



Interview with Dr. Marshall Goldsmith

by Mr. Makarand Rege

Interview



INTERVIEW WITH Dr. MARSHALL GOLDSMITH

As my cab stops in front of the hotel Trident (erstwhile Oberoi Towers) the Arabian Sea looks black and gray and the sky is little cloudy. It looks as if it may rain. Trident reminds me of the terrorist attack of 26/11 where this hotel was a victim and a witness to that tragedy." Good Morning!" The security guard at the gate brings me back to the present. The young lady at the reception wishes me with both the hands folded in a typical Indian way.

It is 6.00 am. I sit in the lobby waiting for Dr. Marshall Goldsmith the top most executive coach in the world. My appointment with him is at 6.30am. There are people going for the morning walk on the Marine Drive. Some of them look thoughtful. May be they are thinking about the delayed monsoon. The lobby of the Trident is as majestic as it was. There is a soothing music being played in the lobby and the a fragrance which fills the place completely.

'Good Morning!' Marshall comes out of the elevator exactly at 6.30 am. gives a genuine smile and bends forward as he shakes my hand. He looks very fresh and charged up! As we both move to the "Verandah" for an early breakfast, it is difficult to believe that the leading coach in the world who coaches the top CEOs of the world could be so simple and unassuming. Marshall makes me comfortable and as we both are having coffee, I start interacting with him.

MR (MAKARAND REGE): Marshall, thanks a lot for your time. How did you get into coaching?

MG (Dr. MARSHALL GOLDSMITH): The way I got into business was largely accidental. I worked with a very famous

person, Paul Hersey.. He gave me an opportunity. I learned what he did. I was a college professor, and he offered me a job making 1000 USD a day. I was making 15,000 USD a year at that time. Because he was double booked, he asked if I wanted to deliver a session in executive education for a very large corporation and I said "Sign me up". I did the session. It was extremely successful. And that is how I got into executive education business. So in that sense it was very accidental.

How I got into the coaching business was also accidental. I was working with a CEO. He said, "We have this young guy who is smart, dedicated, hardworking, driven to achieve, entrepreneurial, gets results, stubborn opinionated, and all that. It would be worth a fortune to us to turn the guy around. Do you think you could help us?" I said "Sign me up" He said "I don't think it would work." Then I came up with my idea and I said "I will work with him for a year. If he gets better, pay me. If he does not get better it is free." He said, "Sold !" That is how I got into coaching. Both of those were reasonably accidental. (*Dr. Paul Hersey is a recognized authority on training and development in leadership, management, and selling and is best known for his work regarding situational leadership.)

MR : What type of coaching do you do? Please explain behavioral coaching.

MG : There are several different types of coaching. We only do behavioural coaching for successful executives not strategic coaching, life planning or organizational change coaching. We only focus on changing leadership behaviour. If our clients have other needs, we refer them to other coaches.

We first get an agreement with our coaching clients and their managers on two key variables.

- 1) What are the key behaviours that will make the biggest positive change in increased leadership effectiveness and
- 2) Who are the key stakeholders who can determine (six to eighteen months later) if this change has occurred.

We then get paid only after our coaching clients have achieved a positive change in key leadership behaviour as determined by stakeholders.

People often ask, can executives change "their behaviour?" The answer is definitely yes. If they did not change, we could never get paid (and we almost always get paid) At the top of major organizations even a small positive change in behaviour can have a big impact. From an organizational perspective the fact that the executive is trying to change anything (and is being a role model for personal development) may be even more important than what the executive is trying to change, one key message that I have given every CEO that I coach is "to help others develop start with yourself ."

MR : Please explain feedforward process.

MG : Providing feedback has long been considered to be an essential skill for leaders. As they strive to achieve the goals of the organization, employees need to know how they are doing. They need to know if their performance is in line with what their leaders expect. They need to learn what they have done well and what they need to change. Traditionally this information has been communicated in the form of "downward feedback" from leaders to their employees. Just as employees need feedback from leaders, leaders can benefit from feedback from their employees.



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Employees can provide useful input on the effectiveness of procedures and processes as well as input to managers on their effective leadership. This "upward feedback has become increasingly common with the advent of 360 degree multirater assessments".

But there is a fundamental problem with all types of feedback. It focuses on the past, on what has already occurred - not on the infinite variety of opportunities that can happen in the future. As such, feedback can be limited and static as opposed to expansive and dynamic.

Over the past several years, I have observed more than ten thousand leaders as they participated in a fascinating experiential exercise. In the exercise, each participant is each asked to provide feedforward that is, to give someone else suggestions for future and help as much as they can. In the second role, they are asked to accept feedforward - that is to listen to the suggestions for the future and learn as much as they can. The exercise typically lasts for 10 - 15 minutes, and the average participant has 6 - 7 dialogue sessions. Feedforward helps people envision and focus on a positive future not a failed past. By giving ideas on how they can be even more successful we can increase their chances of achieving success in future.

MR : Have you done any research that has documented how leaders can change behaviour?

MG : We reviewed leadership development programme in eight major corporations. Although all eight companies had the same overarching goals - to determine the desired behaviors for leaders in their organizations and to help leaders increase their effectiveness by better aligning actual practices with these desired behaviors, they used different leadership development methodologies : offsite training versus onsite coaching, short duration versus long duration, internal coaches versus external coaches and traditional classroom based training versus on the job interaction.

Rather than just evaluating "participant happiness" at the end of the programme each of the eight companies measured the participant's perceived increase in leadership effectiveness over time. "Increased effectiveness" was not determined by the participants; it was assessed by preselected coworkers and stakeholders.

Time and again, one variable emerged as central to the achievement to positive long term change: The participant's on going interaction and follow up with colleagues. Leaders who discussed their improvement priorities with their coworkers and then regularly followed up with these coworkers showed striking improvement.

Leaders who did not have on going dialogue

with colleagues showed improvement that barely exceeded random chance. This was true whether the leader had an external coach, an internal coach or no coach. It was also true whether the participants went to a training programme for five days, went for one day or did not attend training programme at all.

The development of leaders, we have concluded, is a contact sport.

MR : What is your experience of working in India.

MG : During my trip to India; I had the opportunity to work with many dedicated professionals at the Indian School of Business (ISB) in Hyderabad.

I love teaching in India. Every participant in my programme was eager to learn. Their is nothing that a teacher loves more than dedicated students who want to learn. I was amazed at the sincerity and interest shown by participants in my course. There was absolutely none of the cynicism or skepticism I sometimes encounter in the U.S. or Western Europe. As a rule, people in India have a deep respect for education and for educators. At the end of the two days I was given a lovely card with a personal thank you note from each participant. I was very moved by their gratitude.

The world has changed a lot in the past few years. In the past brilliant students like the ones I met at ISB, all dreamed of going to America or Europe, for a quality education. Now they can get a quality education in India. In the past, brilliant young students all planned on leaving India to get great jobs. Now they can get great jobs in India.

MR : Do you have any advice for young people in the current scenario?

MG : My advice to young people who are just entering working is simple;

- It is tough out there, and it is only going to get tougher.
- Forget about security.
- Like it or not, even if you start out with a large corporation, you are going to be an entrepreneur.
- Make peace with reality and your life is going to be a lot better.

In an era of uncertainly, nothing can be taken for granted. Young people are going to have to develop skills and talents that make them globally competitive. And they are going to need to keep upgrading and changing their skills and talents to fit the needs of an ever changing market place. My final advice.

- Forget about taking a year off.
- Don't spend your adult years "Finding yourself"
- Unless you are rich, don't buy the flat screen T.V. When you are poor, live life as a poor person, don't try to live like a rich person.

- And like any great entrepreneur, invest your time and money in your future.

MR : You are a Buddhist, how Buddhism has influenced your work?

MG : You see, my approach is really more Eastern than Western. 'The Western approach would be more of a therapy type approach, focused on the past, where I sit there and analyse your behaviour, why you are the way you are. My Buddhist philosophy can be summarized in there simple words "Be happy now," in my mind, this is heaven, this is hell and this is Nirvana, it is not, "out there". It is "in here". The great Western disease is "I will be happy when this is fueled by our prevailing art form the commercial. The commercial says "You are Unhappy. You spend money. You become happy!" I don't believe that anyone can become happy by having more. I also don't believe that anyone can become happy by having less. We can only find happiness and satisfaction with what we have. Life is good when we make it good. I also sign my emails this way to remind myself (and hopefully to help others).

My coaching philosophy is based upon Buddhist principles. I believe that we have no "fixed identity" but instead we are ever changing. My coaching approach involves helping people let go of the past and focus on becoming what they want to become. I pioneered the concept called feedforward which is the essence of my coaching philosophy.

My understanding of Buddhism is Buddha suggested that each of us test ideas and only use the ideas that work for us (including his own ideas). In my coaching I ask executives to get ideas from many sources and use only the ideas that work for them. I don't try to "convince" or "make" my clients do anything.

As Buddha suggested we can share our ideas and let them be helpful to those who are open to hearing us. By letting others "do only what works for you" we can let their positive experience say far more than our words.

MR: Marshall, thanks a lot for the interview!

MG: Thank you!

As I say good bye to Marshall and present a small book on 'Buddha' by Osho, he says "Thank You I love such books" and he does Namaste with both his hands folded !

I come out of the hotel; the Marine Drive is in its true colours with many vehicles plying on the road. I wave for a cab and now the sun has started shining as if trying to bathe the Maximum City in it's glow. As the cab starts, the Arabian Sea now looks blue and I wonder how some one like Marshall Goldsmith can be so down to earth after reaching those heights!!

Life is Good !!

