

THE LAW OF
THE **BIG**
PICTURE

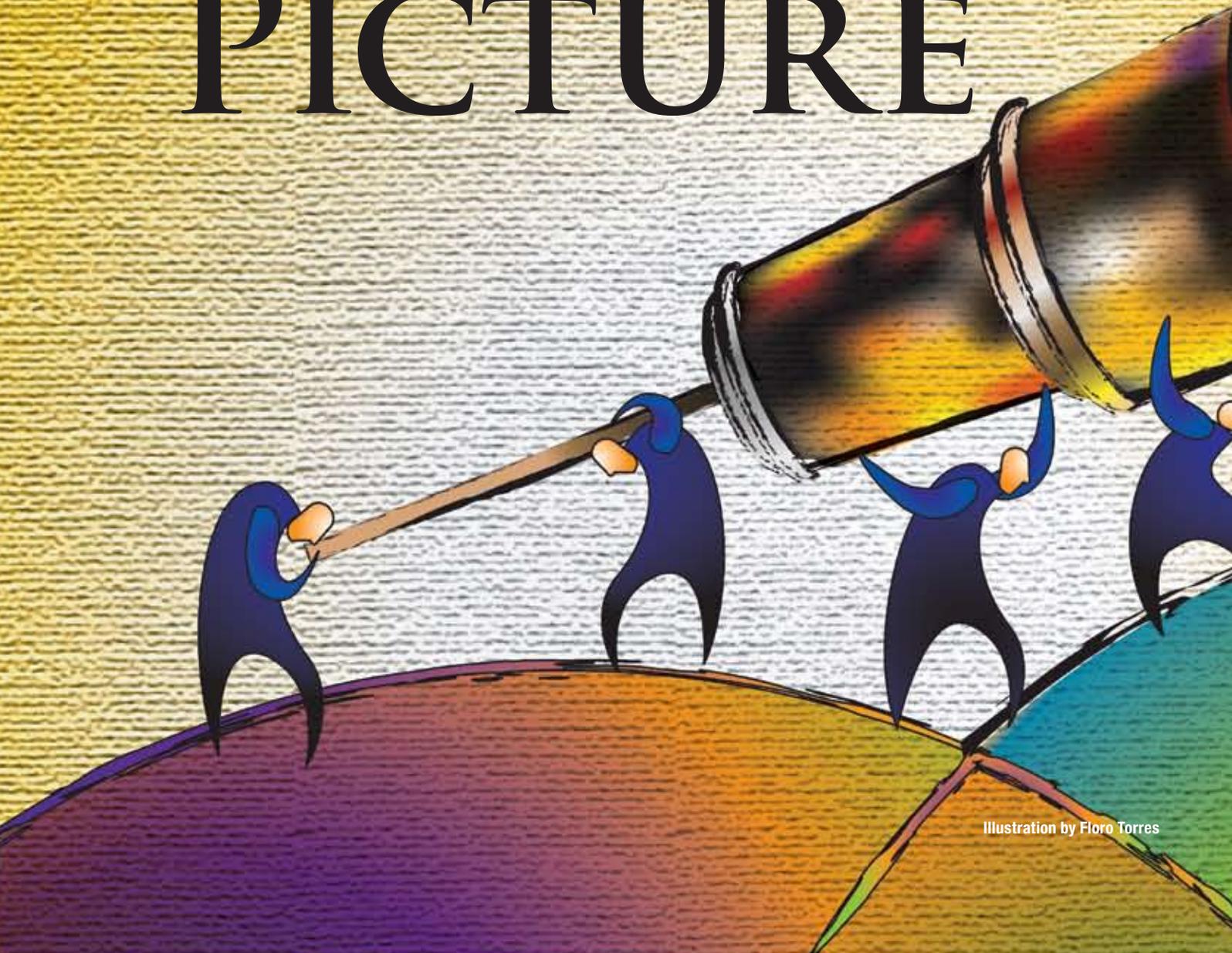


Illustration by Floro Torres



In a culture that sings the praises of individual gold medals and where a person fights for rights instead of focusing on taking responsibility, people tend to lose sight of the big picture.

BY JOHN C. MAXWELL

Years ago, I was invited to participate in an important conference planned by a highly respected national organization. I was one of about a dozen speakers who had been selected to speak to an audience of more than 60,000 people drawn from all parts of the country. It was for a worthy cause I valued, and I considered the invitation an honor.

Several weeks before the conference was to occur, all the speakers were scheduled to meet together along with the founder of the organization to talk strategy, discuss the topics about which we would speak, and give one another support and suggestions. I was really excited about it because the group included some extraordinary leaders. It promised to be an electric moment, but the reality of the meeting turned out different than I expected.

When we all got into a room together, it didn't feel like a strategy-and-support session. As we discussed the upcoming day, a few of the speakers seemed to be jockeying for position. Because they were good communicators, they understood that the speaking order, the time of day, and the amount of time allotted would make a big difference in how their messages were received. The role each speaker was to play seemed to be of more interest than the goal of the conference.

But I also noticed something else. When one speaker briefly informed us about his topic, I sensed immediately that his speech would be the real linchpin of the whole conference. All of the other messages would be subordinate to it. Yet the man was not fighting for the best place. He wasn't jockeying. He didn't seem to want any part of that kind of maneuvering.



DR. JOHN C. MAXWELL STARTED WITH NATURAL LEADERSHIP GIFTS. HE WAS A TEAM LEADER WHEN HE PLAYED SPORTS. HE LED IN COLLEGE. AND WHEN HE GRADUATED AND BECAME A PASTOR, HE QUICKLY EMERGED AS A HIGHLY SUCCESSFUL ORGANIZATIONAL LEADER. OVER THE YEARS, JOHN HAS CONSISTENTLY DOCUMENTED THE LEADERSHIP PRINCIPLES AND INSIGHTS HE HAS GAINED. IN TOTAL, HE HAS AUTHORED MORE THAN 30 BOOKS, INCLUDING SUCH *NEW YORK TIMES* BEST-SELLERS AS *FAILING FORWARD* AND *THE 21 IRREFUTABLE LAWS OF LEADERSHIP*.

In that moment when everyone was focusing on himself, I realized that we had lost sight of the big picture of why we were there. So I said to the group about this speaker, "I believe his message will be the difference maker in the lives of the people attending this conference. And I think the audience will receive it better if it's delivered when I am slated to speak. Please," I said to the person who wasn't trying to promote himself, "Take my spot."

It was almost as if somebody had struck each person in the room. Suddenly everybody regained perspective. After that, instead of looking out for themselves and protecting turf, all of the speakers were willing to give everything for the common good. We all remembered the goal was more important than our individual roles. That is the essence of the Law of the Big Picture.

What's in it for Me?

In a culture that sings the praises of individual gold medals and where a person fights for rights instead of focusing on taking responsibility, people tend to lose sight of the big picture. In fact, some people seem to believe that they *are* the entire picture: Everything revolves around their needs, their goals, and their desires. I saw a message on a T-shirt that expresses the attitude well: "My idea of a team is a whole lot of people doing what I tell them to do."

A team isn't supposed to be a bunch of people being used as a tool by one individual for selfish gain. Members of a team must have mutually beneficial shared goals. They must be motivated to work together, not manipulated by someone for individual glory. Anyone accustomed to pulling together people and using them to benefit only himself isn't a team builder, he's a dictator.

If you want to observe team dynamics in action, look at the world of sports where you can easily see whether people are working together. The outcome of the game is immediate and measurable. For that reason, it's easy to see when an individual is thinking only of himself and not the shared goals and values of the team.

To win in sports, members of the team must always keep the big picture in front of them. They must remember that the goal is more than their role—or any individual glory they may desire.

Some sports teams seem to embrace an "everyone-for-himself" mind-set. Others weave the attitude of subordination and teamwork into the fabric of everything they do. For example, football teams such as Notre Dame and Penn State don't put the names of the players on their jerseys.

Winning teams have players who put the good of the team ahead of themselves. They want to play in their area of strength, but they're willing to do what it takes to take care of the team. They are willing to sacrifice their goal for the greater goal. That's the Law of the Big Picture.

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Seeing the Big Picture

People who build successful teams never forget that every person on a team has a role to play, and every role plays its part in contributing to the bigger picture. Without that perspective the team cannot accomplish its goal, whether the team's "game" is sports, business, family, ministry or government.

Leaders at the highest level understand the Law of the Big Picture. They continually keep the vision of the big picture before themselves and their people. An outstanding example involves Winston Churchill. It's said that during World War II when Britain was experiencing its darkest days, the country had a difficult time keeping men working in the coal mines. Many wanted to give up their dirty, thankless jobs in the dangerous mines to join military service, which garnered much public praise and support. Yet their work in the mines was critical to the success of the war. Without coal the military and the people at home would be in trouble.

So the prime minister faced thousands of coal miners one day and told them of their importance to the war effort, how their role could make or break the goal of maintaining England's freedom.

Churchill painted a picture of what it would be like when the war ended, of the grand parade that would honor the people who fought the war. First would come the sailors of the navy, he said, the people who continued the tradition of Trafalgar and the defeat of the Spanish Armada. Next would come the best and brightest, the pilots of the Royal Air Force, who fended off the German Luftwaffe in the Battle of Britain. Following them would be the soldiers who had fought the Axis Powers in Europe, North Africa and South Asia.

Then last of all would come the coal-dust-covered men in miners' caps. And Churchill indicated that someone from the crowd might say, "And where were you during the critical days of the struggle?" And the voices of ten thousand men would respond, "We were deep in the earth with our faces to the coal."

It's said that tears appeared in the eyes of those hardened men. And they returned to their inglorious work with steely resolve, having been reminded of the role they were playing in their country's noble goal of preserving freedom for the Western world.

That's the kind of mind-set it takes to build a team. It takes courage and the resolve to recognize that *the goal is more important than the role*. It's no small thing for people to do what's best for the team. Often it means sacrificing professional satisfaction, individual statistics or personal glory.

What's Up with "Big Picture" Teams?

So how do people begin to become a more unified team? How do individuals make the shift from independent people to team



John C. Maxwell



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players who exemplify the Law of the Big Picture? It's not something that happens overnight. It takes time. Here is my take on how to get the process started.

1 | Look Up at the Big Picture

Everything starts with a vision. You need to have a goal. Without one you cannot have a real team. An individual without a goal may end up anywhere. A group of individuals without a goal can go nowhere. On the other hand, if everyone in a group embraces the vision for achieving the big picture, then the people have the potential to become an effective team.

Leaders usually have the role of capturing and communicating vision. They must see it first and then help everyone else to see it. That was what Winston Churchill did when he spoke to the coal miners during the war. That was what Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. did as he spoke to people about his dream from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C. That was what GE CEO Jack Welch did when he let his people know that a division of GE that couldn't be first or second in its market wouldn't be a part of GE. The people on a team will sacrifice and work together *only* if they can see what they're working toward.

If you are the leader of your team, your role is to do what only you can do: Paint the big picture for your people. Without the vision they will not find the desire to achieve the goal.

2 | Size Up the Situation

One value of seeing the big picture is that it helps you recognize how far you really are from achieving it. For someone determined to do everything alone, seeing the gulf between what is and what could be is often intimidating. But for people who live to build teams, seeing the size of the task ahead doesn't worry them. They don't shrink from the challenge—they savor the opportunity. They can't wait to put together a team and a plan to accomplish that vision.

At a meeting of all three divisions of the INJOY Group, CEO Dave Sutherland stood before our people and outlined a few of our goals for the coming year. (Some of those goals were huge.) During that process, Dave said, "Some people see the size of the goal, and they get scared. That doesn't bother me a bit. We've already got a great team. To make it to the next level, we just need a few more people like the ones we already have." That's the mind-set of a team builder!

3 | Line Up Needed Resources

Resources are ammunition to help you reach a goal. It doesn't matter what kind of team you're on. You cannot make progress without the support of the appropriate equipment, facilities, funds and so forth—whether your goal is climbing a mountain, capturing a market,

or creating a ministry. The better resourced the team is, the fewer distractions the players will have as they try to achieve this goal.

4 | Call Up the Right Players

When it comes to building a successful team, the players are everything. You can have a distinct vision, a precise plan, plenty of resources and incredible leadership, but if you don't have the right people, you're not going to get anywhere. You can lose with good players, but you cannot win with bad ones.

5 | Give Up Personal Agendas

Teams that win have players who continually ask themselves, "What's best for the rest?" They continually set aside their personal agendas for the good of the team.

6 | Step Up to a Higher Level

Only when players come together and give up their own agendas can a team move up to a higher level. That's the kind of sacrifice required for teamwork. Unfortunately, some people prefer to cling to agendas and pursue the paths of their own inflated egos instead of letting go of them to achieve something greater than themselves.

Becoming a Better Team Member and Leader

What goal in your life is bigger than you are? Are you currently participating in something greater than yourself? If not, set aside some time to reflect on your goals and priorities. If you are trying to accomplish something big, then ask yourself what you are willing to do to accomplish it. Are you willing to take a subordinate role if necessary for the good of the team? If not, you may become a hindrance to the success of the team.

Think about a team you are currently part of (preferably one with a big goal). What kind of attitude do team members have when it comes to the big picture? Are they team players who desire to do whatever it takes for the team to succeed? Or do they desire to benefit only themselves?

Begin to foster a team mind-set in others by modeling a willingness to serve the big picture rather than yourself. Then think about ways you can help your teammates embrace the Law of the Big Picture. Motivate people by painting the big picture. Publicly honor team play. And reward people who sacrifice for the good of the team. 

This article is adapted from John C. Maxwell's best-selling book The 17 Indisputable Laws of Teamwork. Reprinted by permission. Copyright © 2001 Maxwell Motivation, Inc. Published by Thomas Nelson, Nashville, Tennessee.