Choosing to Change

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In his 2007 book entitled *What Got You Here Won't Get You There*, Marshall Goldsmith writes, "I cannot *make* people change. I can only help them get better at what they *choose* to change."

Goldsmith is a highly esteemed executive coach, serving the most successful leaders of America's largest corporations. After pointing out how he can't change anyone, Goldsmith explains why it doesn't make sense that a successful leader would even want to change.

They've been successful. They've acquired the necessary skills to be recognized as major contributors to their organizations. Most successful leaders rate themselves in the top 20% of their peer group.

They have confidence. They've developed an internal belief that they have the capability to make desirable things happen. Through persistence, creativity, innate intelligence, personality, acquired experience, or some unique combination, they just assume they can guide a set of circumstances in a desired direction.

They are motivated. For many years, strong aspirations have fueled most successful leaders. They not only expect that success is possible, they think it is their just reward. They pursue opportunities with zeal, doing whatever it takes to achieve. Since opportunities abound, successful leaders are often overcommitted. They frequently have more to do than there is time available.

They are devoted. Successful leaders choose to do what they do. They are not successful because someone else pushed them into it. They are highly self-determined. The diligence that is required to stay the course through many obstacles and distractions is huge. Successful leaders are thinking, planning, and reflecting at work, on the way to and from work, and even during their leisure hours.

Successful leaders already see themselves as effective. They really don't want to change. They want others to change. They'd love it if circumstances changed. They want resistant followers to "get with the program." They want compliant followers to show more initiative and creativity. They want their direct reports to join with them in executing the responsibilities of leadership.

As I meet leaders, I seek to understand how satisfied they are with the engagement of people in their organizations. I often ask, "Do you lead leaders? Or do you lead followers?"

The person typically looks at me quizzically, wondering how I could ask such a foolish question. They slowly respond, as if they don't quite understand the question. "Of course, I lead followers."

I continue, "What would your direct reports do differently if they behaved as leaders?" After a brief yet thoughtful pause, I hear, "They would come to me with solutions to problems rather than just bringing me tough issues. They would want to take on more of my responsibilities. They would take more initiative and suggest strategies for productively extending our existing resources."

I then ask, "How would your behaviors be different if you were leading leaders rather than leading followers?" The pause is a bit longer this time. "I would share more information. I would delegate much more. I would probably be more overt in seeking their input on tough decisions we face."

Curious, I ask, "Within the context of your organization, who could change more easily, you or them?"

The response is usually quick. "Oh, I could change very quickly."

I smile, make firm eye contact, and entice, "Well, what are you waiting for?"

I know the answer, of course. Despite the pressures and time demands, they love being responsible leaders. Further, they don't *really* know how to engage and support collaborative leaders.

They do know, however, that the concept is appealing. They wonder, "What can I do to get there?"

Marshall Goldsmith clearly described that *What Got You Here Won't Get You There*. To stimulate and empower your direct reports to lead requires different skills from those that drove you to the top.

Please go back and reread the first paragraph of this article. The truth is that no leader can *make* other people change. However, they *can* help other people improve what *they* want to change.

For years, the leader has achieved results by overlaying his or her agenda on the presumed followers.

What if the leader were to change his or her agenda? What if the agenda became "empowering leaders across the organization"?

The answer would likely be a function of what each of the potential leaders needs as far as skills and opportunity. To know that, the leader would have to listen to, interact with, and discern what motivates those individuals.

The essential message of Goldsmith's book is that continuing to do what delivered you to your current level of responsibility won't instill in others the desire and capability to lead. For that to occur, you will have to change first.

Although possible, modifying lifelong habits is not easy. The return on your investment in making some personal changes, however, could be much greater than continuing to do all the leading by yourself!

What will it take for you to become committed to building future leaders?

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