

Coaching According to Marshall: How Dr. Goldsmith Helps Leaders Excel at the Top



Leadership Development by Design

Point of View

Authored by Craig Perrin



Only One Marshall

Marshall Goldsmith is a singular phenomenon in the world of executive coaching. His clients comprise a who's who of top global leaders, and their endorsements are nothing short of glowing. A few examples:

"Marshall is the best at what he does, bar none."

—Vijay Govindarajan, professor and director, Center for Global Leadership, Tuck School, Dartmouth

"I have had the great fortune of working with Marshall for several years. He has helped me in so many ways."

—Jim Yong Kim, 12th president of the World Bank

"Marshall has taught me the importance of making a positive difference in every aspect of my life."

—David Kronberg, CEO, Express

"You can't teach an old dog new tricks ... without Marshall Goldsmith's help."

—Deanna Mulligan, CEO, Guardian Life (Fortune 50 Most Powerful Women in Business)

"Marshall has this seemingly effortless way of guiding people to what really matters."

—Sandy Ogg, recent operating partner, Blackstone Group

"Marshall is a dynamo. He helps people get better and better and better."

—Mark Tercek, president and CEO, The Nature Conservancy

"Marshall's teaching reminds us of how personal growth and change are a never-ending journey."

—John Hammergren, chairman and CEO, McKesson

"Marshall has helped me personally to improve as a leader."

—David Pyott, former CEO, Allergan

"Marshall is the coach's coach."

—Alan Hassenfeld, former chairman and CEO, Hasbro

But here's the issue: There's only one Marshall Goldsmith, and his core approach involves one-on-one dialogue with a single leader, at most ten per year. How can the rest of us benefit from his trademark coaching? Goldsmith himself addresses that need in at least two ways: with his many books (including two New York Times best sellers, *What Got You Here Won't Get You There* and *Triggers*) and with his worldwide speaking tours. It's through these channels that he reaches hundreds of thousands—perhaps millions—of people, helping them apply insights distilled from his decades of executive coaching.

To give leaders an even deeper experience of his way of coaching, AchieveForum has partnered with Goldsmith to develop a state-of-the-art learning solution: "High-Performance Leadership: Applying Insights from Marshall Goldsmith™." In every way possible, this program does what Goldsmith does: Helps successful people address their own behavioral challenges in order to improve their performance as leaders.

This paper outlines key lessons from Goldsmith's long history of executive coaching, which participants explore and apply long after AchieveForum's immersive workshop.

Twenty Leadership Derailers

Mid-level and senior leaders, those who have risen through the ranks, by definition are successful people. Goldsmith's goal is to build on that success by helping these leaders make changes and by sticking with them to take their leadership to the next level, however they may define that step.

All successful leaders have attributes that helped them achieve a list of accomplishments. But as leaders move to higher levels of organizational life, many of their peers share those same attributes. Everyone is functionally skilled. Everyone is smart. Everyone is up to date on the technical aspects of the job.

As leaders become more successful, mastering the more subtle attributes help them achieve greater success. The fact is, the higher they rise, the more their opportunities for growth become behavioral. Goldsmith's coaching experience has shown that as leaders advance in their careers, altering their own behavior is often the only significant change they can make.

For that reason it's critical to face up to something that leaders almost never discuss: the dark side of success.

Everyone talks about the fruits of success; few talk about its challenges. Goldsmith describes his coaching clients as “mega-successful people,” so he has seen the impact of leadership on a grand scale. That impact, he says, is not always pretty. *In What Got You Here Won't Get You There*, he explores 20 self-limiting behaviors—derailers—that can stall the further progress of highly successful leaders:

We'll touch on one of these derailers below.

1. Winning too much
2. Adding too much value
3. Passing judgment
4. Making destructive comments
5. Starting with “no,” “but,” or “however”
6. Telling the world how smart you are
7. Speaking when angry
8. Negativity or “Let me explain why that won't work”
9. Withholding information
10. Failing to give proper recognition
11. Claiming credit you don't deserve
12. Making excuses
13. Clinging to the past
14. Playing favorites
15. Refusing to express regret
16. Not listening
17. Failing to express gratitude
18. Punishing the messenger
19. Passing the buck
20. An excessive need to be “me”

During an interview with the Harvard Business Review, Goldsmith was asked, “What is the number one problem of the people you've worked with over the years?” His response:

Winning too much! Successful leaders love winning in every context! Is it meaningful? Win. Is it critical? Win. Is it trivial? Win. Is it not worth it? Win anyway! Imagine a leader has a hard day at work. She goes home. Her husband or partner says: “I had a hard day!” and she replies, “You had a hard day? Do you have any idea what I had to put up with?” Most successful leaders are so competitive that they have to prove they're more stressed out than the people they live with!



Why is it so important for smart, successful people to win in every situation? Goldsmith observes that the lower leaders are in the organization, the more important it is to be the winner. But the higher they go, the more dysfunctional it is to be the winner. “For great achievers, it's all about ‘me.’ For great leaders, it's all about others,” he says. Because of the profound difference between “I win” and “they win,” it's incredibly challenging to transition from great achiever to great leader.

Every leader can find one or more of the 20 derailers in his or her behavioral repertoire. The question then becomes: “What do I do about it?”

FeedForward

Goldsmith loves the process he calls “FeedForward.” Once leaders identify their derailers, the FeedForward process can be a positive, upbeat way to help themselves and others improve performance. FeedForward is the essence of leadership development, according to Goldsmith. It's a practice that serves leaders well both inside and outside the workplace.

While FeedForward is almost too simple to dignify with a name, some of the simplest ideas are also the most effective. And, since FeedForward is easy to practice, leaders have little excuse not to try it.

Giving feedback, a well-known skill in the workplace, is historical—what someone did, didn't do, could have done, and so on. While this is useful information, no one can change the past.

The FeedForward Process



That's why Rule #1 of FeedForward is: It's not about the past. FeedForward is about what a leader can do in the future, about letting others know what they'd like to accomplish and asking for ideas about how to do it. It's about saying to someone, “I want to get better at ...” and expanding a personal pool of possibilities with others' ideas. “If feedback is past tense,” Goldsmith says, “FeedForward is future perfect.”

FeedForward overcomes the two biggest obstacles that leaders face with negative feedback: successful people in dominant positions don't want to hear it, and their subordinates rarely want to give it. FeedForward shrinks discussion to the intimate dimensions of two human beings.

Goldsmith teaches FeedForward to CEOs and other executives around the world, and they often find it an organization- and life-changing technique. But as simple as it sounds, FeedForward invites a common, human reaction, which leads to Rule #2: Leaders cannot judge or critique the ideas they receive.

The quickest way to shut down others is to evaluate or judge ideas they offer. Because the goal of FeedForward is new ideas, leaders can't say, "Good idea," "Bad idea," "I already knew that," "That will never work," or anything else that carries the freight of judgment. According to Goldsmith:

FeedForward works when you just shut up, listen, and take notes. And what do you say in return? "Thank you!" Treat the idea as a gift. If you give me something, should I say, "Bad gift! I don't like your stupid gift"? No, I should say, "Thank you!" If you want the gift, use it. If you don't want the gift, put it in a closet. If you already have the gift, rewrap it and give it to a neighbor. Who cares?"

When leaders respond to FeedForward with a simple "Thank you," amazing things are possible—for their organizations, their colleagues, and their own performance as leaders.

Six Classic Delusions

Why don't people become the leaders they truly want to be? Why don't they change the behaviors they know diminish their impact? According to Goldsmith, several self-delusions are powerful forces working against a leader's desire to change.



1. Dream of the Future:

A leader might think, "Things are chaotic right now, but in a month or so, all this will settle down. Then I'll get organized and focus on what really matters." In fact, today's conditions are very likely the norm, not the exception.



2. The Planner Bias:

The person who makes the plan is not the person who executes the plan. The planner wants to stay more engaged in meetings. The doer replies to e-mails on a smartphone. Positive behavioral change won't occur before the planner and the doer become one.



3. The Understanding-Doing Gap:

A huge gap separates what we know from what we do. Even if we understand the impact of our negative behaviors, that understanding has no practical value without daily effort to change behaviors that we've accepted in ourselves for years.



4. It Won't Take That Long or Be That Hard:

This delusion rationalizes a failure to make needed changes. For leaders or anyone else, changing ingrained habits or abandoning comfortable behaviors always takes longer and is always more difficult than they expect.



5. The High Probability of Low-Probability Distractions:

Even if a million low-probability distractions are possible, the chance of any one occurring is small. But the chance that *something* will happen is almost certain. There will always be a crisis, even if we can't predict which one.



6. Today Is a Special Day:

"I want to share more information with my peers," a leader might think, "but today is special. Sharing this data could hurt my bargaining position." In fact, most of us can find something special about almost any day to avoid making needed behavioral change.

Behavioral issues can drag on for years, because people cling to these and other delusions that sidetrack an effort to change. Once leaders are aware of their self-delusions, they're more likely to say, "Look, I need some help," making them much more likely to improve.

Six Daily Questions

"What gets measured gets done" applies equally to business matters and behavioral change. Goldsmith attests to this truth on a personal level. He tells us he pays a woman named Kate to call him every day and listen to the answers to questions he's prepared for himself. It may sound silly, he says, but working with a colleague is one of the most effective ways to make change happen. He calls this process the Daily Questions.

Did I do my best to...



Marshall distinguishes between passive questions (did I or did I not make a desired change) and active questions (did I do my best to make progress toward a desired change).

Passive questions might include:

- Did I set clear goals for the day?
- Did I achieve the goals I set?
- Did I avoid making destructive comments to colleagues?

The problem with passive questions is they focus on what the world needs to do to make a positive difference for the leader. They encourage leaders to blame the environment or other people for their own inability to achieve their goals. Passive questions also give rise to misguided actions—lashing out at colleagues, for example—and their unintended consequences.

Active questions, on the other hand, focus leaders on what they can do to make a positive difference for themselves and others. Goldsmith recommends six active questions for everyone:

- Did I do my best to set clear goals today?
- Did I do my best to make progress toward my goals today?
- Did I do my best to find meaning today?
- Did I do my best to be happy today?
- Did I do my best to build positive relationships today?
- Did I do my best to be fully engaged today?

Leaders may use Goldsmith's six questions or create their own questions by following the format "Did I do my best to ..." and targeting their most important behavioral challenges. To implement the Daily Questions process, leaders create a spreadsheet:

- In the first column, they write questions about what is most important to them. Questions could involve work, friends, family, health, or whatever they want to achieve.
- They make sure that each question can be answered by "yes" or "no."
- They create columns for "yes" and "no" responses. Every day, they assign each question a zero for "no" and a 1 for "yes."

While the process is simple, the results can be extraordinary. Goldsmith warns that after a week of tracking, "Results might not be as pretty as that corporate values plaque on the wall. That's because life is incredibly easy to talk. Life is incredibly difficult to live."

Daily questions—active questions—whether Goldsmith's or a leader's own, work for several reasons:

- Daily questions are what psychologists call a "commitment device." These questions announce a leader's intention and increase personal resolve to change something.
- Daily questions press leaders to address areas where motivation is weak. Without consistent movement in the right direction, leaders have little chance to improve.

- More than anything else, daily questions neutralize the archenemy of behavioral change: impatience. The gap between effort and reward can undermine commitment to change. Daily questions shrink goals into manageable 24-hour chunks.

Overall, the Daily Questions remind leaders that success is the sum of small daily efforts. These questions continue to reinforce the truth that if they make the effort, they will improve. And if they don't improve, they'll know precisely why.

Remembering What We Know

No quick summary can do justice to the sum of Goldsmith's teachings or effect the positive change that he works hard to bring about in his clients.

Comparison to another great teacher may be warranted here. In Plato's dialogue *Meno*, written about 2,500 years ago, Socrates attempts to prove that learning is not simply the acquisition of new information. Instead, learning is the recollection of truths that we already know. Goldsmith's work has that quality: he tells us something, shares a story, cites his research, and we think, "I knew that. It's really important. And I never think about it." Perhaps for this reason his work resonates with a very wide audience.

But resonance is of little value without individual commitment to identify and purge behaviors that can stall or derail a career. Even without working one-on-one with Goldsmith, any leader can gain from his insights and apply his practical techniques. It's a matter of remembering what we already know and doing what we know we should.

About AchieveForum:

AchieveForum delivers leadership solutions that are designed for the customer and are built on more than 85 years of global experience. Our tailored learning solutions are created with purpose and driven by innovation to help organizations effectively execute their business strategies. We provide clients with practical and research-based products and programs that mobilize employees, accelerate business initiative implementation, and improve agility.

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