

What got you here won't get you there

*By Marshall Goldsmith,
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Introduction

The key message from Goldsmith in this eminently useful and practical guide for senior managers, is that successful people often have no idea of how their behaviour is being seen by people who matter – bosses, colleagues, coordinators, customers and clients. This manifests itself in the form of various problems:

- Successful people think they have all the answers but others see it as arrogance.
- They think they are contributing to a situation but others see it as interference.
- They think they are delegating effectively but others see it as shirking their 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.

What holds back successful people

Four key beliefs help people to become successful. But these beliefs may also hold them back from progressing further.

- Successful people believe in their skills and talents. Because they have succeeded, they start believing that they have the skills and talent to keep on winning.
- Successful people believe that they have the capability within them to make desirable things happen. They believe that through sheer force of personality or talent or brainpower, they can steer a situation in that direction. Successful people start attributing their success to their behaviour. It is difficult to make them see that they could be successful in spite of their behaviour.
- Successful people believe they are going to succeed in future. They pursue opportunities with great enthusiasm. They do whatever it takes to achieve the goal. But that is also why successful people tend to do too much and face the danger of over commitment.
- Successful people believe they are doing what they choose to do, because they choose to do it. The more they believe that their behaviour is a result of their own choices and commitments, the less likely they are to change their behaviour.

The four beliefs – that they have the skills, the confidence, the motivation and the free choice to succeed – make successful people vulnerable. This vulnerability is the result of a false belief that a specific activity followed by positive reinforcement is actually the cause of that positive reinforcement.

The line of thinking pursued by successful people is: “I behave this way and I achieve results. Therefore I must be achieving results because I behave this way.” These people confuse between “because of” and “in spite of.”

Faulty Behaviours

The problem with successful people is not skill, intelligence or personality, but essentially interpersonal behaviour. This can manifest itself in various ways. Some of them are:

- Winning too much – Trying to win at all costs
- Adding too much value – Trying to modify a proposal slightly
- Passing judgment – Rating others and imposing our standards on them.
- Making destructive comments – Being unnecessarily sarcastic, driven by a need to sound witty and sharp
- Starting with No, but, however (This kind of response seems to imply: “I am right. You are Wrong.”)
- Telling the world how smart we are.
- Speaking when angry
- Negativity
- Withholding information
- Failing to give proper recognition
- Claiming credit that we don’t deserve
- Making excuses
- Clinging to the past
- Playing favorites
- Refusing to express regret
- Not listening
- Failing to express gratitude
- Punishing the messenger
- Passing the buck

The higher we go up the corporate ladder, the more our problems are behavioural. At the top, it is not technical expertise but people skills that make the difference between successful and not so successful managers. Indeed, as people advance in their careers, behavioural changes must clearly be the focus area.

Information and Emotion

Most of the interpersonal flaws of successful people revolve around information and emotion. People have an overwhelming need to tell others something that they don't know even when it is not in their best interest. People have an overwhelming need to display and show off what they know. And they tend to do this excessively.

When managers add value, or pass judgement or make destructive comments, or announce "we already knew that" or explain "why that won't work," they are compulsively sharing information. When they fail to give recognition or refuse to apologize or express gratitude, they are withholding information. Appropriate information is anything that unequivocally helps the other person. But it becomes inappropriate when we go too far or risk hurting someone.

The other habits are centered on emotion. When leaders get angry or play favourites or punish the messenger, they are succumbing to emotion. When interacting with people, leaders have to ask: In this appropriate and how much should I convey?

The Power of Feedback

To change and improve, leaders must make four commitments:

- Let go of the past
- Tell the truth
- Be supportive and helpful
- Pick something to improve yourself.

Feedback is the starting point in the journey of personal change. When asking for feedback, we must not start giving our opinion. We must listen to the feedback carefully and say thank you. Feedback can come in three forms: solicited, unsolicited and observation.

Apologizing is the most powerful, healing gesture human beings can make. An apology sends out a signal of the intention to change. It is an emotional contract between us and the people we care about. We must simply say "I am sorry. I will try to do better in the future." Anything more will complicate things.

After we apologize, we must advertise, i.e., declare in public in which area we want to change. By telling people we are trying to change, explaining how hard we are trying and by asking everyone for ideas, we can get off to a good start.

Bulk of our success in learning from other people is based on how well we listen. We must think before we speak. We must resist the urge to blurt out. The trouble with

listening for most of us is that we are actually busy composing what we are going to say next, even when we pretend to be listening.

The ability to make a person feel that, when we are with that person, he or she is the most important person in the room, is the skill that separates the great from the near great.

The great people display empathy, caring and respect. And by doing so, they gain the trust and respect of others.

Thanking works because it expresses gratitude, one of our most basic emotions. The best thing about thank you is that it creates closure in any potentially explosive discussion. After someone says thank you, we can't argue with them or try to prove them wrong.

After having mastered the art of apologizing, advertising, listening and thanking, we must follow up relentlessly:

- to measure our progress.
- to remind people that we are making an effort to change.
- to erase skepticism among our colleagues.
- to acknowledge that improving is an ongoing process.

Feedback is a great tool for determining what happened in the past. But Goldsmith has an even more powerful tool called Feed Forward.

Feed Forward is all about ideas that we can put into practice in the future. Unlike feedback which deals with mistakes and shortfalls, feed forward focuses on solutions, not problems. Feed forward involves four steps

- Pick the one behaviour that we would like to change
- Describe this objective in any one-on-one dialogue with one person we know.
- Ask that person for two suggestions that will lead to a positive change in selected behaviours
- After listening carefully to the suggestions, say "Thank you".

Feed forward is a more promising tool than feedback. People do not take feed forward as personally as feedback. When we receive feed forward, we tend to listen better. For all that we need to do is focus on hearing. Feed forward makes us "shut up and listen."

Conclusion

Goldsmith lays down the following rules for personal change management:

- Rule 1* : Not all problems can be cured by behavioural changes.
- Rule 2* : Pick the right thing to change.
- Rule 3* : Don't delude yourself about what you really must change.
- Rule 4* : Don't hide from the truth you need to hear.
- Rule 5* : There is no ideal behaviour.
- Rule 6* : If you measure it, you can achieve it.
- Rule 7* : Monetize the result, create a solution.
- Rule 8* : The best time to change is now.