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Marshall Goldsmith is one of the world's foremost authorities on helping leaders achieve positive, measurable change in behavior for themselves, their people, and their teams. He is executive director of the Financial Times Knowledge-Leadership Dialogue, a cofounder of Keilty, Goldsmith & Company, and a member of the board of the Peter Drucker Foundation. In 2000, Marshall was listed in Forbes magazine as one of the top five executive coaches and in Human Resources magazine as one of the world's leading HR consultants. He also has been ranked in the Wall Street Journal as one of the top ten executive educators. Marshall has coauthored or coedited nine books, including The Leader of the Future (a Business Week "Top 15" best-seller), The Community of the Future (ranked #1 in its field by Amazon.com), and the newly released Coaching for Leadership.

The Person in the Mirror

As a Ph.D. student at UCLA in the early 1970s, I had a self-image of being “hip” and “cool.” I believed I was intensely involved in deep human understanding, self-actualization, and the uncovering of profound wisdom. Early in my Ph.D. program, I was one of thirteen students in a class led by a wise teacher, Bob Tannenbaum. Bob had come up with the term *sensitivity training*, had published the most widely distributed article to appear in the *Harvard Business Review*, and was a full professor. He was a very important person in our department at UCLA. He is also a great guy.

In Bob's class, we were encouraged to discuss anything we wanted to discuss. I began by talking about people in Los Angeles. For three full weeks I gave monologues about how “screwed up” people in Los Angeles were. “They wear these \$78 sequined blue jeans and drive gold Rolls Royces; they are plastic and materialistic; all they care about is impressing others; and they really do not understand what is deep and important in life.” (It was easy for me to be an expert on the people of Los Angeles. I had, after all, grown up in a small town in Kentucky.)

One day, after listening to me babble for three weeks, Bob looked at me quizzically and asked, “Marshall, who are you talking to?”

“I am speaking to the group,” I answered.

“Who in the group are you talking to?”

“Well, I am talking to everybody,” I replied, not quite knowing where he was headed with this line of questioning.

“I don't know if you realize this,” Bob said, “but each time you have spoken, you have looked at only one person. You have addressed your comments toward only one person. And you seem interested in the opinion of only one person. Who is that person?”

“That is interesting. Let me think about it,” I replied. Then (after careful consideration) I said, “You?”

He said, “That’s right, me. There are twelve other people in this room. Why don’t you seem interested in any of them?”

Now that I had dug myself into a hole, I decided to dig even deeper. I said, “You know, Dr. Tannenbaum, I think you can understand the true significance of what I am saying. I think you can truly understand how ‘screwed up’ it is to try to run around and impress people all the time. I believe you have a deep understanding of what is really important in life.”

Bob looked at me and said, “Marshall, is there any chance that for the last three weeks all you have been trying to do is impress me?”

I was amazed at Bob’s obvious lack of insight! “Not at all!” I declared. “I don’t think you have understood one thing I have said! I have been explaining to you how screwed up it is to try to impress other people. I think you have totally missed my point, and frankly, I am a little disappointed in your lack of understanding!”

He looked at me, scratched his beard, and concluded, “No. I think I understand.”

I looked around and saw twelve people scratching their faces and thinking, “Yes. We understand.”

Suddenly, I had a deep dislike for Dr. Tannenbaum. I devoted a lot of energy to figuring out his psychological problems and understanding why he was confused. But after six months, it finally dawned on me that the person with the issue wasn’t him. It wasn’t even the people in Los Angeles. The person with the real issue was me. I finally looked in the mirror and said, “You know, old Dr. Tannenbaum was exactly right.”

Two of the great lessons I began to understand from this experience were (1) that it is much easier to see our problems in others than it is to see them in ourselves, and (2) even though we may be able to deny our problems to ourselves, they may be very obvious to the people who are observing us.

There is almost always a discrepancy between the self we think we are and the self the rest of the world sees in us. The lesson I learned (and strive in my professional work to help others understand) is that often the rest of the world has a more accurate perspective than we do. If we can stop, listen, and think about what others see in us, we have a great opportunity. We can compare the self that we want to be with the self we are presenting to the rest of the world. We can then begin to make the real changes needed to align our stated values with our actual behavior.

I have told this story at least three hundred times, and I have thought about it more frequently than I have told it. Often when I become self-righteous, preachy, holier than thou, or angry about some perceived injustice, I eventually realize that the issue is not with the other person or people. The issue is usually in me.

Today I work mostly with executives in large organizations. I help them develop a profile of desired leadership behavior. Then I provide them with confidential feedback, which allows them to compare their behavior (as perceived by others) with their profile of desired behavior. I try to help them deal with this feedback in a positive way, to learn from it, and (eventually) to become a good role model for the desired leadership behavior in their organization. Although I am supposed to be a “coach,” very little of my coaching involves “sharing my wisdom.” Most of it involves helping my clients learn from the people around

them. In this way, the lesson I learned from Bob Tannenbaum has not only helped me in my personal life; it has helped shape the course of my professional life.

QUESTIONS

- *Can you see in yourself what others see in you, or do you see in others what you don't want to see in yourself?*
- *What really bothers you about the "rest of the world"?*
- *Is there a chance that some of your concerns may be a reflection of your problems, not theirs?*
- *How can honest feedback from others help you in aligning your values with your behavior?*

This chapter appear in the book:

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