

What got you here won't get you there

Goldsmith, Marshall. (2007). New York: Hyperion

Why this book?

Stakeholder Centered Coaching is about improvement. As the environment and world changes, our knowledge, skills, and applications will have to keep pace. In this book, Marshall Goldsmith identifies some reasons why people stay with what has been working believing it will always produce good results. He discusses strategies that will help leaders get feedback on what behaviors are working and what are not, our barriers to behavioral change, and how “feedforward” can increase productive results.

I was so impressed by this book I became a certified as a Stakeholder Centered Coach. I have been coaching principals, central office, and other leaders for the past two years using this method. Real Results from Real Leaders using data from the people most directly affected by the leadership. “Helping good people get better.”

In leadership, read the latest book by the gurus and voilá, the answer appears. This book spurs our thinking on why organizations and people continue to look for the “holy grail.” What seems to be occurring in life is “there is no magic pill.” The only real advantage is continual learning. As Goldsmith writes, “The Trouble with Success, it prevents us from achieving more success.” Once an answer is found, many quit looking for new answers. As De Witt Jones said, “look for the second right answer.” Maybe it is better to look for multiple right answers.

Unfortunately, many people, and leaders, in particular, do not have a clear idea of how their behavior affects themselves and others. A list from this book follows:

- They think they have all the answers, but others see it as arrogance.
- They think they are contributing to a situation with helpful comments, but others see it as “butting in.”
- They think they are delegating effectively, but others see it as shirking responsibilities.
- They think they are holding their tongue, but others see it as unresponsiveness.
- They think they are letting people think for themselves, but others see it as ignoring them.

Left unchecked, these quirks become larger problems that extend farther into the organization. The higher up the leader, the more widespread the effect. The major focus of this book is how to work with successful people to receive honest feedback and suggestions to make behavioral change a more positive environment. As Goldsmith points out, “My job

is to help them identify a personal habit that's annoying their coworkers and help them eliminate it."

The following process for improving skills is outlined below. There is no correlation between an individual's standing in the corporate pyramid and what his coworkers think of these interpersonal skills:

1. Get 360° feedback
2. Help them understand what everybody really thinks about them.
3. Show them a process for how to improve.
4. Help them apologize to everyone affected by their flawed behavior (it is the only way to erase the negative baggage).
5. Advertise their efforts to get better because you have to tell people that you're trying to change.
6. Follow up every month or so with their colleagues.
7. Listen without prejudice to what their colleagues, family, and friends are saying. Listen without interrupting or arguing.
8. Whenever they benefit from input from others show gratitude, by saying "thank you"
9. Feedforward – "special sauce" for eliciting advice from people on what they can do to get better in the future.

Dr. Goldsmith uses golf as a metaphor. No matter what the handicap, 36 or scratch, all golfers want to get better. This is what John Carse (1986) calls an "infinite game." The goal of the game is to keep getting better as opposed to finding one way that works and ending any further improvement (finite game).

Most people in organizations delude themselves about their achievements and contributions. These false assumptions are more likely to occur because of their success than the failures. When something works, we believe it was because of our knowledge, skills, and application rather than a combination of many others and events.

Some of the beliefs caused by this delusion are:

- I succeeded and it is because of my contribution. This is fundamentally called "attribution error." Over 80% of people rate themselves in the top 20% of performers.
- I can succeed so they take greater risks. They will always believe they will succeed. Unfortunately, "if you are born on third base, you think you hit a triple."
- I will succeed. Most overestimate what they can handle. Then, if success doesn't happen, they say, "I meant to...." They always think they will get to the issues eventually.

- I choose to succeed. Successful people are self-sufficient which can be a very good thing or add to the delusion of how much they are responsible for success.

As Marshall mentions in the book: “one of my greatest challenges is helping leaders see that what got them where they are is not because of all of their behaviors.” He helps them see that they are confusing ‘because of’ and ‘in spite of’ behaviors; and, he helps them to get out of the ‘superstition trap’ where they attribute their success even to their actions that have nothing to do with that success.

Two things that can get in the way of improvement is clinging to the notion that their success is linked totally to their behavior and the fear of overcorrection that will stop future success. “People will do something, including changing their behavior, only if it can be demonstrated that doing so is in their own best interests as defined by their own values.”

In section two Goldsmith, outlines twenty habits that keep successful people from being more successful and, thereby, even more, valuable to their organization. These are habits mainly related to interpersonal issues rather than knowledge and skill deficits. “The higher you go, the more your problems are behavioral.”

Goldsmith is clear, he doesn’t work with bad people and if a person can’t reflect on issues and be honest, there is a low chance of improving performance. And the same applies to those who work with the leader. They are key to helping the leader change and they need to adhere to four requirements to be effective stakeholders to the process:

Here are four requirements for providing help:

1. Let go of the past. Focusing on future behavior will be the most valuable.
2. Tell the truth. The stakeholders must provide honest feedback to be helpful.
3. Be supportive and helpful. Continuing to be judgmental will not be helpful.
4. Pick something to improve yourself. Choosing a behavior that will improve leader performance will be critical.

As Marshall points out: “Getting feedback is the easy part. Dealing with it is hard. Stop asking for feedback and then, expressing your opinion. Treat every piece of advice as a gift or a compliment and simply say, ‘Thank you.’ No one expects you to act on every piece of advice. If you learn to listen and act on the advice that makes sense, the people around you may be thrilled.”

“You Do Not Get Better Without Follow Up” – Ed Koch, Former Mayor of New York City, who was famous for riding the subways of his city and asking “how am I doing.” Lots of

research exists concerning ongoing feedback and reflection. Without follow-up, most initiatives are short-lived. The following are thoughts expressed in the book:

- Follow-up is how you measure your progress.
- Follow-up is how we remind people that we're making an effort to change and that they are helping us.
- Follow-up is how our efforts eventually get imprinted on our colleagues' minds.
- Follow-up is how we erase our coworker's skepticism that we can change.
- Follow-up is how we acknowledge to ourselves and others that getting better is an ongoing process, not a temporary religious conversion.
- Follow-up makes us do it.

Goldsmith outlines his conclusions on change. "Does anyone who goes to these leadership classes ever change? In polling 86,000 participants. Three conclusions emerged.

First Lesson: Not everyone responds to executive development, at least not in the way the organization desires or intends. Some people are trainable and some are not. In a major research study, a year later 70% of direct reports said the boss did some things differently. 30% said nothing changed. They said they were too busy.

Second Lesson: People don't get better without follow-up. Follow-up was defined as an interaction between would-be leaders and their colleagues to see if they were improving their leadership effectiveness. Those that followed up made improvements. Those who didn't didn't improve. Elton Mayo (Harvard) identified the "Hawthorne Effect." He posits that productivity tends to increase when workers believe that their bosses are showing a greater interest and involvement in their work.

Third Lesson: There is an enormous disconnect between understanding and doing. Nobody ever changed for the better by going to a training session. They got better by doing what they learned in the program. Doing involves follow-up. Becoming better leaders is a process, not an event.

So, if you want a coach, what are some things to consider?

It shouldn't be a chore for your coach to get in touch with you. Making excuses won't make the process valuable.

1. Your coach should be interested in your life and have your best interest at heart. There are many people out there calling themselves coaches. Choose wisely.
2. Your coach asks questions about your goal. They are not there to judge you.

3. Pick an issue in your life that you're not happy with and that you want to improve. Make a list of daily tasks that will help you get to your goal.

Marshall Goldsmith coined the term “Feedforward” for leaders and those who want to help the leader get better. It is focused on what you are going to do differently. There is nothing you can do about the past. There is an enormous opportunity about how you will behave differently and for the better in the future. Here are four simple steps:

1. Pick one behavior that you would like to change which would make a significant, positive difference in your life. e.g. I want to be a better listener.
2. Describe this objective in a one-to-one dialogue with anyone you know. The person you choose is irrelevant. Some of the truest advice comes from strangers.
3. Ask that person for two suggestions for the future that might help you achieve a positive change in your selected behavior. I want to be a better listener. Would you suggest two ideas that I can implement in the future that will help me become a better listener?
4. Listen to the suggestions. Take notes if you like. You are not allowed to judge, rate, or critique the suggestions in any way. You can't even say something positive. The only response you're permitted is, Thank you.

A trait associated with successful people is a high internal locus of control. Describing the beliefs of leaders Marshall coaches: “Successful people love getting ideas for the future. Successful people have a high need for self-determination and will tend to accept ideas about concerns that they “own” while rejecting ideas that feel “forced” upon them.”

“When it comes to our flawed past, leave it at the stream. To change you need to be sharing ideas for the future. Racecar drivers are taught, “Look at the road, not the wall.” That is what Feedforward does.”

Here are Eight Rules that Goldsmith uses to get a better handle on the process of change:

Rule 1: You might not have a disease that behavioral change can cure. You may think you have lung cancer when you have a pulled muscle. Is it a behavioral problem or a skill problem?

Rule 2: Pick the right thing to change. Wanting is different from choosing. There is a difference between miswanting and mischoosing. One of my first tasks is helping clients distinguish between what they want in life and how they choose to reach that goal.

Rule 3: Don't delude yourself about what you really must change. I have learned there are five reasons people do not succeed; for instance, with their diet and fitness goals.

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1. Time – it takes longer than expected
2. Effort – it is harder than expected
3. Distractions – they don’t expect a “crisis” to emerge
4. Rewards – they don’t get the response from people they want
5. Maintenance – it is hard to sustain

Rule 4: Don’t hide from the truth you need to hear. People get afraid of the answers they may get. If we don’t ask for critiques of our behavior, then no one has anything critical to say. This thinking defies logic. It has to stop. You are better off finding out the truth than being in denial.

Rule 5: There is no ideal behavior. Benchmarking is one of the biggest hazards in getting people to change for the better. Sometimes the desire for “perfect” can drive away “better.” The perfect benchmark for being a human being does not exist.

Rule 6: If you can measure it, you can achieve it. The “soft values” are hard to quantify and are as vital as any hard number we can come up with. They demand our attention.

My 9-year old child nailed me with; when you are home you spend time on the phone, watching TV. You don’t spend any time with me. YIKES. I said, “thank you, daddy will do better.”

Rule 7: Monetize the results, create a solution. An executive put in a “swear jar.” Monetizing the punishment makes you notice more acutely.

Rule 8: The best time to change is now. I have learned a hard lesson trying to help real people, change real behavior in the real world. There is no “in a couple of weeks...”

One of the best ideas for leaders expressed in this book is when a leader wrote a memo to his colleagues. Memo to Staff: How To Handle Me (page 199). You can find the memo in the book. This self-disclosure, honesty, and focus on how to communicate in the best way possible sets the tone for a positive working relationship and increases trust. Most of the organization will be watching to see if you are serious about behaving this way. Any deviation will end up being a reason to discount the commitment to your new goal.

Peter Drucker suggests instead of a “to-do” list, we also create a “stop doing” list. Here are the 20 Unrecognizable Habits that all leaders would benefit to avoid, or stop doing:

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
2. Adding too much value: The overwhelming desire to add our two cents to every discussion

3. Passing judgment: The need to rate others and impose our standards on them
4. Making destructive comments: the needless sarcasm and cutting remarks that we think make us sound sharp and witty
5. Starting with “No,” “But,” or “However”: The overuse of these negative qualifiers which secretly say to everyone, “I’m right, You’re wrong”
6. Telling the world how smart you are: The need to show people we’re smarter than they think we are
7. Speaking when angry: Using emotional volatility as a management tool
8. Negativity, or “Let me explain why that won’t work”: The need to share our negative thoughts even when we were not asked
9. Withholding information: The refusal to share information with others to maintain an advantage over them
10. Failing to give proper recognition: The inability to praise and reward
11. Claiming credit that we do not deserve: The most annoying way to overestimate our contributions to any success
12. Making excuses: The need to reposition our annoying behavior as a permanent fixture so people excuse us for it
13. Clinging to the past: The need to deflect blame away from ourselves and onto events and people from our past; a subset to blaming everyone else
14. Playing favorites: Failing to see that we are treating someone unfairly
15. Refusing to express regret: The inability to take responsibility for our actions, admit we’re wrong, or recognize how our actions affect others
16. Not listening: The most passive-aggressive form of disrespect for colleagues
17. Failing to express gratitude: The most basic form of bad manners
18. Punishing the messenger: The misguided need to attack the innocent who are usually only trying to help
19. Passing the buck: The need to blame everyone but ourselves
20. An excessive need to be “me”: Exalting our faults as virtues simply because they’re who we are

Maybe focusing on “learning” as the goal will help our school organizations as the environment keeps changing.

References:

Carse, J. (1986). *Finite and infinite games* New York: Ballantine Books