement? A person might as well say, "I'm throwing away my life" or "I'm killing myself," because, as Benjamin Franklin asserted, time is "the stuff life is made of." Today is the only time we have within our grasp, yet many people let it slip through their fingers. They recognize neither today's value nor its potential.

A friend named Dale Witherington recently e-mailed to me a poem he wrote called

“The Lifebuilder’s Creed.” In part, this is what it says:

Today is the most important day of my life.

Yesterday with its successes and victories, struggles and failures
is gone forever.

The past is past.

Done.

Finished.

I cannot relive it. I cannot go back and change it.

But I will learn from it and improve my Today.

Today. This moment. NOW.

It is God’s gift to me and it is all that I have.

Tomorrow with all its joys and sorrows, triumphs and troubles isn’t here yet.

Indeed, tomorrow may never come.

Therefore, I will not worry about tomorrow.

Today is what God has entrusted to me.

It is all that I have. I will do my best in it.

I will demonstrate the best of me in it—

my character, giftedness, and abilities—

to my family and friends, clients and associates.

I will identify those things that are most important to do Today,

and those things I will do until they are done.

And when this day is done

I will look back with satisfaction at that which I have accomplished.

Then, and only then, will I plan my tomorrow,

Looking to improve upon Today, with God’s help.

Then I shall go to sleep in peace . . . content.⁶

The Missing Piece Has Been Discovered!

If we want to do something with our lives, then we must focus on today. That's where tomorrow's success lies. But how do you win today? How do you make today a great day instead of one that falls to pieces? Here's the missing piece: *The secret of your success is determined by your daily agenda.*

The secret of your success is determined by your daily agenda.

How would you like every day to . . .

- Possess possibilities?
- Remain focused?
- Enjoy good health?
- Exhibit stability?
- Hold an advantage?
- Possess tenacity?
- Exercise options?
- Sense inner peace?
- Experience fulfillment?
- Feel significant?
- Receive direction?
- Learn and grow?

Wouldn't that make today a great day?

It all comes down to what you do today. When I talk about your daily "agenda," I *don't* mean your to-do list. Nor am I asking you to adopt a particular kind of calendar or computer program to manage your time. I'm focusing on something bigger. I want you to embrace what may be a whole new approach to life.

Make the Decision Once . . . Then Manage It Daily

There are only a handful of important decisions people need to make in their entire lifetimes. Does that surprise you? Most people complicate life and get bogged down in decision making. My goal has always been to make it as simple as possible. I've boiled the big decisions down to twelve things. Once I've made those decisions, all I

have to do is manage how I'll follow through on them.

Successful people make right decisions early and manage those decisions daily.

If you make decisions in those key areas once and for all—and then manage those decisions daily—you can create the kind of tomorrow you desire. ***Successful people make right decisions early and manage those decisions daily.*** The earlier you make those right decisions and the longer you manage them, the more successful you can become. The people who neglect to make those decisions and to manage them well often look back on their lives with pain and regret—no matter how much talent they possessed or how many opportunities they once had.

Regret in the End

A classic example of such a person was Oscar Wilde. A poet, playwright, novelist, and critic, Wilde was a man of unlimited potential. Born in 1854, he won scholarships and was educated in Britain's best schools. He excelled in Greek, winning the Gold Medal at Trinity College for his studies. He was awarded the Newdigate Prize and was honored as "First in Greats" at Oxford. His plays were popular, earned him lots of money, and he was the toast of London. His talent seemed limitless. Karen Kenyon, writer for *British Heritage* magazine, called Wilde "our most quotable writer" after Shakespeare.⁷

Yet at the end of his life, he was broken and miserable. His wanton living landed him in prison. From jail, he wrote a perspective on his life. In it, he said,

I must say to myself that I ruined myself, and that nobody great or small can be ruined except by his own hand. I am quite ready to say so. I am trying to say so, though they may not think it at the present moment. This pitiless indictment I bring without pity against myself. Terrible as was what the world did to me, what I did to myself was far more terrible still.

I was a man who stood in symbolic relations to the art and culture of my age. I had realised this for myself at the very dawn of my manhood, and had forced my age to realise it afterwards. Few men hold such a position in their own lifetime, and have it so acknowledged. It is usually discerned, if discerned at all, by the historian, or the critic, long after both the man and his age have passed away. With me it was different. I felt it myself, and made others feel it. Byron was a symbolic figure, but his relations were to the passion of his age

and its weariness of passion. Mine were to something more noble, more permanent, of more vital issue, of larger scope.

The gods had given me almost everything. But I let myself be lured into long spells of senseless and sensual ease. I amused myself with being a FLANEUR, a dandy, a man of fashion. I surrounded myself with the smaller natures and the meaner minds. I became the spendthrift of my own genius, and to waste an eternal youth gave me a curious joy. Tired of being on the heights, I deliberately went to the depths in the search for new sensation. What the paradox was to me in the sphere of thought, perversity became to me in the sphere of passion. Desire, at the end, was a malady, or a madness, or both. I grew careless of the lives of others. I took pleasure where it pleased me, and passed on. I forgot that *every little action of the common day makes or unmakes character*, and that therefore *what one has done in the secret chamber one has some day to cry aloud on the housetop*. I ceased to be lord over myself. I was no longer the captain of my soul, and did not know it. I allowed pleasure to dominate me. I ended in horrible disgrace. There is only one thing for me now, absolute humility.⁸ (emphasis added)

By the time Wilde saw where his inattention to the day was going to land him, it was too late. He lost his family, his fortune, his self-respect, and his will to live. He died bankrupt and broken at age forty-six.

“One today is worth two tomorrows; what I am to be, I am now becoming.”

—BENJAMIN FRANKLIN

I believe that everyone has the power to impact the outcome of his life. The way to do it is to focus on today. Benjamin Franklin rightly observed, “One today is worth two tomorrows; what I am to be, I am now becoming.” You can make today a good day. In fact, you can make it a masterpiece. That is the subject of the next chapter.