

Is Winning Everything?

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I was searching the internet when I happened upon a very interesting article. A Harvard Business Review writer had interviewed Marshall Goldsmith, one of the most esteemed executive coaches in America.

The interviewer observed, “You work with some of the most powerful leaders in American business. What’s the most common behavior problem you’ve found in the executives you’ve worked with?”

Consider a pause right here! Put this article aside for a moment and ponder that question!

Here’s a man who has coached hundreds of executives, confronting many different behavior problems. Out of this wealth of experience, what do you think Goldsmith’s response was to that question? Here it is again: “What’s the most common behavior problem you’ve found in the executives you’ve worked with?”

Would it be a failure to keep promises? Might it be greed? Maybe it’s always wanting to control what’s going on! Perhaps it is taking the workers in the trenches for granted!

Think about in your own experience; what’s the most common experience you’ve had with the people who have served in authority over you? If I were to talk with the people under your influence, what would they say is the most common behavior problem they’ve seen in you?

Marshall Goldsmith said that the most common behavior problem he finds in executives is an obsession with winning. Think about that! Let that concept sink in!

An obsession with winning? Really? Why would that be a problem? Many individuals would find that to be a valuable trait in a leader, wouldn’t they?

Goldsmith explained further: “When the issue is important, naturally we all want to win. But even if it’s trivial, we still want to win! Even if it’s not worth our time, or if it’s to our disadvantage, we often try to win anyway.”

Okay, it’s time for a little self-assessment. Is this a behavior problem for you? (I’ll bet you can quickly think of several others who have this problem! But you can’t control the actions of anyone but you!)

Don’t think this is a characteristic that is limited to highly paid executives! Have you ever played a game of “Chutes and Ladders” with a young child? Timmy or Lizzie counts the number of spaces to the next sliding board, then flicks the spinner. If the dreaded number comes up, it’s not unusual to hear “Oops, I messed up. Let me spin again!”

Why is it that in competitive situations, we are tempted to bend the rules, or maybe even cheat outright? Why is it that we will use our position, authority, personality, possessions (a little bribe, perhaps?), or intellect to get our way? Why? Because we have been scripted that way since birth!

We are compared with other children; he is taller, she is faster, this one started reading at an earlier age, that one is prettier. We experience “grading on the curve” in schools, and we watch competitive sports on television. Peer pressure is just a way of deciding if you are good enough to fit in; if you don’t, “Hey, you’re a LOSER, man!”

Is the desire to win a character flaw unique to executives? Hardly! We find evidence of it at the beginning of humanity. When Adam and Eve tried to win the knowledge of good and evil, they lost their purity and felt shame and guilt. (Genesis 3:8) When Cain, one of their sons, offered sacrifices to God that didn't seem as appreciated as his brother's, his response was jealousy, anger, and revenge. (Genesis 4:8)

Our desire to win is a natural part of who we are as human beings. So what's the problem? Why such a big deal if it's so natural?

An obsession with winning doesn't work very well in relationships. If you lead an organization, it's better to stimulate other good ideas than it is to prove that yours are better.

"The higher up you go," says Goldsmith: "the more you need to make other people winners, and not make it about winning yourself."

If I had been able to interview Goldsmith, I would have asked him to comment on the contrast between competition and collaboration. In my experience, if a leader can model collaborative behaviors and create an environment where cooperation is valued, the organization wins big. And usually, so do all the participants!

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