

# Helping Successful People Get Even Better

*By Marshall Goldsmith*

(Published in *Business Strategy Review* – London Business School,  
spring 2003)

In my role as an executive coach, I am asked to work with extremely successful leaders who want to get even better. They are key executives in major corporations. They are very intelligent, dedicated and persistent. They are committed to the success of their companies. They have high personal integrity. Most are financially independent. They are not working because they *have to*. They are working because they *want to*. Intellectually, they realize that the leadership behavior that was associated with yesterday's results may not be the behavior that is needed to achieve tomorrow's innovation.

While most of us can easily see the need to change the behavior of *others*, we often have great difficulty in changing ourselves! As we become more successful, it seems even harder to change. As Charles Handy has pointed out, the “paradox of success” occurs because we *need to change* before we *have to change*. However, when things are going well we often feel no reason to change.

I have recently completed a review of research related to the topic of helping successful people change their behavior. Most research on behavioral change has focused on dysfunctional behavior with clear physiological consequences (e.g. alcoholism, drug addiction, eating disorders or smoking). A substantial amount has been written on *why* successful people succeed. Not surprisingly, very little has been written on the unique challenges involved in helping successful people change. The entire concept is somewhat counter-intuitive.

My assumption is that you, the reader, are a successful person. You may not be a key executive in a major corporation. However, I would guess that you are successful by most socio-economic standards. My second assumption is that you are working with other successful people. Many of the people that you work with are knowledge workers. They

know more about what they are doing than you do. In most cases your most valued co-workers are also there because they want to be, not because they have to be. You have the challenge of helping yourself and helping them make the changes that will take your team to the “next level”.

What have I learned about helping people like you and your colleagues change?

In almost all cases, even the most successful leaders can increase their effectiveness by changing certain elements of their behavior. (The same is true for us as spouses, partners, friends, parents and children.) By becoming aware of how we can improve, involving respected colleagues and following-up, we can almost always get better at the behavior we choose as perceived by the people we choose. I have also learned that the key beliefs that can help us succeed can become challenges when it is time for us to change.

#### **Four Key Beliefs of Successful People: Their Implications for Behavioral Change**

There are a variety of reasons why successful people succeed. Some factors can be changed and some cannot. Every person does not have the *potential* to succeed in every activity. For example, a poor athlete may become better through practice. However, physical limitations may prohibit this person’s chance of ever becoming a professional. As Harvard’s Howard Gardner has pointed out, different individuals have different “intelligences” that can dramatically impact their potential in different fields.

My review of research focused on the *beliefs* that tend to differentiate more successful people from their peers (who may have similar potential to achieve). Successful people tend to have four underlying beliefs:

- 1) I choose to succeed.
- 2) I can succeed.
- 3) I will succeed.
- 4) I have succeeded.

Each of these beliefs can be labeled differently (self-determination, self-efficacy, optimism, etc.). Each belief increases our likelihood of achieving success. All of the beliefs are inter-related and positively correlated with each other. Each belief will be discussed in terms of why it generally leads to success and how it can inhibit change.

***I choose to succeed.***

***Successful people believe that they are doing what they choose to do, because they choose to do it.***

Successful people have a high need for self-determination. The more successful a person is, the more likely this is to be true. Successful people have a unique distaste for feeling controlled or manipulated. In my work, I have “made peace” with the fact that I cannot “make” executives change. I can only help them get better at what they choose to change. One of the great challenges of coaching (or teaching or parenting) is to realize that the ultimate motivation for change has to come from the person being coached - not the coach.

Having the belief, “I choose to succeed” does not imply that successful people are selfish. Obviously, many successful people are great team players. It does mean that successful people need to feel a *personal commitment* to what they are doing. They need a sense of ownership. When leaders have a personal commitment to the mission, they will be much more likely to achieve results. They will lead with their hearts as well as their minds. They will also be effective in attracting and developing fellow “believers” who want to get the job done.

“I choose to succeed” is a belief that is highly correlated with achievement. Adding “and I choose to change” can be a very difficult transition.

***Successful people’s personal commitment can make it hard for them to change.***

The more we believe that our behavior is a result of our own choices and commitments, the less likely we are to want to change our behavior. One of the best-researched principles in psychology is called *cognitive dissonance*. The underlying theory is simple. The more we are

**committed to believing that something is true, the less likely we are to be willing to change our beliefs (even in the face of clear evidence that shows we are wrong). Cognitive dissonance works in favor of successful people in most situations. Their commitment encourages them to “stay the course” and to not “give up” when “the going gets tough”. This same principle can work against successful people when they should “change course”.**

**A macro-level example of this phenomenon has occurred in Japan. In the 1980s, Japanese managers were widely praised as role models for leadership behavior. The country’s economic growth was one of the greatest success stories in the history of business. Books were written and “benchmarking trips” were organized so that leaders from around the world could learn from their success. This success had a deep impact on many leaders. Business success went beyond financial results and was transformed into national pride about “Japanese management”. Leaders were not just proud of what they had achieved, they were proud of how they achieved it.**

**Unfortunately, the style that worked in the 1980s did not work in the 1990s. Rapid changes in technology, the economy, the role of manufacturing and the workforce made the “Japanese management” approach far less desirable. It has taken two decades for many leaders in Japan to admit that their previous approach was no longer working. Many leaders “denied the numbers” for years, before accepting the fact that change was needed. The same commitment that had brought a huge success in the 1980s, led to a huge challenge at the turn of the century. The leaders who have had the wisdom and courage to “let go” of the past are the ones who are succeeding in the new Japanese economy.**

***I can succeed.***

***Successful people believe that they have the internal capacity to make desirable things happen.***

**This is the definition of self-efficacy. It is perhaps the most central belief shown to drive individual success. People who believe they can succeed see opportunities where others see threats. This comfort with ambiguity leads people with high self-efficacy to take greater risks and**

achieve greater returns. To put it simply - they try more different things!

Successful people tend to have a high “internal locus of control”. In other words they do not feel like victims of fate. They believe that they have the motivation and ability to change their world. They see success for themselves and others as largely a function of motivation and ability, not luck, random chance or external factors.

(This explains why the state-run lottery has been proven to be a “regressive tax”. People who buy significant numbers of lottery tickets are people who believe that success comes from random chance. These same people tend to be less economically successful.)

There is a very positive (and not surprising) relationship between “need for self-determination” and “internal locus of control”. If people believe that the world is largely out of their control and that they are merely “cogs in the wheel of life”, they will not feel as bad about being controlled or manipulated. (After all, that’s just the “way it is.”) If people feel that they can change their world and make it better, they will find external control and manipulation much more distasteful.

While, the “I can succeed” belief is generally associated with success, it can (when combined with optimism) lead to what is called “superstitious behavior”. This “superstition” can lead to difficulty in changing behavior even when others see this behavior as obviously dysfunctional.

*Successful people often confuse correlation with causality. They often do not realize that they are successful “because of” some behaviors and “in spite of” others.*

Any human (in fact, any animal) will tend to repeat behavior that is followed by positive reinforcement. The more successful people are (by definition), the more positive reinforcement they tend to receive. One of the greatest mistakes of successful people is the assumption, “I am successful. I behave this way. Therefore, I must be successful *because* I behave this way!”

“Superstitious behavior” is merely the confusion of correlation and causality. Many leaders get positive reinforcement for the *results* that

occur. They then assume that their behavior is what helped lead to these results. Just as successful athletes believe in “lucky” numbers or perform “rituals” before a contest, successful business leaders tend to repeat behaviors that are followed by rewards. They may fear that changing *any* behavior will break their “string of success”.

One financial services CEO was viewed as an outstanding leader, but was seen as incredibly weak in the area of providing coaching to his direct reports. (This is fairly common for top executives.) He had developed an elaborate rationalization as to: 1) why coaching “at my level” was not important, 2) why coaching was a waste of his time, 3) how he had “made it this far” without providing coaching, and 4) how *he* had never received much coaching and it obviously did not hurt *his* career!

Fortunately, this executive had some highly respected direct reports who were both courageous and assertive. He decided to honor their wishes and “give coaching a try”. After achieving very positive success, he finally admitted that this had been a personal weakness for years. He realized he had been successful in spite of his lack of coaching, not because of it.

***I will succeed.***

***An unflappable sense of optimism is one of the most important characteristics of successful people.***

Successful people not only believe that they *can* achieve, they believe that they *will* achieve. This belief goes beyond any one task. Successful leaders tend to communicate with an overall sense of self-confidence. In a recent study with Accenture involving over 200 high-potential leaders (from 120 companies around the world), self-confidence ranked as one of the “top 10” elements of effective leadership for leaders in the past, the present and the future.

Successful leaders not only believe that they will achieve, they assume that the people they respect will achieve. As was stated earlier, they see success as a function of people’s motivation and ability. If they believe that their people have the motivation and ability, they communicate this contagious sense of optimism and self-confidence to others.

**Successful people tend to pursue opportunities. If they set a goal, write the goal down and publicly announce the goal, they will tend to do “whatever it takes” to achieve the goal.**

**While this sense of optimism is generally associated with success, it can easily lead to “overload” if it is not controlled.**

*Successful people tend to be extremely busy and face the danger of over-commitment.*

**It can be difficult for an ambitious person, with an “I will succeed attitude, to say “no” to desirable opportunities. As of this writing, the huge majority of executives that I work with feel as busy (or busier) today than they have ever felt in their lives. In North America, this perception was consistent for the last four years of the '90s, a decade which featured one of the longest economic expansions in our history. Most of these executives were not over-committed because they were trying to “save a sinking ship”. They were over-committed because they were “drowning in a sea of opportunity”.**

**Successful people achieve a lot, and they often believe that they can do more than they can. My favorite European “volunteer” client was the Executive Director of one of the world’s leading human services organizations. His mission was to help the world’s most vulnerable people. Unfortunately (for all of us), his business was booming. His biggest challenge as a leader, by far, was avoiding over-commitment. (By the way, this is very common for the top human services leaders.) Without externally imposed discipline, he had a tendency to promise even more than the most dedicated staff could deliver. Unchecked, this “we will succeed” attitude could lead to staff “burn out”, high turnover and ultimately less capability to help those in need.**

**One of my clients recently completed a study of the graduates of their executive development program. As part of the program each graduate was expected to focus on behavioral change. They were all instructed in a simple process to help them achieve this change. At the end of the class over 95% of the participants said that they would follow the steps in the process (in a confidential survey). One year later about 70% followed the process. This group showed huge improvement in**

effectively changing behavior. Approximately 30% did nothing. This group showed no more improvement than a control group.

When asked, “Why didn’t you implement the behavioral change plan that you said you would?” “I was over-committed and just did not get to it!” was by far the most common response.

*I have succeeded.*

*Successful people tend to have a positive interpretation of their past performance.*

High achievers not only believe that they have achieved results; they tend to believe that *they* were instrumental in helping the results get achieved. This tends to be true even if the positive outcomes were caused by external events that they did not control.

In a positive way, successful people are “delusional”. They tend to see their previous history as a validation of who they are and what they have done. This positive interpretation of the past leads to increased optimism towards the future and increases the likelihood of future success.

While the belief, “I have been successful” has many positive benefits; it can cause difficulty when it is time to change behavior.

*Successful people’s positive view of their performance can make it hard to hear disconfirming information from others.*

Successful people consistently over-rate their performance relative to their professional peers. I have personally asked over fifty thousand successful professionals to “rate yourself” relative to your professional peers. Close to 85% of *all* successful professionals rated themselves in the “top 20%” of their peer group (who were, by the way the exercise was defined, statistically as successful as they were). Professions with higher perceived social status (e.g. physicians, pilots, investment bankers) tend to have even higher self-assessments relative to their (equally prestigious) peers.

**My favorite example of this characteristic occurred with a group of medical doctors. I told the group that I had done extensive research, which had proven that exactly half of all MDs had graduated in the bottom half of their medical school class. Two of the doctors insisted that this was impossible!**

**In trying to help successful people change behavior, it is important to help them separate the “message” from the “messenger”.**

**Successful people tend to deny the importance of disconfirming input for three common reasons: 1) the input is being delivered by someone that they do not see as an “equal” in terms of success therefore it “doesn’t count”; 2) they assume that input which is inconsistent with their self-image is “incorrect” and the other person is “confused” or 3) they agree with the input, but assume that the behavior must not be that important since they are successful.**

### **Helping Successful People Change**

**In our work with leaders, my firm focuses on helping successful people achieve a positive, measurable, long-term change in behavior. To measure impact, we have completed “before-and-after” studies with tens of thousands of participants. The steps in the behavioral change process have been developed to work with successful executives. However, these steps can be used to help any successful person change their interpersonal behavior.**

***Have the successful person receive input on important, self-selected behaviors as perceived by important, self-selected raters.***

**It is hard to measure effectiveness in changing behavior unless there is a clear agreement on what desired behavior is. Successful people have a high need for self-determination. Ultimately, the ownership of the behavioral change process will have to come from the people who are changing their behavior, not from an internal or external coach.**

**One reason that successful people tend to deny the validity of behavioral input is that they were not involved in determining the desired behavior for a person in their position. The more they are involved in determining what this desired behavior is, the more likely they are to**

**“buy-in” to the validity of demonstrating this behavior. Successful people are very responsive to help in achieving goals that they have set. They tend to resist changes that make them feel “judged” or “manipulated”.**

**Successful people also have a desire for internal consistency. If leaders publicly state that certain behavior is important, they will be more likely to strive to be a positive role model in demonstrating this behavior.**

**From my experience in developing leadership profiles, I have found that almost all executives will develop a great profile of their “desired” behaviors. In most cases, *understanding* what behaviors are desired will not be their major challenge. Their major challenge will be *demonstrating* these behaviors.**

**An example of the value of involving leaders in developing their own profile occurred with a CEO client several years ago. When he received feedback from his co-workers (on his own behavior), he looked skeptically at one of the lower scoring items and asked, “Who was the person that wanted to include *that* item?” I replied, “You!” He then remembered why he wanted to include the item. He also began to face the fact that the real problem was his own behavior, not the wording of an item.**

**The first reason that people deny the validity of behavioral input is “wrong behaviors”. The second reason is “wrong raters”. If successful people select the raters, they will be much more likely to accept the validity of the ratings. Most executives respect the opinion of *almost all* of their key colleagues. By letting the successful person pick the raters, you can avoid the potential reaction, “Why should a winner like me listen to a loser like him?”**

**One argument against letting the people we coach pick their own raters is that they will pick their “friends” and the input will not be representative. I have not found this to be true for two reasons: 1) Almost all of the executives I have met end up selecting raters that are similar to the group I would select anyway. The only time they do not want to include someone is if the person is about to leave the company or they have a deep disrespect for this person. In my experience, I have**

never had an executive want to exclude more than two raters. 2) When 360° feedback is used for *developmental* purposes, the “items for improvement” that emerge from self-selected raters are quite similar to the items that come from other-selected raters.

Bev Kaye, Ken Shelton and I recently asked over 50 great thought leaders and teachers to describe a time when they learned something that made a key difference in their lives. This led to our book *Learning Journeys*. More than half of the respondents described a situation in which they had received feedback or a challenge from someone that they deeply respected. Interestingly enough most agreed that the same message would not have had much impact if a different person had delivered it. This made us realize that the *source* of feedback and suggestions can be as important as the *content* of the feedback and suggestions. If successful people respect the source of information, they will be much more likely to learn and change.

Successful people will almost always respond constructively to advice and input when they are involved in selecting the behaviors and selecting the advisors. By making the process confidential (not identifying raters), people will tend to focus on what they need to improve, not who did the rating. It is hard to deny the validity of items that we say are important as evaluated by raters that we respect!

*After receiving input, have the person select 1-2 important areas for behavioral improvement.*

I used to suggest that executives pick 1-3 areas for behavioral change. After doing “before-and-after” interviews (one year after receiving input), most executives have let me know that three is too many. Many of the successful people that I meet are too busy now. As was mentioned earlier, a main reason that people do not “stick with” their change plan is over-commitment. They don’t need another “laundry list” of goals. I now suggest that two should be the *maximum* number of behaviors to change. Changing *one* high-leverage behavior (that makes the most impact) can create a very positive difference.

Challenge the people you are coaching to work on *only* the behaviors that can make a real difference. I was asked to review the 360° summary report of one of the world’s most successful high-tech CEOs.

After receiving his confidential feedback, he considered his lowest item (listening) and asked himself, “If I become a better listener, will this make our company a better company? I am busy. Is working to become a better listener the most effective use of my time?” Before he began to work on changing behavior, he “checked it out” with the Board and with people he respected. He then decided that this change was indeed worth his effort. I was greatly impressed with his thoughtfulness and maturity in dealing with this type of information. He had a clear mission and did not want to be distracted by dealing with behavioral change that was not relevant to the achievement of the mission.

If successful people see the connection between their behavioral change goals and their personal goals, they will be much more likely to change. They need to understand the difference between “because of” and “in spite of” behaviors. Some interesting research indicates that *the desire to achieve the skills associated with success is more highly correlated with achievement than the desire for success itself*. If the successful people that you are coaching see the connection between changing behavior, achieving their vision and living their values, they will be much more committed to “do what it takes” to achieve lasting change.

*Have the person involve respected colleagues in the behavioral change process.*

Ongoing involvement from supportive colleagues is almost always associated with positive behavioral change. Colleagues are much more likely to help if they feel that they are respected and that their advice is *requested* (as opposed to *expected*).

In involving key colleagues, we teach successful leaders to have brief conversations with each colleague during which they:

- 1) Thank each colleague for his/her feedback and express gratitude for the positive recognition that was received.
- 2) Let each colleague know the 1-2 areas for improvement that have been selected and why they are important.
- 3) Ask each colleague to help them by providing constructive, future-oriented suggestions that may help the leader achieve positive, measurable change.
- 4) Recruit the respected colleague to provide ongoing supportive coaching to help them improve.

**Findings on the usefulness of this process are very clear. When successful people write down goals, announce these goals to respected colleagues and involve the colleagues in helping them improve (in a supportive way), positive measurable change is much more likely to occur.**

***Teach the successful person's colleagues to be helpful coaches, not cynics, critics or judges.***

**Unlike some forms of achievement (e.g. academic achievement), behavioral change is dependent on an interpersonal *relationship* that involves more than one person. If successful people feel that they are being encouraged and supported by the people around them, they will be much more likely to “stick with it” and achieve positive, long-term behavioral change. If they feel they are being judged or manipulated, they will tend to become hostile to the process and quit trying.**

**Years ago, I had an experience of this “turn off” effect with the CFO of a major computer company. He was perceived as being “aloof” and “arrogant”. He saw himself as introverted and somewhat shy. (It is not uncommon that introverted high-level executives are perceived as arrogant.) One suggestion from employees was that he “get off the top floor” and spend more time with the finance staff. On his first visit to practice “management by walking around”, he was greeted with sarcastic comments like, “What’s the matter, is the air conditioning broken up there?” and “What are *you* doing down here, slumming it?” He found the experience negative and embarrassing. I later discussed this with one of his employees. While the employee thought this was “funny”, he did not realize that he was sabotaging his manager’s efforts to meet *his* own request for behavioral change.**

**In our coaching process, we work not only with the executive; we work with the people around the executive. We do not get paid unless positive, measurable change occurs (after at least one year). The executive does not define whether he or she achieved positive, measurable change; the people around the executive determine it. We help these co-workers help the executive by doing the following:**

- *“Letting go” of the past and focusing on the future.*

Successful people are much more likely to change by envisioning a positive future than by reliving a humiliating past. Proving that a successful person was “wrong” is often a counter-productive waste of time. Successful people respond well to getting ideas and suggestions for the future that are aimed at helping them achieve their goals. The analogy used by racecar drivers is, “Focus on the *road*, not on the *wall!*” The executive should not be expected to do everything that their colleagues suggest. Leadership is not a popularity contest. However, well-intended and constructive suggestions for the future are almost always useful.

- *Being a supportive coach, not a cynic, critic or judge.*

Successful people attribute more validity to the sincere recognition of progress than to the sincere acknowledgement of failure. Behavioral change is almost always “non-linear”. Almost all adults will have “set backs” when attempting to change behavior. Co-workers need to realize that this is a natural part of the process and not “give up” on the executive. We all have a tendency to revert back to behaviors that were correlated with success in the past. The more successful we are, the easier it is to rationalize this return to past behavior. If the executive is encouraged to move beyond set backs and the colleagues do not dwell on these set backs, the odds for long-term change greatly improve. The colleague’s goal should be to help the executive feel like a “winner” as they participate in the process of change.

- *Develop a follow-up process that provides an opportunity for ongoing dialogue on selected behaviors with selected colleagues.*

Our research on follow-up has clearly shown that leaders are much more likely to achieve a positive, measurable change in behavior if they consistently involve selected colleagues (through follow-up dialogues) in the change process. These follow-up dialogues are very focused and need take only a few minutes. They can be done by phone or in-person. In one study (involving 8,000 respondents in a “Fortune 100” corporation), only 18% of all leaders who received 360° input, but did no follow-up, were rated as a “+2 or +3” on increased effectiveness in

one year (on a “-3 to +3” scale). This was no better than a control group who had received no training and no input. On the other hand, 86% of leaders who did consistent (or periodic) follow-up received top ratings on increased effectiveness.

When co-workers are trained to be supportive coaches, the follow-up process provides an ongoing opportunity for constructive suggestions and recognition. It reinforces the individual’s public commitment to change. Ongoing dialogue creates a process in which *both* parties are focused on improving the relationship, not on judging each other.

Mini-surveys can be a simple and efficient way to measure behavioral change. Mini-surveys are usually very short and focus only on the behaviors that have been selected by the person being coached. They are designed so that the raters evaluate behavior that occurs *only* during the coaching period. They focus on the rater’s perception of *improvement*. If the executive agrees upon the desired behaviors for change, selects highly respected co-workers as raters, takes the process seriously and follows-up, positive change will almost always occur. After receiving the mini-survey results the executive thanks the raters, involves them in future change and continues the process. This is almost always a positive experience for the executive and for the co-workers.

In summary, helping successful people change behavior is both an opportunity and a challenge. Our “before-and-after” research has taught us a great lesson – successful people will not change behavior because they go to a course. They will get better because of their own efforts and the efforts of their respected colleagues. By understanding the unique issues involved in helping successful people change, organizations can get a huge return on investment from their development efforts. There is generally a “normal distribution” curve for most types of achievement. The marginal gain for helping a highly successful person move from the “top 5%” to the “top 1%” may be greater (to the organization) than the gain from helping the average performer move from the “top 50%” to the “top 20%.” This is especially true with high-potential leaders who represent one of the greatest sources of value for the organization of the future. While much more research needs to be done on this topic, there is a clear body of knowledge that can help make the best performers even better!