

Getting From Here to There

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By Marshall Goldsmith

No matter how much you have achieved, to get to the next level you are going to have to get even better.

As an executive educator, my mission is to help successful leaders achieve positive, lasting change in behavior for themselves, their people, and their teams. My personal-coaching clients are either CEOs or executives who have the potential to become CEOs in major organizations. They have already achieved megasuccess – and are fully committed to getting even better. I will share with you the same insights that I share with them.

Learning to Ask

As a board member of the Peter Drucker Foundation for 10 years, I had the privilege of listening to Peter speak on many occasions. One of the reasons that he is quoted so frequently is that he had the gift of distilling meaningful concepts into short phrases. One of my favorite Peter Drucker quotes is, “The leader of the past knew how to tell – the leader of the future will know how to ask.”

My first suggestion for you is simple. Start asking. If you are a leader in today’s rapidly changing world, you are probably managing knowledge workers. Drucker’s definition of “knowledge workers” was employees who know more about what they are doing than their boss does. It is hard to tell people who already know more about their work than we do what to do and how to do it. That’s why we have to ask, listen, and learn from them. We should focus on helping them become more effective as opposed to judging them from our superior vantage point.

Start asking your direct reports, “How can I do a better job of helping you become even more effective?” Asking works. And this isn’t just a theory. Extensive research shows it’s a fact. My partner, Howard Morgan, and I published a study on leadership development involving more than 86,000 respondents from eight major corporations. Our findings are hard to debate.

Lots of Common Sense

Managers who asked their co-workers for suggestions for improvements, listened to these suggestions, learned from the people around them, and consistently followed up to check on progress were seen by their direct reports and colleagues as becoming more effective leaders. Managers who didn’t ask and follow up were not seen as becoming more effective leaders – even though they participated in exactly the same leadership development programs.

In hindsight, these findings are common sense. When people ask us for input, listen to our ideas, try to learn from us, and follow up to check on their progress, our relationship with them almost invariably improves and they become more effective in their dealings with us.

Yet while asking may be common sense, it is far from common practice. My good friend Jim Kouzes (who with Barry Posner co-authored the best-selling book *The Leadership Challenge*), has reviewed ratings from tens of thousands of people who completed questionnaires evaluating the leadership skills of their managers. “Asking for input on how he or she can improve” scores in last place in terms of direct-report satisfaction with managers.

Quit Kidding Yourself

Why don't we ask? Because deep down inside we are afraid of the answers. Let me give you a personal example. I am 57 years old. At my age, one type of input that I should ask for every year comes from my doctor. It is called a physical exam. I managed to successfully avoid asking for this input for seven years. What did I tell myself for seven years? I will get that physical after I begin my "healthy foods" diet. I will get that physical after I get in shape.

Who was I fooling? The doctor? My family? I was only kidding myself. I only changed my mind when I realized that the possible consequences of not asking were scarier than any answer I could get. And I only came to that realization after a close friend who had ignored his health died prematurely as a result.

I realize that asking for input at work isn't a life or death situation, but it can still make a difference. And asking doesn't just work vis-a-vis direct reports; it also works with peers. Get in the habit of asking your peers, "How can I do a better job of working with you?" or "How can my part of the company do a better job of helping your part of the company?"

While almost every company preaches the value of synergy and teamwork, employees seldom want to go first and ask their colleagues across the organization how to actually create it. If you are a manager, have you been asking your direct reports how you can help them become even more effective? Even if you are not a manager, have you been asking your co-workers how you can do a better job of working with them?

If your answer is, "no" or "not very often," get started.

Try asking your co-workers for input. If you have a chance, send me an e-mail at Marshall@MarshallGoldsmith.com and let me know how it goes.

Life is good.

Marshall Goldsmith is a renowned HR consultant, author and leadership expert. Marshall is widely recognized as a foremost authority in helping leaders achieve measurable change in behaviour — for themselves, their people, and their teams. www.marshallgoldsmithlibrary.com/.