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What Got You Here Won't Get You There

By
Marshall Goldsmith

Marshall Goldsmith is an executive coach who coaches successful people to become even more successful. His specialty is working with CEO's or potential CEO's and he looks for long-term behavioral change. He usually works with his clients for 18 months.

The process he uses starts with Goldsmith collecting confidential 360 degree feedback from his client's boss, peers, and direct reports. Based on an evaluation of that feedback, if the client decides there is a behavior that s(he) wants to change, s(he) first apologizes, then advertises efforts to get better, then follows-up every month or two to see how things are going.

One of the best techniques Goldsmith uses is "feed forward" (rather than feedback). His client elicits advice from his peers or direct reports about how he can get better. This is so much more constructive than eliciting feedback themselves which by definition is more negative.

Getting to the point of wanting to change a behavior is not always easy for an executive. After all s(he) has risen to her(his) current high level job without the need to change. On the face of things, it looks like there is positive reinforcement for all current behaviors. But if the 360 degree feedback shows a reputation for not listening or not sharing information, for example, these traits could very well hold back this executive from being the next CEO. The need to change will need to be perceived as in her(his) self-interest.

Goldsmith goes over 20 bad habits, of which he sees one or two in each of the executives that he coaches. Habit #1 is the need to win too much, whether at the multimillion deal at the office or a decision about where to go to dinner in the evening. He even cites an example of a father needing to beat his son in a basketball game. There are several "sibling" habits to this one, like *Adding Too Much Value*, where the executive cannot resist saying "I already knew that" or "I know a better way" and *Withholding Information*. Since information is power, the executive dilutes others' value. Another "sibling" is *Claiming Credit That We Don't Deserve*.

Another group of bad habits revolve around the habit of *Negativity*. "Siblings" include *Passing Judgment*, *Making Destructive Comments*, *Speaking When Angry*, and *Punishing the Messenger*, which are all self-explanatory. Another one is to start a response with "No," "But," or "However" which essentially tells the other person that you are wrong and I am right.

The group of bad habits that shows this executive is too inwardly focused include *Not Listening, Failure to Express Gratitude, Failure to Give Proper Recognition, Failure to Express Regret, and An Excessive Need to Be “Me.”* This last one is where the executive is very aware of a certain behavior, for example, failure to return phone calls or expressing opinions no matter how hurtful, but considers this so much a part of her/his persona that makes it extremely hard to think of changing.

There are three basic steps in the process that Goldsmith recommends for changing behavior.

First Apologize

What is critical is that you not explain or qualify the apology. The only thing you may add to “I’m sorry” is “I’ll try to do better in the future.”

Tell the World – Advertise

You must broadcast the news widely. When you tell peers and staff what you intend to change, ask for their ideas so that they become invested in you. Then remember that they will be watching to see if you pay attention to their suggestions. You will be living in a fish bowl in some respects, but leaders always are. It will be like an election campaign.

Follow-up

You will be doing lots of listening. No interrupting. No saying, “I knew that.” No saying, “No,” “But,” or “However.” Just ask intelligent questions.

This should be a growth period for the entire organization. As you ask for “feed forward,” you have the opportunity to be a role model for receiving ideas and acting on them. You might want to keep a record of your improvements. Goldsmith notes “our addiction to measurement—and its documented value.” He had a funny example about his nine year old daughter asking for more time with her Dad. He made great strides year after year, increasing the time spent with both his children. But when they were teenagers, they suddenly voted to drastically cut back on their time with Dad!

A particularly effective method for changing some types of behavior, e. g., making negative comments, is collecting a monetary fine for each negative comment made. It doesn’t take too long to break that bad habit. A monetary bonus can also be an effective incentive in other instances. One CEO wanted to succeed so badly that he promised his assistant a \$2,000 bonus if he changed his behavior. He thought she was in the best position to assure that he accomplished his goals. He was successful and she collected the bonus.

The important thing about follow-up is the consistency and sincerity of the effort. Are you approaching this task with the same intensity that you do other tasks? Are you making progress each month? Do your peers and direct reports agree that you are making progress?

Special Challenges for People In Charge

Goldstein has a short chapter at the end of the book in which he gives advice about how to deal with the challenges of being a manager. I thought two of these ideas were interesting.

Stop Acting as if You are Managing You

It is so natural to believe that everyone thinks like you think. Goldsmith explains how to avoid this pitfall.

Stop Being Prejudiced About Your Employees

This is a prejudice that you may not have thought about—against the free agent. Many managers started their careers when employees sacrificed their lives for the good of the organization. Goldstein says there are these likely four forms of prejudice against the relatively new phenomenon of the free agent.

- (1) *I know what they want.* There is the assumption that money is the key motivator, but many times that is not what will keep the employee. Don't be afraid to ask what your employees want.
- (2) *I know what they know.* This is an amazing assumption. The blind spot where managers think they know how to do the employee's job.
- (3) *I hate their selfishness.* It is a new world order in which employees are expected to look out for themselves, so don't resent it. You can beat them to the punch by offering what s(he) wants.
- (4) *I can always get someone else.* This is just not true with knowledge workers. When workers start "voting with their feet," you have a problem.

Ignoring realities can cause small problems to become big ones. Determining what motivates your employees and how you can keep the best ones is critical to your success.

Goldsmith's book is an easy read and he makes good points although not new ones. I found his discussion on free agents the most interesting part although it was only a small part of a small chapter that was not related to the main theme of the book,

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