

Renowned leadership coach Marshall Goldsmith shares his insights on how successful people can achieve even greater accomplishments.

# Which Workplace Habits Do You Need to Break to Become More Successful?

Marshall Goldsmith

Higher levels of achievement are attained not only by learning and honing new behaviors or skills, but also by putting a stop to one or more of 21 annoying workplace habits! This excerpt from Marshall Goldsmith's new book, *What Got You Here Won't Get You There*, can help you identify the behaviors that may serve as a roadblock to higher achievements.

With successful people likely to focus on their successes rather than failures, there are four key beliefs regarding success that actually prevent us from changing our ways and achieving even greater success, as described below:

- *Belief 1: I Have Succeeded*—Successful people believe in their skills and talents.
- *Belief 2: I Can Succeed*—Successful people believe they have the capability within themselves to make desirable things happen. People who believe they can succeed see opportunities where others see threats. They're not afraid of uncertainty of ambiguity. They embrace it. They want to take greater risks and achieve greater returns. Given the choice, they will always bet on themselves.
- *Belief 3: I Will Succeed*—Successful people have an unflappable optimism. They not only believe that they can manufacture success, they believe it's practically their due.
- *Belief 4: I Choose to Succeed*—Successful people believe that

they are doing what they choose to do because they choose to do it. They have a high need for self-determination. The more successful a person is, the more likely this is to be true.

These four success beliefs—that we have the skills, confidence, motivation, and the free choice to succeed—make us superstitious. Psychologically speaking, superstitious behavior comes from the mistaken belief that a specific activity that is followed by positive reinforcement is actually the cause of that positive reinforcement. The activity may be functional or not—that is, it may affect someone or something else, or it may be self-contained and pointless—but if something good happens after we do it, then we make a connection and seek to repeat the activity. Superstition is merely the confusion of correlation and causality. Any human, like any animal, tends to repeat behavior that is followed by positive reinforcement. The more we achieve, the more reinforcement we get.

One of the greatest mistakes of successful people is the assumption, “I behave this way, and I achieve results. Therefore, I must be achieving results because I behave this way.” This belief is sometimes true but not across the board. That’s where superstition kicks in. I’m talking about the difference between success that happens because of our behavior and the success that comes in spite of our behavior. Almost everyone I meet is successful because of doing a lot of things right, and almost everyone I meet is successful in spite of some behavior that defies common sense.

### Identifying Your Most Annoying Interpersonal Issues

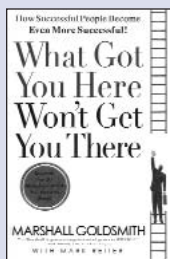
What we are dealing with here are challenges in interpersonal behavior, often leadership behavior. They are the egregious everyday annoyances that make your workplace substantially more noxious than it needs to be. They don’t happen in a vacuum. They are transactional flaws performed by one person who is relating to other people. These 21 habits, described briefly below, stand in the way of great leaders reaching higher levels of accomplishment:

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1. *Winning too much: The need to win at all costs and in all situations—when it matters, when it doesn’t, and when it’s totally beside the point.* Winning too much is easily the most common behavioral problem that I observe in successful people. There’s a fine line between being competitive and over-competitive, between winning when it counts and when no one’s counting—and successful people cross that line with alarming frequency. Winning too much is the number one challenge because it underlies nearly every other behavioral problem.
2. *Adding too much value: The overwhelming desire to add our two cents to every discussion.* It’s common among leaders used to running the show. It is extremely difficult for successful people to listen to other people tell them something that they already know without communicating somehow that “we already knew that” and “we know a better way.”
3. *Passing judgment: The need to rate others and impose our standards on them.* There’s nothing wrong with offering an opinion in the normal give and take of business discussions. You want people to agree or disagree freely, but it’s not appropriate to pass judgment when we specifically ask people to voice their opinions about us.
4. *Making destructive comments: The needless sarcasm and cutting remarks that we think make us sound sharp and witty.* They are different from comments that add too much value—because they add nothing but pain. We don’t think we make destructive comments, but the people who know us disagree.
5. *Starting with “no,” “but,” and “however”:* The overuse of these negative qualifiers, which secretly say to everyone, “I’m right. You’re wrong.” When you start a sentence with “no,” “but,” “however,” or any variation, no matter how friendly your tone or how many cute mollifying phrases you throw in to acknowledge the other person’s feelings, the message to the other person is, “You are wrong.” The general response from the other person is to dispute your position and fight back. From there, the conversation dissolves into a pointless

## About the Book

Marshall Goldsmith's latest book, *What Got You Here Won't Get You There*, serves as a guide to help you move to the next level of success in your career. As the book suggests, the key to great success is not always mastering a new skill or task, but instead eliminating one or more annoying personal habits or personality traits that can serve as barriers to greater achievements in life.



Goldsmith begins by discussing four key beliefs commonly held by successful leaders, which can create an illusion of success and cause leaders to resist change. He then outlines 20 workplace habits—ranging from the number one habit, the need to win too much, to other flaws such as making excuses or refusing to express regret. Alone, or in combination, these habits can slow down or even derail a successful career.

The best selling book then focuses on a somewhat different 21st habit: goal obsession, which by itself isn't a flaw because it isn't something that you do to another person. Goldsmith describes goal obsession as a force at play when you get so intensely focused

on achieving a goal that it comes at the expense of a larger mission.

The third section of this book is centered on how you can change for the better and overcome habits through learning to gather and accept feedback, making apologies, listening, thanking, following up, and practicing a skill that Goldsmith calls feedforward. He explains that feedforward requires four simple steps: selecting the behavior that you want to change; describing this objective in one-on-one dialogue with anyone you know; asking that person for two suggestions for the future that might help you achieve a positive change in your selected behavior; and finally, listening attentively to the suggestions and expressing your thanks.

In Goldsmith's fourth and final section, "Pulling Out the Stops," you can learn how to apply the rules of change. Here he offers seven rules to help you get a better handle on the change process involved when striving to overcome your workplace habits.

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war. You're no longer communicating. You're both trying to win.

6. *Telling the world how smart we are: The need to show people we're smarter than they think we are.* This is another variation on our need to win. We need to win people's admiration. We need to let them know that we are least their intellectual equal if not their superior. We need to be the smartest person in the room. It usually backfires.
7. *Speaking when angry: Using emotional volatility as a management tool.* Emotional volatility is not the most reliable leadership tool. When you get angry you are usually out of control. It's hard to lead people when you've lost control. The worst thing about anger is how it stifles our ability to change. Once you get a reputation for emotional volatility, you are branded for life.
8. *Negativity, or "Let me explain why that won't work": The need to share our negative thoughts even when we weren't asked.* This is unique because it is pure unadulterated negativity under the guise of being helpful. We employ it to establish that our expertise or authority is superior to someone else's. It doesn't mean that what we say is correct or useful. It's simply a way of inserting ourselves into a situation as chief arbiter or senior critic.
9. *Withholding information: The refusal to share information to maintain an advantage over others.* Intentionally withholding information is the opposite of adding value. We are deleting value. Yet it has the same purpose: to gain power. The problem with not sharing information—for whatever reason—is that it rarely achieves the desired effect. You may think you're gaining an edge and consolidating power, but you're actually breeding mistrust.
10. *Failing to give proper recognition: The inability to praise and reward.* This is a sibling of withholding information. In withholding your recognition of another

person's contribution to a team's success, you are not only sowing injustice and treating people unfairly, but you also are depriving people of the emotional payoff that comes with success.

11. *Claiming credit that we don't deserve: The most annoying way to overestimate our contribution to any success.* Claiming credit is adding insult to the injury that comes with overlooked recognition. We're not only depriving people of the credit they deserve, but we are hogging it for ourselves. It's two crimes in one. This is another sibling of the need to win.
12. *Making excuses: The need to reposition our annoying behavior as a permanent fixture so people excuse us for it.* If we can stop excusing ourselves, we can get better at almost anything we choose.
13. *Clinging to the past: The need to deflect blame away from ourselves and onto events and people from our past; a subset of blaming everyone else.* Many people enjoy living in the past, especially if going back there lets them blame someone else for anything that's gone wrong in their lives. That's when clinging to the past becomes an interpersonal problem. We use the past as a weapon against others.
14. *Playing favorites: Failing to see that we are treating someone unfairly.* The net result (of playing favorites) is manifestly obvious. You're encouraging behavior that serves you but not necessarily the best interests of the company. If everyone is fawning over the boss, who's getting the work done? Worse, it tilts the field against the honest, principled employees who won't play along. This is a double hit of bad news. You're not only playing favorites but also favoring the wrong people.
15. *Refusing to express regret: The inability to take responsibility for our actions, admit we're wrong, or recognize how our actions affect others.* Perhaps we think apologizing means we have lost a contest (and successful people have a practically irrational need to win at everything). Perhaps we find it painful to admit we were wrong (we rarely have to apologize for being right). Whatever the reasons, refusing to apologize causes as much ill will in the workplace as any other interpersonal flaw.

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16. *Not listening: The most passive-aggressive form of disrespect for colleagues.* When you fail to listen, you're sending out an armada of negative messages. You're saying, "I don't care about you. I don't understand you. You're wrong. You're stupid. You're wasting my time. All of the above."
17. *Failing to express gratitude: The most basic form of bad manners.* Like apologizing, thanking is a magical super-gesture of interpersonal relations. It's what you say when you have nothing nice to say—and it will never annoy the person hearing it. Gratitude is a skill that we can never display too often.
18. *Punishing the messenger: The misguided need to attack the innocent who are usually only trying to help us.* Punishing the messenger is like taking the worst elements of not giving recognition and hogging the credit, passing the buck, making destructive comments, and not thanking or listening—and then adding anger to the mix.
19. *Passing the buck: The need to blame everyone but ourselves. Passing the buck is one of those terrifying hybrid flaws.* Take a healthy dose of needing to win and making excuses. Mix it with refusing to apologize and failing to give proper recognition. Sprinkle in a faint hint of punish the messenger and getting angry. What you end up with is passing the buck. Blaming others for our mistakes. This is the behavioral flaw by which we judge our leaders—as important a negative attribute as positive qualities such as brainpower, courage, and resourcefulness. A leader who cannot shoulder the blame is not someone we will follow into battle. We instinctively question that individual's character, dependability, and loyalty to us. And so we hold back our loyalty to him or her.
20. *An excessive need to be "me": Exalting our faults as virtues simply because they're who we are. Each of us has a pile of behavior that we define as "me."* It's the chronic behavior, both positive and negative, that we think of as our inalterable essence. Over time, it would be easy for each of us to cross the line and begin to make a virtue of our flaws—simply because the flaws constitute what we think of as "me." This misguided loyalty to our true natures—



this excessive need to be me—is one of the toughest obstacles to making positive long-term change in our behavior.

Finally, the 21st workplace habit, “goal obsession.” There’s a reason I have given goal obsession a special stand-alone place in this section on our interpersonal challenges. By itself, goal obsession is not a flaw. Unlike adding value or punishing the messenger or any of the other 20 habits, goal obsession is not transactional; it’s not something you do to another person. It is, however, often the root cause of the annoying behavior. Goal obsession turns us into someone we shouldn’t be.

Goal obsession is one of those paradoxical traits we accept as a driver of our success. It’s the force that motivates us to finish the job in the face of any obstacle—and finish it perfectly—a valuable attribute much of the time. It’s hard to criticize people for wanting to do things 100% right (especially when you consider the sloppy alternative). Taken too far, however, it can become a blatant cause of failure. In its broadest form, goal obsession is the force at play when we get so wrapped up in achieving our goal that we do it at the expense of a larger mission.

Admittedly, this is a scary pantheon of challenges, and when they’re collected in one place they sound like a chamber of horrors. Who would want to work in an environment where co-workers are guilty of these sins? Yet we do every day.

We are all guilty of most of these “sins” some of the time. You may know one person who is chronically guilty of one or two of them, while another person has different issues. Hopefully, you don’t work with anyone who frequently exhibits all of these failings! Focusing on one or two key areas for change simplifies the task of helping ourselves—or helping others—get better.

There’s more good news. It is imminently possible to remove these roadblocks. The potential to fix them is in the skill set of every human being. For example, the cure for not thanking enough is remembering to

say, “thank you.” How tough is that? For not listening, it’s keeping your mouth shut and ears open. For not apologizing, it’s learning to say, “I’m sorry. I’ll do better in the future.” For punishing the messenger, it’s imagining how we’d like to be treated under similar circumstances. And so on.

This stuff is simple. It’s definitely not easy, but it is definitely doable! You already know what to do. It’s as basic as tying your shoelaces or riding a bike, or any other skill that lasts a lifetime. We just lose sight of the many daily opportunities to employ them and thus we get rusty.

Check yourself against the list. While it is imminently possible you may have been guilty of all of them at least once, it’s unlikely that you’re facing all of these roadblocks as daily activities. It’s not even likely that you can claim six to eight of them as common occurrences. Even if you could, of those six to eight, it’s also unlikely that all of them are sufficiently significant concerns that we have to worry about. Some are going to be more serious issues than others. For example, if only one out of 20 people says that you have an anger management issue, let it go. On the other hand, if 16 out of 20 say it, let’s get to work.

Whittle down the list to the vital issues, and you’ll know where to get started.

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Marshall Goldsmith is co-founder of Marshall Goldsmith Partners. He served as a member of the board of directors of the Peter Drucker Foundation for 10 years. Goldsmith is recognized as a world-class authority in helping successful leaders achieve positive, measurable change in behavior for themselves, their people, and their teams. Goldsmith has worked extensively with more than 70 major CEOs and their management teams. In 2006, Alliant International University renamed their schools of business and organizational psychology the Marshall Goldsmith School of Management. His newest book, *What Got You Here Won't Get You There*, is a New York Times best seller and Wall Street Journal number one business book. For more information visit [marshallgoldsmithlibrary.com](http://marshallgoldsmithlibrary.com).