

# How to Change Your Reputation

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Early in my career, a mentor told me, “You don’t control your reputation. Other people do.”

The question mark on my face stimulated him to continue. “There is a disconnect between the self you think you are and the person others see and experience. You CAN control your actions, but you can’t control your effects. Other people talk about you, and that dialogue becomes your reputation.”

Sometimes, in working with a leader, I share feedback about an annoying habit. The individual is stunned to learn that what he or she intended is so very different from what people experience.

Realizing the detrimental impact, the leader has energy to change the behavior. Sometimes significant work is necessary to replace the former bad habits.

Despite the effort, however, the reputation typically lingers. Frustrated, the individual laments, “What will it take for them to see that I’ve changed?”

Marshall Goldsmith, in his book *What Got You Here Won’t Get You There*, writes, “It’s a lot harder to change people’s perceptions of your behavior than it is to change your behavior.” The following guidance is adapted from pages 136-146.

Changing your reputation takes repetitive humbling efforts over time. You will have to gain the alliance of the very people who were offended or hurt by your past behaviors.

**Apologize.** People don’t forgive those in authority easily. If you’ve genuinely decided to change your former behaviors, go to those you’ve offended and confess your former errors in judgment. Say very simply, “I’m sorry, and I expect to behave differently in the future. Please hold me accountable.”

**Ask.** Hard as it is to believe, asking them “How can I do better?” will support your effort. They’ll likely have suggestions. Listen to them. Most of the time, the counsel will be consistent with what you are considering anyway. Thank them for the advice with a promise to report back on your progress.

**Act.** The same circumstances that you once blew will soon present themselves. Be intentional about controlling your immediate reaction. Do what you’ve decided is the new “right” behavior for you. Be patient with yourself; new behaviors require special thought and deliberate follow-through.

**Advertise.** Don’t expect that people will automatically recognize your new response. Despite our desires to the contrary, we humans stereotype. Most people will presume you acted as you have in the past. You’ll have to raise the profile of your new behaviors. It may feel awkward or embarrassing, but people won’t know of your actual changes unless you let them know.

Be careful at this point. Being blatant or cocky about your new behaviors will set you back. Practice your humility here. It’s a fine balance between letting people know of your progress and seeking additional feedback. Doubling back to the “Ask” stage is usually helpful. Give folks an opportunity to share their observations and offer additional thoughts. (Note: Their behaviors will likely improve too, as they can’t help but examine how they handle similar situations.)

Is all this necessary? No. You can choose to live with your former reputation, letting the proverbial chips fall where they may. Unfortunately, you’ll lose the increased respect you might have gained.

My philosophy is that if you’ve gone to the effort of changing your behavior, put in the little bit of humbling extra work that’s necessary to strengthen your relationships with those you had offended. It will be good for them, good for you, and good for your organization.