

Can I Really Improve by Doing Nothing?

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Yes, it's true! And the more responsibility you hold in the organization, the more it applies.

In his book *What Got You Here Won't Get You There*, Marshall Goldsmith suggests that the more authority you have, the more your problems are behavioral. You'd likely not be in your position of responsibility if you lacked intelligence. Further, it's unlikely you'd be where you are if you lacked functional and technical competence. Your responsibility is to beneficially influence others, yet sometimes what you do has an unintentionally negative effect on people.

Management consultant Peter Drucker said, "We spend a lot of time teaching leaders what to do. We don't spend enough time teaching leaders what to stop. They need to learn what to stop."

Marshall Goldsmith cites twenty behaviors that leaders, especially those with significant responsibility, should stop. (If you are an up-and-coming leader, pay attention. Consider starting good habits now!)

Due to space limitations, I've selected four behaviors where you should consider doing nothing as an option instead of continuing what you have been doing. Remember, what other people experience is often different from what you intend when you act as you do.

Speaking when angry. When you are angry, you are out of control (or very close to it). When you are out of control, it's hard to lead effectively.

If you acquire the reputation of having an uncontrollable temper, people categorize you as unpredictable and dangerous. Their interactions with you will be tainted with excessive caution.

When you become angry, say and do nothing. The first few times, this will feel very awkward. So, excuse yourself for a moment. Step away and think about other productive options available to you in this situation. Consider the potential effects of your behavior had you vented your uncontrolled anger. You'll fare better doing nothing than if you had exploded in the moment.

Punishing the messenger. Disappointing news may be the cause of your anger. But sometimes you express your disappointment to the deliverer, who's merely trying to provide a service.

It's not just yelling. It's also the rolling of your eyes or the snort of irritation when you're told that what you wanted can't be delivered until tomorrow. It's not your assistant's fault, but it's how your assistant interprets your disgust.

Emotional responses well up immediately, so it may be hard to withhold displaying your judgment. However, you'll find that doing nothing (except perhaps saying "thank you" to those who deliver information) will not only enhance your relationships, but help ensure you hear information you need.

Making destructive comments. At times, you may make cutting remarks that have the effect of putting others down (or at least asserting yourself as superior). At the end of the day, you may not recall any such incident. Yet the individuals who were the object of your scorn remember!

It's also damaging when you make destructive comments about a person who is not present. Not only is the incident often reported to that person, you've also taught all the people present that you may potentially speak negatively about them when they aren't around.

If poor performance exists anywhere in your organization, address it directly with that individual. In the presence of others, it's better to do nothing than to make judgmental remarks.

Adding value. When a subordinate offers a suggestion, you say something like, “That’s a great idea. What if you did this, too?” You think you just contributed, and you probably did add to the value of the idea. But what did you do to the person’s energy for executing the proposal?

You unintentionally wrested ownership of the idea from that individual. Because the person now views the idea as yours, you cut the energy for executing it by half or more. That’s not a very smart tradeoff. You’d have been better off not doing anything besides saying, “Thank you!”

I’ve just shared an overview on four of twenty issues that Marshall Goldsmith raises in far more detail in his book. Oh, how difficult it is to be an effective leader!

You don’t control your reputation! Your reputation forms by what other people say about you. However, you are in complete control of your behaviors, and that’s what people talk about!

Sometimes, it’s better to do nothing than to do what has come to feel “natural” to you. Ah, knowing when to do nothing and when to do something is a distinction that comes with experience!

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