



**"WE ALL HAVE THIS
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Marshall Goldsmith
Concentrate on the future, not the past

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CONCENTRATE ON THE FUTURE, NOT THE PAST

Executive coaching is a huge growth market. With senior managers under increasing pressure from organisational stakeholders, where do they turn to for help? If they are among the elite of corporate America, the person they turn to is Marshall Goldsmith.

Goldsmith is one of the world's best known – and best paid – executive coaches. Ranked among the top 10 executive educators by the *Wall Street Journal*, profiles in the *New Yorker* and the *Harvard Business Review* confirm his place at the top of his chosen profession.

Based in California in the US, Goldsmith is co-founder of Marshall Goldsmith Partners, an executive coaching firm delivering “measurable change in the behaviour of leaders at all levels of the organisation”. In support of business leaders he has racked up an impressive nine million air miles and coached over 70 major CEOs. His books include *Coaching for Leadership* and *The Leader of the Future* and the most recent, *What Got You Here Won't Get You There* (see A book in 10 minutes on page 14).

Hyperactive and relentlessly positive, Goldsmith talked to Des Dearlove about his highly effective coaching methods.

How does your work break down in terms of types of activity?

I do three things: teaching, coaching and writing. Teaching, I enjoy the most. With coaching, I learn the most. And then there is writing, which has the biggest impact in terms of reaching people. With my website, for example, 650,000 items have been downloaded from 165 countries. I can't speak to that many people.

Which area of coaching do you specialise in?

I have a very narrow focus. I don't do life planning, career planning, strategy or personal productivity. I am the best in the world in my narrow area – or maybe second best. My specialism is interpersonal skills – behavioural issues. The focus is strictly on helping successful leaders get better.

How can you be sure that your coaching actually makes a difference?

Simple. I don't get paid if people don't change. It is a very novel pricing model but it is very easy to measure behavioural change – and executives like it because pay is linked to results. We get people to say that they

will do X and Y and then we see if they have actually done it.

What happens when you go into an organisation?

I only work with people if they agree to do certain things. If people don't want to do the things I ask, I won't work with them.

The person who is receiving the coaching has to get confidential feedback on how everyone sees him. He is going to find out what he's doing well, what he needs to improve, to venture suggestions. Then we sit down, with his boss, possibly, and talk. We have to reach an agreement. He's going to have to get the feedback, talk to people, follow up on a regular, disciplined basis, apologise for previous sins.

Do the executives usually appreciate the value of coaching at the outset?

I'm often asked the question: how do I convince my clients that this is worthwhile? Answer: I don't. If I've got to convince someone that it is worthwhile, they don't have their heart in it anyway. I don't convince anybody. If they don't think it's worth it, fine.

“If you want a better relationship with your co-workers then the co-workers need to be coaches.”

If they believe it is worth it, then we help develop a leadership inventory. We choose the key areas to change and agree those with the executive we're coaching. The executive will then talk to the people he or she works with to explain what they would like to change and that the past has passed. They say what would you like me to do? Obviously, they don't do everything that people suggest – leadership is not a popularity contest.

Talking to people who work with the executive, we then come up with measures. The important thing is that it is the people who work with the executive who come up with the measures.

The onus is on co-workers to be involved?

Very much so. If you want a better relationship with your co-workers then the co-workers need to be coaches. We ask co-workers whether they can let go of the past. Next we ask whether they can commit to tell the truth. Then we ask whether they can be helpful to the person being coached rather than being cynical or sarcastic. Finally the co-worker has to think of something they can do better. Ninety-eight per cent of people agree to do all of this.

How does that feedback process work?

It's called feedforward, not feedback. You have a conversation with your co-workers. Whatever they say, you sit there, shut up, listen, take notes and say thank you.

Describe your positives, express gratitude. Here is what I would like to change. You don't ask for more feedback from the past from them, you ask for ideas for the future.

Once you have collected those ideas, then what?

You send me the list with all your ideas. You are not going to promise to do everything. We are going to think about it, and do what we can. I give you my ideas. What if I give you the dumbest idea in the whole world? What do you say?

Thank you?

Thank you. You don't judge or critique my ideas. Why? I'm a Buddhist. My number one goal is for me to be happy, so if I give you a dumb idea, just don't do it. It's just a waste of my time and yours, critiquing me all day.

Besides this coaching process is not about me getting better, but about you getting better.

Are your interactions with the person you are coaching face to face?

The first interactions are face to face, but after that, a lot of interaction is over the phone. I interact with people as little as needed. Not as little as possible, but as little as needed. My mission is to spend the least amount of time needed to help these people get better.

Then I follow up rigorously. Based on my behaviour last month, give me ideas for next month. Follow up, follow up, follow up, and as you're following, measure.

What's your success rate?

Probably 85 to 90 per cent. Occasionally, however, for a variety of different reasons I fail.

For example, a very large company hired me to coach someone who is very outgoing and creative and innovative. The company hired this person – innovative and outgoing – but didn't want them to rock the boat and make waves. So they hired me to help them fit in with the corporate culture.

What happened?

I worked with the person for a year. Finally I looked at them, and said: “Look, I'm a Buddhist. My number one mission is for me to be happy. You're so miserable you're making me unhappy too.”

They left the company.

Has that changed your approach?

It taught me a great lesson. Because I taught that person to be a better phoney. It wasn't them.

Now I tell my clients, to look in the mirror. Is it really them? The only reason they should try to change is if, in their heart, they think it is the right thing to do. So in this case it wasn't right for this person. So I didn't get paid, but I was still happy I did it.

What prevents people following through with what you teach in your books and presentations?

It has to do with a dream. I'm sure you have probably had the dream, the same idiotic dream for years. The dream sounds like this.

I'm incredibly busy right now. Given the pressures of work and home and all these commitments, I feel kind of overcommitted. I don't tell others this, but every now and again, my life feels a little out of control. But you know, I'm working on some very unique and special challenges right now, and I think the worst of this is going to be over in five or six months. And after that, I'm going to take a couple, three weeks to get organised, and spend some time with the family, and begin my new, healthy life programme, and after that, everything will be different. And it won't be crazy anymore.

Have you ever had a dream that vaguely resembles this dream?

It sounds familiar

We all have this fantasy that somehow tomorrow is going to be different from today, and it's not going to be crazy any more, and that rationality is going to start prevailing. No it's not. Tomorrow's going to be equally crazy. You want to do something different? What are you going to do now? Just do that.

Nobody gets better because of slogans or buzzwords or happy little terms. You have to do something. With what I do, you get feedback, you pick something to improve, you talk to people, you follow up on a disciplined basis and you get better.

So to me, the real key to what I do is execution. It's not theory. It's easy to understand; but it's hard to do. ■

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IN ADDITION

For more details on coaching for chief executives and directors, contact Simon Bird at Simon.Bird@institute.nhs.uk

WHAT GOT YOU HERE WON'T GET YOU THERE

Steve Coomber has done the reading for you.

Marshall Goldsmith is probably the world's leading executive coach. He is certainly a prolific writer, the author of countless articles, and 22 books, the latest of which is *What Got You Here Won't Get You There*, (written with Mark Reiter) a 223 page journey from where you are right now in your career, to where you want to be.

Goldsmith isn't any old coach either, he specialises in helping leaders achieve maximum performance. He has, for example, coached scores of CEOs, and worked with executives at many Fortune 500 companies, including General Electric, Boeing and Motorola.

One of Goldsmith's areas of expertise is remedial action for unhelpful executive behaviour. "I work with interpersonal skills – behavioural issues", he explains. "The focus is strictly on helping successful leaders get better." To get better, however, executives have to accept there's a problem, says Goldsmith.

His books are heavy on practical information, rather than theory. A good example of the way he works is a story he tells, not in this book, about an executive he once coached. "Although regarded as hardworking with high potential, his offhand behaviour towards co-workers meant he was seen as a complete jerk. How did I get this guy to change? I called his wife and kids and asked them how he behaved at home. To his surprise his family agreed with his colleagues that he was a jerk. So I said to him, you may be making more money than God, but do you really want to have a funeral that no one shows up at? The message got through."

Resisting change

But back to the book. As a leader, explains Goldsmith at the beginning of the journey, getting where you want to go, involves a thorough assessment of your behaviour, the way you work, the way you interact with others. First, however, like anyone who wishes to improve, you need to acknowledge the need for improvement, the need to change.

For successful leaders that is often a very difficult thing to do. Usually past success colours beliefs and attitudes about future performance, says Goldsmith. Successful people tend to attribute that success to their actions rather than luck, believe that they can influence events and that past success necessarily predicts future success.

Confront such a person with the news that they need to change in order to progress, and more often than not, they will go through a classic three stage response. First they think the person telling them is confused, has got it wrong, doesn't know what they are talking about. Next, when it sinks in that just maybe that other person is right, they go into denial. Finally, they go on the attack, in an attempt to discredit the bearer of uncomfortable truths.

This is a challenge enough, says Goldsmith, but then, on top of this all too common reaction are four key beliefs which, by the very fact that they help make us successful, also hold us back. The four beliefs are, as Goldsmith describes them: I have succeeded; I can succeed; I will succeed; I choose to succeed.

The "I have succeeded" belief while useful in motivating people is also a barrier, especially when people tend to attribute their contribution to an enterprise as playing a greater part in the success of that enterprise than the contributions of others. "I can succeed" is the equivalent of saying "I am confident I can succeed". Successful people, says Goldsmith, often ascribe success to their own actions, believing that

they control their own destiny and therefore influence their future, unlike others who believe that luck plays a big part in individual events and outcomes. The challenge for people who believe that their behaviour has led to success, is that they are less willing to change their behaviour; unwilling to face up to the fact that their success might be in spite of rather than because of their behaviour.

"I will succeed" is the attitude of the eternally optimistic. Those that believe they will succeed find it difficult to turn down opportunities. The can-do attitude leads to an avalanche of opportunities, which leads to the person in question being snowed under. Goldsmith points out that often the people who recognise their behavioural issues, but do nothing to remedy them, are victims of the "will succeed" belief. The intention is there, it is just that over commitment leads to a lack of time to amend behaviours, break bad habits and improve performance.

Finally, "I choose to succeed", another of the four beliefs common in successful people, is about the need for self-determination. Successful people, argues Goldsmith, need to feel that they are in control and that they are not doing things because they have to, or are told to. The more people believe that their behaviour is a product of their choices, then the less likely they are to want to change that behaviour.

Diehard bad habits

Assuming you manage to accept the need to change, and overcome the resistance to change entrenched through holding these four beliefs, then you will still need to identify those things that you need to change, those behaviours that are holding you back. Fortunately, Goldsmith is on hand to help. There are, he says, 20 habits to look out for. There is not room here for all of them. However, here are a few that may, or may not, have a ring of uncomfortable familiarity.

Ranking at the top of the bad behavioural habits charts is “winning too much”. It’s that competitive dad syndrome. As Goldsmith points out, competitiveness in itself is not a bad thing, but it is when it is “deployed at the service of objectives that are simply not worth the effort.” Over competitiveness also underpins many other bad behaviours, such as arguing too much, putting others down and ignoring people.

Goldsmith offers an effective example. A and B disagree over which restaurant to go to. B makes a suggestion, which A agrees to, having first made clear that in their opinion the service is dreadful. The service is indeed dreadful. So what does A do: point out that they were right – winning; or shut up and make the best of the evening, aiming for as much enjoyment as possible given the circumstances? Goldsmith says that, in his experience, 75 per cent of people will complain, although 100 per cent agree that they should get on with the evening.

Habit #3 is passing judgement. People don’t like to be critiqued. If you pass judgement, positive or negative, when people make comments about you, people notice and will be reluctant to make comments for fear of a negative response. Instead, suggests Goldsmith you need to be neutral in response, “a human Switzerland”. Try it and people will find you more agreeable, even.

At #7 is “speaking when angry”, tempting but ill-advised. It is hard to lead people when you are angry, which usually equates with out of control. “Hothead” is not a good image to cultivate. Unfortunately it tends to wipe out good aspects of your behaviour and you become known for the outbursts of temper rather than your good deeds. Hot on the heels of #7 is habit #8 “negativity”. We all know a “Let me explain why that won’t work” person. Monitor your speech; find out if that’s you, if it is, try to curb that negativity.

On the way to #20 are many more habits that sound depressingly familiar: making excuses; clinging to the past; passing the buck; not listening; and goal obsession, which while not a flaw in itself is something that leads to the other bad habits.

Changing for the better

Change requires knowledge of your bad behaviour, this in turn requires feedback. How do you get feedback? In three ways, suggests Goldsmith; solicited, unsolicited, and observational feedback. The first two are more obvious than the last. But observational feedback is very powerful: make a list of people’s casual remarks about you; listen to what you say about yourself; ask the people at home what they think about you – honestly.

So what next? Goldsmith offers his rules for change. Eight of them. They are as follows: Make sure that your problem is one that behavioural change can cure; if it is then pick the right thing to change; and don’t delude yourself about what you must really change; don’t hide from the truth; there is no ideal behaviour – no benchmark perfect behaviour; if you can measure it, then you can achieve it – whether it is the number of times you say thank you, or the number of hours you spend with your family at the weekend; and monetise the result, create a solution – useful for incentivising good behavioural habits in others.

Finally there is rule eight. If you have got this far and are intrigued, or even determined to grasp Goldsmith’s advice with both hands, then take heed of rule number eight: the best time to change is now. Presumably that would include buying the book. ■

What Got You Here Won’t Get You There: How Successful People Become Even More Successful by Marshall Goldsmith, with Mark Reiter, Hyperion; 2007

NOW YOU’VE READ THIS BOOK, MAYBE YOU’LL LIKE...

Marc Woods Personal Best: Ten Lessons to Help You Achieve Your True Potential Capstone Publishing, 2005

The truly inspiring story of how cancer and the loss of a leg provoked a lazy teenager into living his life to the full; he became a multi gold medallist at swimming in the paralympics and is now a successful leadership speaker and performance coach.