

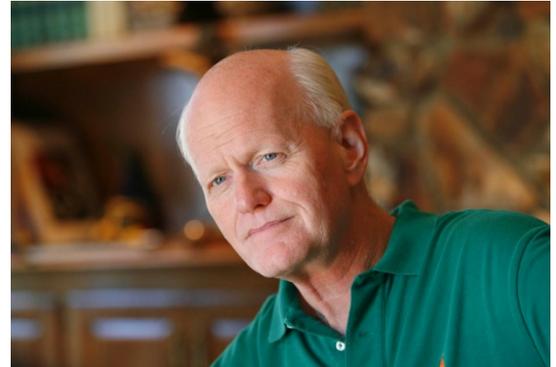


Learn How To 'Do'

Our greatest challenge as leaders is not understanding the practice of leadership; it is practicing our understanding of leadership.

The consistent and ongoing misassumption of almost all leadership development programs is "if they understand, they will do." This assumption is not valid in any aspect of our lives, and leadership development is no exception.

If the "understanding equals doing" equation were accurate, everyone who understood that they should go on a healthy diet and work out would be in great shape. Almost everyone in America knows what we are supposed to do. Over the years our knowledge of the importance of diet and exercise has gone up dramatically. Why is it then that Americans weigh more than we have ever weighed in our history? Why is obesity considered the "new epidemic"? We all know what it takes to get in shape, we just don't do it. I live in California. I think it was Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger who wisely noted, "Nobody ever got muscles by watching me lift the weights!"



Companies have invested millions of dollars in developing profiles that describe the behavior of their desired leader of the future. I have probably reviewed a hundred of these profiles. I have helped write about 70 of them. Most make a lot of sense. They usually suggest that leaders should have high integrity, focus on customer service, deliver quality products, develop great people and encourage innovation. Some of these profiles are organized around values and some around competencies. Many say basically the same thing - but in a language that fits their corporation's culture. Most corporations know what their leaders should do and do a fine job of communicating this message.

Leaders who are not working for a company that describes desired leadership behavior can still read books on the topic. One of my books, *Global Leadership: The Next Generation* (with Cathy Greenberg, Alastair Robertson and Maya Hu-Chan), describes research findings (sponsored by Accenture) involving over 200 specially selected high-potential leaders from 120 global organizations. This book, like others of its type, paints a clear picture of desired behavior for future leaders. Kouzes and Posner, Zenger and Folkman, the Center for Creative Leadership, Personnel Decisions Incorporated and several others have written books on this topic. My guess is that any leader whose behavior even approximates the behavior that is described in any of these books will be viewed as an outstanding role model. Anyone who reads these books can understand what to do.

I recently had the privilege of working with the CEO and over 2,000 of the top leaders in one of the world's most admired companies. The company had developed a well-thought-out profile of desired leadership behaviors. Leaders in the company received 360-degree feedback to help them understand how their actual behavior was seen as matching this desired profile. All were trained to respond to co-workers on their feedback using a very simple follow-up process. At the end of the training, leaders were asked in a confidential survey if they were going to do what was taught in the program. Almost 100 percent said that they understood and saw the value of what was being taught. They almost all vowed that they were going to follow up with their co-workers, work on their "areas for improvement" and get better.



A year later, the same leaders and their co-workers were surveyed to see what happened. Many of the leaders (about two-thirds of the total group) actually did what they committed to do and, as a group, they were seen as becoming much more effective. Some leaders, however, did absolutely nothing as a result of receiving feedback and attending training, and as a group they were seen as improving no more than can be attributed to random chance. The training that they attended produced no more change than staying home and watching sitcoms.

Howard Morgan and I published an article entitled "Leadership Is a Contact Sport" that involved over 86,000 respondents from eight major corporations. Just like the 2,000 leaders mentioned above, every leader in our study received feedback. They were all given some very simple instructions on how to follow up with co-workers and how to become more effective. Our results showed that there was no correlation between understanding and doing. The leaders who did absolutely nothing understood what to do as well as the leaders who actually executed on their improvement plans. Amazingly, the leaders who did nothing rated the value of the programs just as highly as the leaders who executed. The "did nothings" not only understood what to do - they saw the value in doing it.

Over the years, I have had the opportunity to interview hundreds of leaders in the "did nothing" category. I always ask them why they didn't do what they said they would do after their leadership development programs. Their answers never have anything to do with ethics or integrity. In spite of some terrible recent examples of ethics violations, most leaders that I meet are highly ethical people. They are not liars or phonies. They truly believed that they should change and that this was the "right thing to do". Their answers never have anything to do with a lack of intelligence or understanding. These are very bright people. They not only saw the value in what they committed to do, they understood what to do and how to do it.

Our research paints a compelling picture. People don't get better because they go to "programs". They don't get better because they listen to motivational speeches. They only get better if they pick something important to improve, involve the people around them and follow up in a disciplined way. Long-term change in leadership effectiveness takes time, follow-up and discipline - not just understanding.

One of the most annoying aspects of the American culture is our love for slogans, buzzwords and the "program of the year". I asked one of my clients, "How much money has your company wasted on the program of the year?" He laughed and said, "Tens of millions of dollars." I then asked, "How much money has your company spent on disciplined follow-up to ensure that leaders actually do what they are being taught?" He sadly noted, "Tens of dollars".

Why didn't these leaders do what they said they were going to do? Why in life don't we often do what we know we should do?

The answer to this question can be described by a dream. I have had this dream for years. I am going to predict that you have had this dream. You too may have had this dream for years. (You may be a little skeptical right now, thinking "This guy doesn't know my dreams!" We'll see how accurate I am.) This dream is going to describe why we often don't do what we know we should. The dream sounds like this:

"You know, I am incredibly busy right now. In fact, I feel about as busy today as I have ever felt in my life. To be honest, I feel over-committed. To be real honest - given what is going on at work and at home, sometimes my life seems out of control. But our company is working on some very unique and special challenges right now. I think that the worst of this will be over in four or five months. After that, I think that I will take a couple of weeks and begin working on my leadership development. I think that I will get organized, get caught up and spend some time with my family. I may even start my "healthy lifestyle" program. After that everything will be different. Then it won't be crazy anymore!"



Have you ever had a dream that vaguely resembles this dream? Most of the leaders that I work with have. Many have been having it on a daily basis for years.

I have learned a hard lesson trying to help real leaders change real behavior in the real world. There is no "two or three weeks". Sanity does not prevail. Look at the trend line! There is an outside chance that tomorrow is going to be even crazier than today.

Why don't we do what we know we should? We are waiting to get to it. We are waiting until life isn't crazy. We are waiting for a time that will probably never happen.

Here is my suggestion to leaders: Ask yourself a very hard question - as a leader - what am I willing to change now? Just change that. Keep it simple. Develop a disciplined plan. Stick to it! Realize that there is a huge gap between "I understood it" and "I did it!" Get help if you need it. Don't be embarrassed. If you could have done it without assistance - you probably would have done it by now!

Here is my suggestion to corporations: Realize that there is a huge gap between "understanding" and "doing". Don't flood your leaders with too much information. Realize how busy they are. Don't confuse "simple" with "easy". Don't count on programs, slogans or motivational speeches to produce real change. Don't kid yourself by thinking that you can "check the box" after a couple of days of training and that your people will be better leaders. Be prepared to give leaders the help they need with ongoing follow-up, support and encouragement. It's not easy - but it's worth the effort.

Dr. Marshall Goldsmith was recently named winner of the Thinkers50 Leadership Award (sponsored by Harvard Business Review), and ranks #6 in Global Guru's top 30 Leadership Professionals in 2013. Dr. Goldsmith's Ph.D. is from UCLA's Anderson School of Management where he was recognized as one of 100 distinguished graduates in the 75 year history of the School (in 2010). He has been asked to teach in the executive education programs at Dartmouth, Michigan, MIT, Wharton, Oxford and Cambridge Universities. Marshall is the co-author or editor of 32 books, including the bestseller 'What Got You Here Won't Get You There'. He is one of a select few executive advisors who have been asked to work with more than 120 major CEOs and their management teams.