Helping successful people get even better

Marshall Goldsmith

Success may breed success but it can also be dissipated by an inability to make necessary changes in behaviour. But executive coaching – and the help of colleagues – can make it happen. Here’s how.

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

Most of us can easily see the need to change the behaviour of others. This is one of the great challenges in leadership. We wonder why it is so difficult for them to change. Yet we often have difficulty in changing even small aspects of our own behaviour. 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 feel no reason to change”.

I have recently completed a review of research related to the topic of helping successful people change their behaviour. Most research on behavioural change has focused on dysfunctional behaviour with clear physiological consequences (for example, 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 to 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. I am also going to assume that many of the people you work with are knowledge workers. In most cases your most valued co-workers are also there because they want to be there, not because they have to be. You frequently 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 behaviour. (The same is true for us as spouses, partners, friends, parents and children.) By becoming aware of how we can improve, we can almost always get better. I have also learned that the key beliefs that can help us succeed can become challenges when it is time to change.

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Four key beliefs of successful people

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 his or her chance of ever becoming a professional. As 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 individuals hold 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:

- I choose to succeed
- I can succeed
- I will succeed
- I have succeeded

Each of these beliefs can be labelled differently (self-determination, self-efficacy, optimism and so on). But each increases the 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 accepted 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 realise 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; many successful people are great team players. But 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 a 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 behaviour is a result of our own choices and commitments, the less likely we are to want to change our behaviour. One of the best-researched principles in psychology is 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 favour of successful people in most situations. Their commitment encourages them to stay the course and to not give up when the going gets tough. But this same principle can work against successful people when they should change course.

Japan is a macro-level example of this phenomenon. In the 1980s Japanese managers were widely praised as role models for leadership behaviour. The country’s economic growth was one of the greatest success stories in business history. Books were written and benchmarking trips organised so that leaders from around the world could learn from Japan’s success. This attainment 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 a decade for many leaders in Japan to admit that their previous approach was no longer working. Many leaders denied it 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 mammoth challenge by 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 this motivation and ability, not luck, random chance or external factors. (This explains why a state-run lottery is in effect a “regressive” tax.)

There is a very positive (and not surprising) relationship between the 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 behaviour”. This superstition can lead to difficulty in changing behaviour even when others see this behaviour as obviously dysfunctional.

Successful people often confuse correlation with causality. They often do not realise that they are successful because of some behaviours and in spite of others.

Any human (in fact, any animal) will tend to repeat behaviour that is followed by positive reinforcement.

The more successful people are, 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 behaviour is merely the confusion of correlation and causality. Many leaders get positive reinforcement for the results that occur. They then assume that their behaviour 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 behaviours that are followed by rewards. They may fear that changing any behaviour will break their string of success.

One financial services chief executive was viewed as an outstanding leader but was also seen as incredibly weak in providing coaching to his direct reports. (This is fairly common for top executives.) He had developed an elaborate rationalisation as to why coaching “at my level” was not important, was a waste of his time, how he had “made it this far” without providing coaching, and how he had never received much coaching himself and it obviously had not hurt his career.

Fortunately, this executive had some highly respected direct reports who were both courageous and assertive. He decided to accept 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 realised 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 the consultancy firm 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 also achieve. As 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 opportunities. 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 1990s, a decade that featured one of the longest economic expansions in 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 favourite European client was the executive director of one of the world’s leading human services organisations. His mission was to help the world’s most vulnerable people. Unfortunately (for all of us), his business was booming. His biggest challenge, by far, as a leader was avoiding over-commitment. Without externally imposed discipline, he had a tendency to promise more than even 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 graduates of her company’s executive development programme. As part of the programme each graduate was expected to focus on behavioural change. They were all instructed in a simple process to help them achieve this change. At the end of the programme over 95 per cent of the participants said (in a confidential survey) that they would follow the steps in the process. One year later about 70 per cent had done so. This group showed huge improvement in effectively changing behaviour. Approximately 30 per cent did nothing. This group showed no more improvement than a control group.

When they were asked why they hadn’t implemented the behavioural change as promised, by far the most common response was “I was over-committed and just did not get to it”.

**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.

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

Successful people consistently overrate their performance relative to their professional peers. I have personally asked over 10,000 successful professionals to rate themselves relative to their professional peers. Eighty per cent to 85 per cent of all successful professionals rated themselves in the “top 20 per cent” 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 (for example, doctors, pilots, investment bankers) tend to have even higher self-assessments relative to their (equally prestigious) peers.

A classic example of this characteristic occurred with a group of medical doctors. I told the group that I had done extensive research that had proved that exactly half of all medical doctors had graduated in the bottom half of their medical school class. Two of the doctors in the group insisted that this was impossible.

In trying to help successful people change, 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: the input is being delivered by someone that they do not see as an “equal” in terms of success and therefore it “doesn’t count”; they assume that input that is inconsistent with their self-image is “incorrect” and the other person is “confused”; or they agree with the input but assume that the behaviour 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 behaviour.

To measure impact, we have completed before-and-after studies with tens of thousands of participants. The steps in the behavioural change process have been developed to work with successful business executives. However, these steps can be used to help any successful person change their interpersonal behaviour.

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

One reason that successful people tend to deny the validity of behavioural input is that they were not involved in determining the desired behaviour for a person in their position. The more they are involved in determining what this desired behaviour is, the more likely they are to buy in to the validity of demonstrating this behaviour. 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 behaviour is important, they will be more likely to strive to be a positive role model in demonstrating that behaviour.

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

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

The first reason that people deny the validity of behavioural input is “wrong behaviours”. 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 a potential reaction like “why should a winner like me listen to a loser like him?”

One argument against letting people pick their own raters is that they will choose their friends and the input will not be representative. I have not found this to be true for two reasons.

First, 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 a person. In my experience, I have never had an executive want to exclude more than two raters.

Second, 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 asked over 50 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 realise that the source of feedback and suggestions can be as important as their content. 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 behaviours and selecting the advisors. 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 one to two important areas for behavioural improvement.

I used to suggest that executives pick one to three areas for behavioural change. After doing before-and-after interviews (one year after receiving input), most executives have let me know that three is too many. As 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 behaviours to change. Changing one high-leverage (that makes the most impact) behaviour can create a very positive difference.

You also need to challenge the people you are coaching to work on only those behaviours that can make a real difference.

I was asked to review the 360° summary report of one of the world's most successful “new economy” chief executives. 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 his behaviour, 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 behavioural change that was not relevant to the achievement of that mission.

If successful people see the connection between their behavioural 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” behaviours. 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 behaviour, achieving their vision and living their values, they will be much more committed to doing what it takes to achieve lasting change.

Have the person involve respected colleagues in the behavioural change process

Ongoing involvement from supportive colleagues is almost always associated with positive behavioural 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:

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

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

Teach the successful person’s colleagues to be helpful coaches not critics or judges

Unlike some forms of achievement (for example, academic achievement), behavioural 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 behavioural change. If they feel they are being judged or manipulated, they will tend to become hostile to the process and stop trying.

Years ago I had an experience of this “turn off” effect with the chief financial officer 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 for introverted high-level executives to be 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, 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. The employee thought this was “funny” and did not realise that he was sabotaging his manager’s efforts to meet the employee’s own request for behavioural change.

In our coaching process, we work not only with the executive but with the people around him or her. 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 that.

We help these co-workers help the executive by asking them to do the following:

Let go of the past and focus 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 racing 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.

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Be a supportive coach, not a cynic
Successful people attribute more validity to the sincere recognition of progress than to the sincere acknowledgement of failure. Behavioural change is almost always “non-linear”. Almost all adults will have set backs when attempting to change behaviour. Co-workers need to realise 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 behaviours that were correlated with success in the past. The more successful we are, the easier it is to rationalise this return to past behaviour.

If the executive is encouraged to move beyond set backs and colleagues do not dwell on them, the odds for long-term change greatly improve. The colleagues’ 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
Our research on follow-up has clearly shown that leaders are much more likely to achieve a positive, measurable change in behaviour 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 either by phone or in-person.

In one study (involving 8,000 respondents in a Fortune 100 corporation), only 18 per cent 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 per cent 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 behavioural change. Mini-surveys are usually very short and focus only on the behaviours that have been selected by the person being coached. They are designed so that the raters evaluate behaviour that occurs only during the coaching period. They focus on the rater’s perception of improvement. If the executive agrees upon the desired behaviours 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. In our experience this is almost always a positive experience for the executive and for the co-workers.

In summary, helping successful people change behaviour is both an opportunity and a challenge. Our before-and-after research has taught us a great lesson – successful people will not change behaviour because they go on a course. They will get better because of their own efforts and the efforts of respected colleagues. By understanding the unique issues involved in helping successful people change, organisations can get a huge return on investment from their development efforts.

The marginal gain for helping a highly successful person move from the top five per cent to the top one per cent may be greater (to the organisation) than the gain from helping the average performer move from the top 50 per cent to the top 20 per cent. This is especially true with high-potential leaders who represent one of the greatest sources of value for the organisation of the future.

California-based Marshall Goldsmith is one of the world’s best-known executive coaches. Ranked among the top 10 executive educators by the Wall Street Journal, he has coached over 50 major CEOs. His books include Coaching for Leadership and The Leader of the Future. Goldsmith is partnering with Hewitt Associates, the global HR outsourcing and consulting firm, to jointly provide executive coaching services.

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