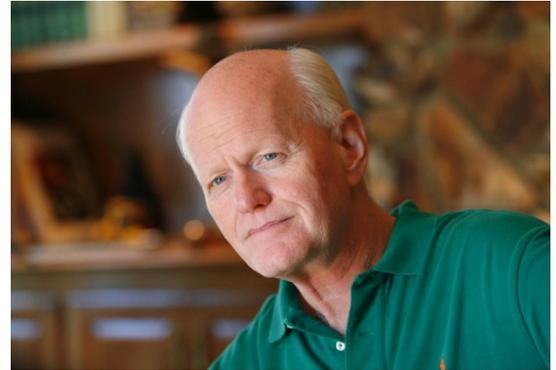




Nice or Honest, Why Choose?

I have helped more than 70 major organizations identify and profile desired leadership behaviors. Almost every company I work with wants to encourage collaborative leadership and has in its inventory of desired behavior such things as "effectively builds teamwork," "develops positive partner relationships with co-workers," or "creates synergy with other parts of our business."

One specific item that I encourage my clients to include in their leadership profiles is "avoids destructive comments about other people or groups." This is a bad and all too common habit!



While we all support the theory of building partnerships across our organizations, our day-to-day behavior can create the opposite result. Let's face it; we have all stabbed our co-workers in the back in front of other employees at one time or another. And when we bash our colleagues, what message are we sending about our commitment to be their partners?

Failing Your Own Test

I don't want to sound as if I'm preaching at you. I also get feedback - and like all of my clients, I also try to get better. My best feedback comes from my customers. I was certainly not ranked as one of the "top 10 executive educators," "top five coaches," or "most credible thought leaders" by my staff or my family!

(In fact, after reading about one of my awards, my daughter smiled and said: "Daddy, I want to go into your field." "Kelly," I replied, "that makes me proud. Why do you want to go into my field?" She laughed and said: "The standards are low!")

I used to manage a small consulting business. I will never forget the first time I received 360-degree feedback from my own staff. My score on "avoids destructive comments" was in the eighth percentile - meaning that 92% of the world was doing a better job than I. I failed a test that I wrote!

I immediately had one-on-one conversations with each member of our staff. I said: "I feel good about much of my feedback. Here's one thing that I want to do better - quit making destructive comments. If you ever hear me make another one about a person or group, I'll pay you \$10 each time you bring it to my attention. I'm going to break this bad habit!"

We're All Human

Then I launched into an emotional pep talk, encouraging them to be honest and diligent in "helping" me. As it turns out, my pep talk wasn't needed. They tricked me into making nasty comments to pick up the 10 bucks.

By noon of day one I had already lost \$50, locked myself in the office, and refused to speak to anyone for the rest of the day. The next day I lost \$30. The third day: \$10.



Do I still make unnecessary, destructive comments on occasion? Of course, I'm still human. But I know in this area I am better than I used to be. The score I earned on that item the last time I received 360-degree feedback was 4.8 out of a possible 5!

I had moved up to the 96th percentile. What does this prove? Pay a few thousand dollars in fines - and you can get better!

In my executive education courses, my clients are "fined" \$2 for each destructive comment they make. These can either be comments made directly to another person, or comments made behind someone's back. They also may be unnecessary, negative comments about the company, other divisions, or functions (e.g., lawyers, accountants, HR, IT).

The money is all donated to a charity of their choice. How much money have we raised for good causes playing this little game with my clients over the years? More than \$300,000!

Think Before You Speak

When I suggest that my clients should avoid destructive comments, I am not saying that they should avoid all negative comments. Companies, teams, and individuals have to get honest feedback so that they can know what to improve and begin to create positive change.

A simple test can help you determine whether the comment that you are about to make is merely negative or is unnecessarily destructive.

Before speaking ask yourself:

- Will this comment help our customers?
- Will this comment help our company?
- Will this comment help the person I am talking to?
- Will this comment help the person I am talking about?

If the answers are "no," "no," "no," and "no," here's a strategy that doesn't require a PhD to implement: Keep quiet!

We often confuse honesty with disclosure. We can be totally honest without engaging in destructive disclosure. For example, I may think that my co-worker is a complete idiot. There is no moral, legal, or ethical reason that I have to share this opinion with the rest of the world.

If you want to stop destructive comments in your own organization, institute the \$2 rule. The amount of money you collect won't hurt people very much, negative behavior will be reduced, your office will be more positive, and you may be helping people who need the money more than you do.

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.