Agent of Change
A Talk with Marshall Goldsmith

John Alexander

EDITOR'S NOTE: *Successful people are always successful because of many things and in spite of some things, according to coach and consultant Marshall Goldsmith. Helping executives understand this and change ineffective behavior is Goldsmith's challenge.*

Goldsmith is a founding director of Keilty, Goldsmith and Company (KGC), a consulting firm based in San Diego that specializes in leadership development and feedback. He has been rated one of the top five executive coaches by Forbes *magazine and one of the top ten executive development consultants by* The Wall Street Journal. *He has co-edited a number of recent books for the Drucker Foundation, including* Leading Beyond the Walls *(Jossey-Bass, 1999). Most recently he co-edited* Coaching for Leadership: How the World's Greatest Coaches Help Leaders Learn *(Jossey-Bass, 2000). He has also written numerous articles on the subject of leadership development.*

Goldsmith is the principal developer of the Leader of the Future Process, a KGC service that helps organizations develop leaders in a way that mirrors the organizations' vision and values. Leadership feedback processes that Goldsmith has helped design, develop, or implement have been used by more than one million people in more than seventy organizations, including some of the world's leading corporations. A leadership development process that Goldsmith codesigned won the American Society for Training and Development's national award for innovation in 1994.

During a recent visit to the Center for Creative Leadership's Greensboro campus, Goldsmith was interviewed by CCL president John Alexander. The following are excerpts from the interview.

JA: You have spoken and written about changing behavior, in particular about helping leaders make behavioral changes through coaching. In your career, what have you learned about changing behaviors?

MG: One thing I have learned is that not a lot has been written about what I focus on, which is to help successful people change behavior. Roughly 95 percent of everything written on the subject is written about people with reasonably dysfunctional behavior—alcoholics, drug addicts, et cetera. Most people I work with, by any socioeconomic standard, are very successful. They're not losers by any definition. So my challenge is helping successful people change their behavior.

The easy part is that successful people believe they can change their behavior—that is, that they can reach a goal. The hard part is that they have had so much positive reinforcement for their past behavior that it is difficult for them to "let go" of what they perceive has led to this success. I ask them: You are successful because of a lot of reasons, and you are successful *in spite of* something. What's on the "in spite of" list? Try to improve that.

JA: In coaching senior executives, are you typically working on interpersonal behavior?

MG: Yes. My area is to help people achieve positive, long-term changes in behavior. Typically, that's interpersonal behavior, not anything else.

JA: How do you go about helping people change interpersonal behaviors that aren't working for them?

MG: The way I do behavioral coaching is very new. One, I don't get paid if people don't learn. Two, the new behavior is defined by the people who work

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with the person I am coaching. It's not defined by the person I work with. It's not defined by me. If identified behaviors are changed as judged by the stakeholders, I get paid. If they're not changed, I don't get paid.

JA: How do you identify those behaviors in the first place?

MG: The first thing, before you do any behavioral coaching, is to ask a question: What are the desired behaviors? Second, find out who is in a position to give valid feedback to this person on these behaviors. Third, give them feedback through 360-degree assessments. Fourth, I help them develop the plan for improvement, a plan with a very positive central focus. I used to teach people to pick as many as

three areas for behavioral change. Now I say just pick one or two.

When I do coaching, I give the person suggestions. I focus my suggestions on the future, not the past. People tend to get upset and defensive and go into denial when you talk about their previous behavior. If you focus on the future, they are much more likely to accept what you say.

JA: Is there a key ingredient in someone changing his or her behavior?

MG: One key variable for people being receptive is admitting they have a problem. If someone is not willing to admit his problem, I won't work with him.

JA: Let me shift a little bit from the single individual. You also work with hundreds of individuals within one company. How do you make the transition from changing an individual's behavior to helping a company client change multiple behaviors in roughly the same direction for the organization?

MG: I start with asking the executives what the behaviors are that they believe will lead to long-term success in their company. Then I ask the company to pick one behavior. You want everybody in the company to get better doing one thing.

My job is to help them do a better job of demonstrating those behaviors. If they have given me the right behaviors, this will help their company.

Each person gets ongoing follow-up and suggestions on that one behavior. I don't define what the behavior looks like—if I do that, I start discounting what it looks like to the people who are doing the judging. The people need to be defined by their co-workers or team members, not by me.

Behavioral coaching does not fix all leadership problems. I will not do coaching if the following conditions exist: One, the person is unwilling to try.

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Two, the person is not given a fair chance. Three, their issue is not behavioral, it's intellectual or strategic. Four, their issue is integrity.

JA: What do you see as the future of 360-degree feedback as a tool to help organizations effect behavioral change?

MG: One of the biggest problems of 360-degree feedback is that people are sick of filling out eighty- or one hundred–item forms. So I predict that mini-surveys will become the dominant device in 360-degree assessment. The process will become more focused, smaller, concentrating specifically on the items people are working on. Why have people fill out all these dozens of items when you know that 80 percent of the items are not going to result in any real change?

I also think that more and more organizations are going to focus on before-and-after studies so they can document the success of the 360-degree-feedback process. One thing I am most proud of is documenting that 360-degree feedback did lead to positive, measurable change in behavior and is not just in theory a good idea. Our research is clear: if people develop a rigorous follow-up process they get better, and if they don't, 360-degree feedback is a waste of time. The feedback in and of itself does not cause people to get better. If everybody who got 360-degree feedback changed their behavior for the better, everybody who had a physical exam would be in shape.

JA: How is the role of human resources evolving in organizations?

MG: I think the role of human resources is going to change dramatically. One of the biggest challenges for organizations is going to be retention of their best people. That is becoming a huge issue, and human resources will be heavily involved in that.

In my work, I identify the companies that have changed the most and shown the most improvement. One of the key variables for the companies that have achieved the most positive, measurable change in behavior is the presence of a human resource "champion," an inside person who takes responsibility to make things happen. That can have a huge positive impact. Another thing I am doing now with some of my clients is training their human resource people to be personal coaches.

JA: How will the emerging Internet economy affect issues of leadership?

MG: One of the challenges I see in this new world is that leaders are going to have to do things more quickly and more efficiently than ever before. They're just not going to have time to undertake lengthy or bureaucratic processes. Seventy-five to 80 percent of the people I meet feel as busy as or busier than they've ever been in their lives. So one of the things I try to teach people is how to engage in team behavior, leadership behavior, and changing behavior in ways that don't eat up too much time.

I also believe that new technology ultimately will be a great aid to leadership development. It will enable organizations to develop customized leadership development plans and provide customized leadership development education right at the individual's desk using push [automatic data distribution] technology, which is a very exciting prospect.