



Book Redesigning Leadership

Design, Technology, Business, Life

John Maeda and Becky Bermont
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Recommendation

Designer, artist, writer, engineer, scientist, academic and computer scientist John Maeda is a thought leader and Renaissance man who has lectured at the Technology, Entertainment and Design (TED) conference. His elegant and insightful book, *Laws of Simplicity*, is an influential bestseller, and *Esquire* magazine named him one of the 21st century’s most important people. He is a National Design Award winner and president of the Rhode Island School of Design (RISD). Maeda is an unconventional thinker who looks at matters differently – and acts accordingly. Here he writes in collaboration with Becky Bermont, the vice president of media at MIT Media Lab. *BooksInShort* recommends this enjoyable, provocative read to anyone who wants a refreshing take on, and insightful perceptions into, the demanding universe of leadership.

Take-Aways

- Renaissance man John Maeda, president of the Rhode Island School of Design (RISD), exemplifies the fact that leaders come in all forms and from all backgrounds.
- As an artist, he believes leaders should embrace messiness, as artists do.
- Leaders should admit they don’t have all the answers.
- One-on-one conversation is the best leadership tool. It provides “the best chance to get a point across.” Avoid interpersonal electronic communications.
- Leaders are human and should show their humanity to foster team building.
- Leaders cannot communicate effectively unless they show respect toward others.
- A sound organization works equitably, for a good cause, with happiness and gratitude.
- Leaders should delegate wisely that which should be delegated.
- Executive perks interfere with enlightenment and send the wrong message.
- Leaders should be aware of and protect the worthy traditions of their organizations.

Summary

A Special Leader

John Maeda left his comfortable, prestigious and rewarding sinecure as a tenured professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) to become president of the Rhode Island School of Design (RISD), America’s leading art and design college. This was not an easy change. At MIT, Maeda had broad academic freedom to say or do pretty much whatever he wanted. As RISD’s chief executive, Maeda’s communications and activities are more circumscribed. At MIT, Maeda was a big

success; at RISD, his achievements depend in large part on politics. As an MIT professor, Maeda understood exactly what the university and students expected. As RISD president, he must figure it all out as he goes forward, without a playbook.

“Being prepared isn’t a matter of how much you practice. It’s knowing that even if you fail you won’t give up.”

Maeda is an accomplished designer and artist. Many creative people don’t respect leaders, but Maeda avoided such stereotypical thinking thanks to Naomi Enami, a multimedia producer with whom Maeda became acquainted when he was young. While Enami possessed a megawatt sense of showmanship, he could function as an aware, serious businessman. Enami was famous for his signature line, “If I am here, everything is okay!” Upon entering his studio, he would make this fulsome announcement, find a spot in the middle of the floor and promptly go to sleep. Enami taught Maeda that leaders come in many different forms and with different methodologies.

“Artists don’t distinguish between the act of making something and the act of thinking about it – thinking and making evolve together in an emergency, concurrent fashion.”

Maeda’s creative background shaped how he views leadership. Maeda’s willingness to cover his hands with paint while making art enables him to approach leadership in a similar, hands-on, embrace-the-messiness fashion. His sense that action should happen in “the moment” drives how he performs. Maeda works hard to balance his creative instincts with his formal training in engineering and business management.

“Sophistication is the craft of subtlety that goes unnoticed.”

Maeda’s artistic eye helps him see how things look from different vantage points. To gain perspective, he worked as a food server in RISD’s cafeteria, as a breakfast cook for faculty members, as a donut deliverer for campus security officers and as a luggage carrier for new students. He does not hide in his executive office. As an artist, Maeda is accustomed to applying “superhuman intensity” to his work. This aligns well with the creative students at RISD, where, according to many of the university’s attendants, the acronym “stands for [the] ‘Reason I’m Sleep Deprived’.”

Strive to See the Big Picture

When he was new at MIT, Maeda sought advice on “faculty politics” from his mentor, Professor Whitman Richards, who told him not to focus on MIT, but on the world beyond. Maeda adopted this solid advice. At MIT, Maeda also learned the value of humility by emulating a professor who was not afraid to admit that he didn’t know all the answers to his students’ questions. That humble attitude stands in marked contrast to that of most professors, who act as if they know “absolute truths.”

“The higher up you go in an organization, the less likely people are to say what’s on their mind, for fear of retribution.”

Before he became RISD president, Maeda spoke with students at the school who complained that the administration sent them emails promoting community togetherness with this off-putting message at the bottom: “Please do not reply to this email message.” Maeda promised to do better. He recognizes that emails and blogs make communication efficient but not always effective. These technologies suffer from “sensory deprivation” and a lack of “emotional context.” Maeda believes the shorter the email, the better. He does not like to copy people on his messages, because sending an email to only one person tells the recipient that he or she “is the only one in the world that matters.”

One-on-One Meetings Promote Communications

The top communication mode for leaders is one-on-one meetings, which are “the best chance to get a point across.” Leaders should offer “less presentation, more discussion.” As RISD president, Maeda cannot meet with everyone who has business with the university, so he relies on his staff to communicate and meet with people to keep relationships in their proper context. He believes in purposeful delegation and does not interfere with the process.

“Being grateful is knowing that ‘thank you’ is not enough.”

“In the end, complex information delivered by a person usually feels better,” says Maeda. Having his staff communicate with important audiences ensures that he avoids inadvertently undercutting the people who work for him because, “Managers in the hierarchy serve specific roles in communicating with the campus.” Maeda thinks that as president he should not deal with constituencies better served by managers. Maeda is not enamored with applications like Facebook for community building. Preferring the real world, he sometimes writes “free pizza” in an email subject line because “food and fire have brought people together since the beginning of time.” Maeda uses this subject line as a motivator to persuade people to attend meetings.

“Doing right means more than being right.”

Maeda classifies people who gather for meetings as “wannacomes,” those who sit forward in their chairs, eager to pick up every nugget of information; “havetocomes,” those who use meeting time to check emails; and “wannaeats,” those who show up for free food. The best way to transform the havetocomes into wannacomes is to decrease meeting time and increase meeting effectiveness. You know you’ve run a good meeting when attendees say with genuine regret, “I wish this meeting was a little longer.” The best ideas emanate from meetings that include people with differing perspectives.

Building a Team

In 2004, the US Olympics basketball team included various superstars – the world’s greatest and most famous players. Yet these big names failed to capture the gold medal. Hiring even the most talented people doesn’t guarantee success unless they come together as a team. Great leaders bring teams together and motivate their members to change their attitudes “from ‘me’ to ‘we’.” Getting people together in the same room is essential for creating a team and promoting collective effort. If people share a common physical space, “they’ve assumed the basic stance of being a team.” Being in the same place forces people to recognize one another’s humanity and to get along; that is the foundation of any team.

“A leader’s job is getting people on board with his vision.”

After you bring people together, spur everyone to talk each other. To turn a group of individuals into a team, the leader must demonstrate humanity. You must be natural, and show your emotions. If you hide your feelings or always smile as though you’ve been “hit by a poisonous dart by Batman’s arch-nemesis, the Joker,” your group will not coalesce around you as a leader. Maeda affirms that, “It’s okay...to be human.”

Signals

At MIT, Maeda learned that leadership does not depend on position; people will not follow you just because you have a formal title or authority. Leadership depends on who you are. To be a better leader, you must first be a “better follower.” As a young academic, Maeda worked hard at becoming a better follower. Leaders must be conscious of the unconscious signals their body language sends. Maeda suffers from carpal-tunnel syndrome and, years ago, during a meeting, he constantly contracted his hand into a fist to counteract the pain. Later, he learned that many people believed he was tense and nervous during the meeting. All they could remember was that he kept making a fist.

A Global Conscience

When Maeda worked at MIT’s famous Media Lab, he drew inspiration from former MIT president Jerome Weisner. During World War II, Weisner was a part of the Manhattan Project, which developed the atomic bomb. Afterward, Weisner devoted himself to world peace. Until recently, people who had experienced war, like Weisner, led the world’s major research laboratories, creating a “rare kind of global conscience” that sadly has vanished today. Those leaders understood that actions could have serious, lasting consequences.

“It’s hard to read the emotion behind an electronic message.”

Consider the concepts of “ideas and ideals.” Ideals mean that your heart must rule your brain. Fulfilling ideals concerns your soul, not your mind. As Maeda learned from Bank Rhode Island CEO Dr. Merrill Sherman, leaders are responsible for the “common good” of their organizations. Sherman taught Maeda that any day in which you can do “50% good” – meaning that at least half of what you did that day proved worthwhile – is a day of accomplishment.

“Staring at a missing piece in your life makes you miss the real peace that you truly have.”

Maeda believes that entitlement interferes with enlightenment. He refuses to accept many of the perks – what some describe as “deserved awards” – that come with his position, such as a chauffeured car and membership in a special dining club. Maeda lives in the RISD president’s mansion, but voluntarily pays rent and makes the mansion available for other functions. As he turns down various expensive privileges, he considers how the parents who struggle to pay their child’s RISD tuition might feel viewing his expense statements. This kind of mental exercise helps leaders stay grounded.

Don’t “Mess Up”

As RISD’s newest president, Maeda feels that his primary leadership charge is not to screw things up during his tenure. RISD enjoys a special reputation as a quality institution, a heritage Maeda seeks to honor and uphold. He notes that numerous universities such as RISD have been in operation for more than 100 years – “longer than almost any other kind of organization.” The core beliefs and traditions of these institutions sustain their longevity; “the status quo has become a valid status symbol.” Maeda believes his role is to preserve this status.

“Humor keeps us human.”

The recent global financial crisis affected RISD, as it has other organizations. Leading the university at this difficult juncture has been a challenge for Maeda, though he is pleased the school’s community survived “the world’s financial heart attack together.” During his first year on the job, he conducted many “all-campus meetings” to keep everyone informed on how RISD was weathering the financial storm. In retrospect, he thinks he should have explained less and listened more.

“Inner Competition”

Maeda often feels at the center of a storm of conflict, and he teaches that good things can arise from “constructive conflict,” but “destructive conflict” leaves damage in its wake. Internal – as opposed to external – competition is the most common source of conflict in big organizations. In warfare, a “‘red ocean’ strategy” means turning the sea red with the blood of your enemies. But often the blood in the water ends up being your own, shed by people within your organization as they subvert your plans. “Team-breaking” instead of “team-building” does more harm to an organization than anything outside competitors can inflict.

“There is a simple saying in Japanese that epitomizes the nature of striving for excellence, ‘Ue ni wa ue ga aru’. It translates literally as ‘Above up, there is something even higher above up’.”

Maeda created a web application with a worthwhile purpose and macabre results: Insert your age, and the program immediately reveals how many more spring seasons you are likely to experience in your life. The program uses actuarial “average life expectancy” figures. The “spring-counter,” with its intimations of mortality, helps people focus on the important things.

It’s Good to Be the King

Maeda feels better when he can use a weekend for quiet, constructive reflection, instead of raking himself over the coals to figure out what went wrong during the week. Such reflection time is essential for Maeda, who tries each day to learn a little more about leadership.

“Competency results in success results in complacency results in failure results in learning how to be competent again.”

Maeda’s seven-year-old daughter gave him a leadership lesson when he taught her to play chess. He demonstrated the moves of the chess pieces: “the zigzagging power of the bishop, the smooth motion of the rook, the diminutive one- or two-step dance of the pawn.” Maeda contrasted this versatility with the king, who can advance only one step at a time; he’s weak in comparison to the powerful queen.

“The tide can sometimes turn in your favor. Rejoice when that happens.”

As he discussed the chess king’s movement limitations, Maeda thought of his own restrictions as a college president. “It has been humbling to realize how limited my moves feel,” he said. Noting her father’s somber mood, Maeda’s daughter put everything in perspective. “But Daddy,” she said, “the king is still powerful. Because if he dies, the game is over.” The child was right. A leader’s influence matters far more than any of his or her individual, solitary moves.

About the Authors

The former associate director of the MIT Media Lab, **John Maeda**, is president of the Rhode Island School of Design, where **Becky Bermont** is vice president of media.
