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# RESTORING FAITH IN LEADERSHIP

An interview with the leadership coach and author, Marshall Goldsmith

**D**r Marshall Goldsmith is not the usual kind of leadership coach you might expect to find in the ruthless world of corporate enterprise. A self-described “philosophical Buddhist”, he associates leadership and success in business with lofty ideas such as happiness, meaning and mindfulness.

Yet, he is no idealist – Dr Goldsmith is one of the pioneers of executive coaching, having helped hundreds of CEOs become better managers and human beings with his famous 360-degree feedback and follow-up method. His influential book *The Leader of the Future*, which includes a foreword by management legend Peter Drucker, has been translated into 28 languages. A respected voice in the leadership field, Dr Goldsmith was named winner of the prestigious 2011 Thinkers50 Leadership Award as the World’s Most Influential Leadership Thinker

Alex Katsomitros caught up with him to discuss leadership in a globalised economy, the role of technology, the art of building a collaborative ethos in modern corporations, and spirituality and mindfulness in the workplace.

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Marshall Goldsmith

**Q: In a few words, what makes a good leader in the 21st century? What are the key skills and attributes that top leaders have?**

**Marshall Goldsmith:** A few years ago I co-authored a book entitled *Global Leadership: The Next Generation*, where we asked whether we can actually talk about the leader of the future. If we compare the leader of today with the leader of the future, perhaps many attributes would be the same: integrity, vision, etc. All these were important a thousand years ago and will be important in a thousand years.

However, there are five characteristics that differentiate the leader of the future. The first one is global thinking. Historically, leadership has been domestic; leaders focused not just on their own country, but also their own region, talents, industry and so on. Today they need to operate in a global environment, as they deal with suppliers, partners and customers from other countries. Then you have cross-cultural appreciation, which is the ability to work with people from different cultures. Leaders need to realise that diversity does not refer anymore to working with people from their own country, but has a global sense.

The next one is technological savvy. Leaders have to understand how technology impacts their business. Another skill is the ability to build alliances and partnerships. A few decades ago no one thought that this was important. Today, everything in business is about alliances; you need to work with your customers, suppliers and even competitors, and often handle complex relationships within different companies. The last characteristic is what I call “shared leadership”. Peter Drucker said that “the leader of the past knew how to tell, the leader of the future will know how to ask”. More and more leaders ask, listen and learn, because they deal with knowledge workers who often know more than their managers. So leaders cannot really tell them what to do – they need to ask them.

**Q: As you said, one of the key challenges facing leaders is technology, which not only disrupts various sectors, but also changes work habits. How should leaders adapt to the influence of technology?**

**MG:** I think that an important issue is the use of social media. A friend of mine, Professor Paul Argenti from the Tuck School of Business at Dartmouth, has conducted research on this and found out that CEOs are way behind the curve in terms of understanding the impact of social media. One important issue for the leader of the future is to understand that it's not the rest of the world's problem to understand you, it's your problem to understand how the rest of the world works. So leaders need to keep up with technology and understand its impact, not just for the sake of it, but in order to be able to deal with a generation of people who have grown up with technology and are much more comfortable with it.

**Q: One relevant theme that you already mentioned is collaboration within and across corporations. There is a buzz about it in management studies, particularly about its overlap with technology, such as the use of crowdsourcing, collaborative intelligence and so on. How can leaders establish a collaborative culture in large corporations?**

**MG:** One great role model in regard to collaboration is that of my friend Alan Mulally, who until recently worked for Ford Motor Company. His leadership style can be characterised as "the leader as facilitator", which includes encouraging everyone to tell the truth and helping everyone in the company improve. In this model the leader's job is not providing all the answers, but just helping others to find the answers. And you can't argue about his success – the company's share price has risen considerably and he is considered one of the most successful leaders over the last decade in the US.

“ So people need to ask themselves “what is meaningful for me?” The best leaders are those who love what they do, who are happy and can find meaning every day in everything they do”

**Q: A big part of your work focuses on the value of feedback and follow-up. In one of your articles you say: “There is an enormous disconnect between understanding and doing. Becoming a better leader (or a better person) is a process, not an event.” Is there a one-size-fits-all model for all leaders to improve through feedback?**

**MG:** I am not an expert on every topic, so let me focus me on the area that I know well, which is helping leaders become more successful by changing their behaviour. There is a process that does work in this area, and it is based on receiving confidential feedback and using it in a positive and constructive way. By talking to people and developing an ongoing follow-up strategy you just get better. I have written an article entitled *Leadership is a Contact Sport* which involved research with 86,000 participants from all over the world, and the results were very consistent. This

process works in every country, every industry, and every level of management, and often CEOs are the first ones who realise it.

**Q: Does gender play a role? Is there a female and male model of leadership?**

**MG:** I have indeed noticed a difference in terms of leadership feedback between women and men. And there is research showing that women are better in receiving feedback than men. This does not mean that every woman is better than every man. It is just that statistically the average woman is better than the average man in this area. I teach women at leadership programmes, and one issue I find consistently as a challenge is that women are harder on themselves than men. So I am trying to teach them how to stop being too self-critical and tough on themselves and realise that they shouldn't have unrealistic expectations.

**Q: There's been a buzz of late surrounding spirituality and mindfulness in the workplace. In particular, tech powerhouses encourage their employees to explore their spiritual side, take yoga classes and try to find “meaning”. Obviously one goal is to make them more productive, but do you believe this marks a real shift in business culture?**

**MG:** Spirituality is not the word I would use. I am a Buddhist, but a philosophical Buddhist, not a metaphysical one. I am a great believer in mindfulness, but I don't necessarily define that as “spirituality”. The problem with spirituality is that it refers to spirits and other things that can descend to metaphysics, an area that businesses probably should not touch. On the other hand, mindfulness, which is a Buddhist concept, and “feedforward”, another Buddhist concept that I teach all the time and people find practical and useful, are very important. In my research we are asking people “what is really important for you?” and the results show that you need to pursue happiness and meaning simultaneously.

Some people say that happiness without meaning can be a shallow and empty concept and doesn't work in one term, either at work or at home. On the other if you have meaning without happiness, that's not good either. So you have to look inside and see what makes you happy and what is meaningful for you. Perhaps this could be defined as spirituality – I probably wouldn't use the word though.

**Q: In your opinion, is there one thing that makes leadership meaningful, or is it up to each individual leader to find that out?**

**MG:** I think meaning can be defined by the individual. We have done research on this, asking



“ Sometimes someone sends me an email saying that they watched my videos and this helped them change their life and become a better person. That’s enough for me”

people “what is meaningful for you”, and what we found is that definitions come from inside, not from outside. So I cannot tell you what is meaningful for you. The best leaders are people who love to lead people. Many good technologists when it comes to leadership and dealing with people are doing a terrible job. It’s not that they are bad people; it’s just that they are in a position where what is meaningful and important for them is not aligned with what they do in everyday life, and therefore they are unhappy and often not very effective. So people need to ask themselves “what is meaningful for me?”

The best leaders are those who love what they do, who are happy and can find meaning every day in everything they do. In my job, I don’t have to work, because I love what I do. But I can’t suggest that what I do is necessarily meaningful for other people.

**Q: Would you say that leadership is a universal concept? Does it mean the same thing in Asia and America for example?**

**MG:** There are definitely differences between people. But there are principles that apply all over the world. My own leadership process works in every single country. And this is not a theory; I have worked with and surveyed thousands of people around the world. The best scores in world are indeed in Asia, but that’s not because it works better there or it doesn’t work in other continents – it’s just that people there take the process more seriously. Most of my speaking takes places outside of the US, so it’s not that I haven’t worked abroad.

There are huge cultural differences, but the higher up you go, the more people tend to be alike. A billionaire in China, a billionaire in the US and a billionaire in France – they are still billionaires and have a lot in common. A billionaire in India has more in common with a billionaire in London than he has with a farmer in India.



Dr Marshall Goldsmith receiving the prestigious 2011 Thinkers50 Leadership Award

**Q: I am asking because there is a debate on the relative decline of Europe, particularly in contrast to Asia’s ascent, and often the lack of leadership is cited as a reason for that.**

**MG:** Well, the base of Asia is very different. China has higher growth rate, but this is a relatively recent development. If Chinese leaders were inherently good, then why was China’s economy stagnant for so many years? China started from a very different base and India from an even lower base, although they have had great progress recently. So comparing European or US leaders to Chinese ones does not make sense. It is easy to look at this year’s numbers and conclude that European leaders are not competent. You could also take the numbers for

the last five or hundred years and say American business leaders are not that good, which some people actually do, but I am very suspicious of these gross generalisations.

**Q: One last question about you. What is it that makes your life meaningful?**

**MG:** My mission is to help people have a better life. Although I work with CEOs, it’s not the big things that make me happy – it’s the small things. Sometimes someone sends me an email saying that they watched my videos and this helped them change their life and become a better person. That’s enough for me. I am not going to cure cancer or solve the EU’s problems, but if I can help people, I am happy.