

Good Advice From Biz Coach Marshall Goldsmith

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In recent years, the corporate self-help book has become a staple of the publishing industry. In the world of big business, books that claim to offer the secret to managerial success are themselves big business, routinely topping the best seller lists and, in turn, anchoring the high-profile careers of executive coaches such as Gary Ranker, Kevin Cashman and Stephen Covey.

Marshall Goldsmith is one of the most successful of corporate America's celebrity coaches--he typically makes upward of a quarter-million dollars for a year or so of work with each individual client--and is also one of the best.

The founder of executive coaching firm Marshall Goldsmith Partners, Goldsmith has worked closely with more than 70 CEOs during his career. The chief executives of Ford Motor, GlaxoSmithKline, Getty Images, the American Heart Association, Allergan and Cessna Aircraft, to name a very few, all sing his praises. *Forbes* has named him one of the five most respected executive coaches. *The Wall Street Journal* ranks him among the top 10 executive educators. Now Goldsmith has assembled a book that distills the wisdom he and his stable of coaches usually dispense in person. Listed at \$23.95, *What Got You Here Won't Get You There: How Successful People Become Even More Successful*, written with Mark Reiter, is a bargain compared to the six-figure cost of receiving Goldsmith's wisdom in person. And, as a poor man's substitute for the real thing, it's a very good deal indeed.

The power of Goldsmith's approach lies in its simplicity. There are no fancy formulas for becoming a better boss, no therapeutic gimmicks, no arcane methods or patented techniques. There are no extended parables about moving cheese or melting icebergs.

In fact, when you peel away all the corporate language in which Goldsmith's advice is necessarily steeped, a remarkable truth is revealed: *What Got You Here Won't Get You There* is not actually a corporate book. It is an etiquette book. More centered on basic interpersonal behavior than refined managerial technique, Goldsmith's primary insight is that good manners is good management.

A tacit companion piece to Stephen Covey's *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, Goldsmith's book is built around the bad habits that keep highly successful people from succeeding even more. Goldsmith notes that at a certain professional level, neither intelligence nor skill accounts for the fact that some people continue to advance while others plateau. What differentiates the one from the other, he observes, has nothing to do with one's abilities, experience and training--and everything to do with behavior. Simply put, Goldsmith explains, successful people often limit themselves with behavioral tics that they don't even know they have. Likewise, successful people tend to assume that the behaviors that got them this far will, in time, get them further still. They are delusional on this last count, failing to realize either that their success has come in spite of their behavioral flaws, or that their behavior is preventing them from realizing their potential, not only at work, but also in life.

Everyone's Bad Habits

Goldsmith's work centers on helping people identify and break the bad habits that are getting in their way. The meat of *What Got You Here Won't Get You There* is his elaborate and revealing discussion of the "20 Habits That Hold You Back From the Top." They are:

1. **Winning too much.** Goldsmith notes that the hypercompetitive need to best others "underlies nearly every other behavioral problem."

2. Adding too much value. This happens when you can't stop yourself from tinkering with your colleagues' or subordinates' already viable ideas. "It is extremely difficult," Goldsmith observes, "for successful people to listen to other people tell them something that they already know without communicating somehow that (a) 'we already knew that' and (b) 'we know a better way.'" The fallacy of this sort of behavior is that, while it may slightly improve an idea, it drastically reduces the other person's commitment to it.

3. Passing judgment. "It's not appropriate to pass judgment when we specifically ask people to voice their opinions ... even if you ask a question and agree with the answer." Goldsmith recommends "hiring" a friend to bill you \$10 for each episode of needless judgment.

4. Making destructive comments. We are all tempted to be snarky or even mean from time to time. But when we feel the urge to criticize, we should realize that gratuitous negative comments can harm our working relationships. "The question is not, 'Is it true?' but rather, 'Is it worth it?'" This is another habit Goldsmith recommends breaking via monetary fines.

5. Starting with "no," "but," or "however." Almost all of us do this, and most of us are totally unaware of it. But Goldsmith says if you watch out for it, "you'll see how people inflict these words on others to gain or consolidate power. You'll also see how intensely people resent it, consciously or not, and how it stifles rather than opens up discussion." This is another habit that may take fines to break.

6. Telling the world how smart you are. "This is another variation on our need to win."

7. Speaking when angry. See No. 4.

8. Negativity, or "let me explain why that won't work." Goldsmith calls this "pure unadulterated negativity under the guise of being helpful."

9. Withholding information. This one is all about power. Goldsmith focuses on ways even the best-intentioned people do this all the time. "We do this when we are too busy to get back to someone with valuable information. We do this when we forget to include someone in our discussions or meetings. We do this when we delegate a task to our subordinates but don't take the time to show them exactly how we want the task done."

10. Failing to give recognition. "This is a sibling of withholding information."

11. Claiming credit we don't deserve. To catch ourselves doing this, Goldsmith recommends listing all the times we mentally congratulate ourselves in a given day, and then reviewing the list to see if we really deserved all the credit we gave ourselves.

12. Making excuses. We do this both bluntly--by blaming our failings on the traffic or the secretary or something else outside ourselves--and subtly--with self-deprecating comments about our inherent tendency to be late, or to procrastinate, or to lose our temper, that send the message, "That's just the way I am."

13. Clinging to the past. "Understanding the past is perfectly admissible if your issue is *accepting the past*. But if your issue is *changing the future*, understanding will not take you there." Goldsmith notes that quite often we dwell on the past because it allows us to blame others for things that have gone wrong in our lives.

14. Playing favorites. This behavior creates suck-ups; rewarding suck-ups creates hollow leaders.

15. Refusing to express regret. "When you say, 'I'm sorry,' you turn people into your allies, even your partners." The first thing Goldsmith teaches his clients is "to apologize--face to face--to every coworker who has agreed to help them get better."

16. **Not listening.** This behavior says, "I don't care about you," "I don't understand you," "You're wrong," "You're stupid," and "You're wasting my time."

17. **Failing to express gratitude.** "Gratitude is not a limited resource, nor is it costly. It is abundant as air. We breathe it in but forget to exhale." Goldsmith advises breaking the habit of failing to say thank you by saying it to as many people as we can, over and over again.

18. **Punishing the messenger.** This habit is a nasty hybrid of 4, 10, 11, 16, 17 and 19, with a strong dose of anger added in.

19. **Passing the buck.** "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."

20. **An excessive need to be "me."** Making a "virtue of our flaws" because they express who we are amounts to misplaced loyalty--and can be "one of the toughest obstacles to making positive long-term change in our behavior."

Goldsmith even includes a bonus bad habit: Goal obsession, or getting so caught up in our drive to achieve that we lose track of why we are working so hard and what really matters in life.

The beauty of Goldsmith's approach lies not just in the simplicity of his insights, but also in the clarity of his advice. Because it is our behavior that holds us back, he argues, we can change our future by changing how we act. The key to a better future likewise comes from learning to listen to what others have to tell us about our behavior. We learn best if the lessons others have for us come not in the form of "feedback"--which focuses on an irrecoverable past, centers on judgment and makes us defensive--but on "feedforward," which is constructively centered on the future, and takes the form of helpful advice about things we have the power to change.

Goldsmith's message is, ultimately, a very straightforward one: The secret to corporate success is that one must be able to work well with others. If this sounds an awful lot like kindergarten criticism, that's because it is. But it's also the stuff of top-level corporate coaching, and for good reason.

Reality television shows centered on professional competitions dramatize the essential truth of Goldsmith's argument. Consider Donald Trump's *The Apprentice*, or any of the other career-oriented shows about getting ahead, such as Bravo's *Top Chef*, *Project Runway*, and *Top Design*. More often than not, these shows demonstrate that what really keeps talented people from moving forward is a fundamental inability to play--or work--nice. Because the gifted people on these shows are so competitive, they won't cooperate with their coworkers. Because they are so full of themselves, they don't listen to their clients. Because they are reluctant to give credit to others and tend to take undue credit for themselves, they alienate potential allies and partners. On episode after episode of show after show, we see otherwise brilliant, innovative, capable professionals failing miserably because they don't listen, they won't share, they fail to say thank you and they refuse to say they are sorry.

That's why these shows, so appealing to individual egos in their promise of professional advancement, devote so much time to challenges that center on teamwork. In framing competition around collaborative ventures, they highlight how self-defeating the need to win can be.

Goldsmith's insights need hardly be confined to the workplace. They work at home, as he himself notes, and can do wonders for family harmony. After all, the reason Goldsmith is able to make a living teaching top executives how not to interrupt and how to say thank you is that so many people never learn these skills at home, as children. If they had, Goldsmith would be out of business. As it stands, Goldsmith has written a leadership manual that could double as a guide to good parenting and marital peace.