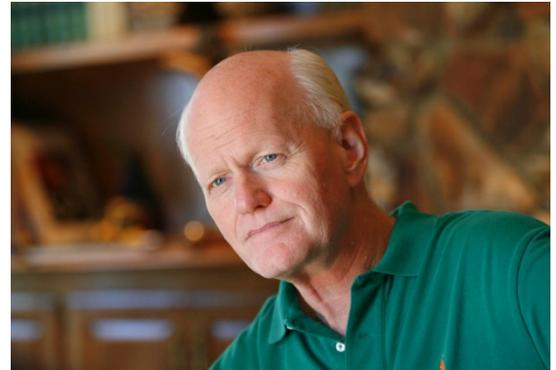




The Power of Perception

Quick question: Amid all your list-making and organizing and planning your next moves, when was the last time you sat down and thought about your reputation? The likely truth is that unless you're a celebrity, politician, or other kind of public figure—people whose reputations are constantly being assessed, elevated, and diminished in the media—you've never codified your reputation at work.

- * Never written down what you thought it might be, or what you want it to be.
- * Never asked your colleagues for feedback about it.
- * Never even thought about what you must do to establish it.



At best, you may harbor a vague notion that you have a reputation for “being a nice person” or “being good at my job” or “being willing to help out.” But that’s about it. You’ve never dug deeper into the specific personality traits, skills, behaviors, and accomplishments that help form a reputation.

What is reputation? Reputation is what you get when you add up who you are and what you’ve done and toss the combined sum out into the world to see how people respond. Your reputation is people’s recognition—or rejection—of your identity and achievement. Sometimes you’ll agree with the world’s opinion; sometimes you won’t. Either way, you cannot create your reputation by yourself—the rest of the world, by definition, always has something to say about it.

And while we’re fairly clear-eyed about what we think of other people, we may live in the dark when it comes to what they think of us. We may have no clue about what other people are saying about us behind our back and, therefore, no opportunity to correct falsehoods (if they are inaccurate) or mend our ways (if they are correct). We don’t have enough information to do much about reputation, so we ignore it.

When I begin coaching an executive, the first thing I do is conduct a 360-degree feedback assessment of his or her behavior on the job; in some cases, this is the first time the executive has ever been “reviewed” by people below rather than above him or her. I interview fifteen to twenty colleagues and direct reports, then tally up the comments and report what I’ve found. In a few cases, much of what I uncover is breaking news to the executive. He or she will express complete surprise and then utter some variation on, “Really, people think I’m (fill in the blank)?”

These are smart, successful, motivated individuals. They’ve reached their incredible position in life by being attuned to what other people think of them—and thoughtfully adjusting their behavior accordingly. And yet my peer assessment of their reputation is often an eye-opener for them.

Would You Rather Be Smart or Effective?

It’s taken me a while to figure out why so many of us neglect our reputation. It’s not that we don’t care. We care a lot. It’s that we confuse our need to consider ourselves to be smart with our need to be considered effective by the world. The two are not the same thing, and one often overwhelms the other.



One of the most pernicious impulses among successful people is our overwhelming need to prove how smart we are. It's drilled into us from our earliest school days, when we're graded and ranked and bell-curved in a winnowing process that separates the average from the smart from the super-smart. It continues through high school and college and graduate school, where it's even more deeply ingrained because the competition to be smart suddenly carries lifelong consequences. And we continue this competition into the workplace, although our "report cards" now come in the form of promotions, paychecks, and praise rather than test-score percentiles. We want our bosses and colleagues to admire our brainpower.

But the need to be the smartest person in the room can lead to incredibly stupid behavior. It leads to dumb arguments, in which we fight to prove that we're right and someone else is wrong. It's the reason we feel the need to tell someone who shares valuable information with us that we "already knew that." It's the reason we fight hard to defend an opinion or decision that has worn out its welcome. It's the reason bosses can't resist improving a subordinate's idea by saying, "That's great, but it would be even better if you . . ." Frankly, it's one of the reasons so many of us are such poor listeners: We're so invested in presenting ourselves as smart that we believe we don't need to hear everything that people tell us; we're smart enough to tune out people and still succeed.

Not everyone behaves like this. There are people who are willing to sacrifice the fleeting buzz of needing to be smart for the more valuable feeling of being effective—of delivering on time, of bringing out the best in others, of finding the simplest route to a solution.

Let's say you're a design engineer, developing a product for your company. Engineers constantly face the choice of doing something brilliant or doing something practical. In this case, you can propose either an elegant solution that will be rejected by the company (because of costs or production difficulties or whatever) or a solution that is 20 percent worse but will be accepted. Which would you prefer? Do you want to be known as someone who builds elegant objects that never get made or as someone who provides practical solutions that always "ship out the door"? There's no correct answer. Some people won't compromise their talent or principles to be more effective; some people will.

What I'd like to suggest here is that we shouldn't think of these decisions in terms of compromise. That suggests an inauthentic choice, something that's not true to our beliefs and goals. Instead, I'd like to posit that these choices are easier to understand and make if we have a clearer idea of the reputation we're trying to build for ourselves.

Personally, I'm in a position in my career where I can do a lot to shape my reputation. I write books, articles, and blog posts and give speeches and interviews, all of which allow me to deliver a thoughtful message about the reputation I want for myself. I'm also clear about what I want my reputation to be: I want people to think of me as someone who's extremely effective in helping successful leaders achieve positive, lasting change in behavior. I don't want to be just good in my field. I want a reputation as one of the best. And to be considered one of the best, I don't have a high margin for error.

Partly because of my reputational goal, many decisions in my career boil down to: Will it make me look smarter or make me become more effective? I always vote for effective. I'm not looking to be known as the smartest person with the most sophisticated theory about helping people change. I want to be known as the guy who is effective at helping people change.

For example, many years ago, I was asked to work one-on-one with a senior executive at one of the world's largest and most admired companies. I had worked at fairly big companies before, but this was far and away the biggest, most prestigious assignment of my life. The people with whom I'd be working would position me on a whole new level. The fact that this benchmark company called me instead of another executive coach was not only flattering but proof that I was nearing my target reputation. The executive in question was a smart,



motivated, high-performing, deliver-the-numbers, arrogant know-it-all who had neared the top of the corporate pyramid despite serious interpersonal flaws. He was in charge of the company's most profitable division, which should have made him a corporate MVP and first in line to succeed the CEO. My job was to see if I could smooth out some of his rough behavioral edges.

I conducted my usual 360-degree feedback interviews with the executive's colleagues. My explanation of the results was met with a brusque brush-off, suggesting that no matter what I said, this man would never accept that he needed to change. He just didn't care.

I had a choice to make: Do I accept the assignment or walk away? A part of me—the part that wanted the top people at the company to think I was smart enough to run with their crowd—was tempted to take it on. Success would be a long shot. But hey, I told myself, no risk, no reward.

Another part of me—the part keeping an eye on my reputational objectives—knew that I would be jumping into an empty grave if I worked with this impossible executive. If I couldn't actually help him change, I would fail the assignment, which in turn would brand me as ineffective. In the end, I walked away, but not before telling the CEO my reasons. The result: While dropping the job might have implied that I wasn't up to the task, it turned out to be a good move—the company later dismissed the executive, and the CEO praised me for having the courage to walk away from a potentially lucrative assignment.

Smart or effective? When you have to choose and your reputation is on the line, opting for the latter may actually cement the former. Remember this smart/effective distinction the next time you face a career decision. Many of us, as I mentioned, are clueless about our reputations, so it makes sense that even fewer of us think about the long-term reputational impact when we make a decision. We're thinking short-term needs instead: Does my choice "take it to the next step," or make me look proactive, or get my boss off my back, or bring in some quick cash, or make me look like I'm outrunning my peers? These are all variations on the same question: "Am I smart enough?" It's not the same question as, "Does this choice add or detract from my long-term reputation?"

Expectations and Reputations

Most of us separate character and reputation. We define our character as "who we really are" and our reputation as "who other people think we really are." In situations where their assessment differs from our own, we generally characterize the assessment of others as "wrong." It takes courage to realize that, in some cases, other people's view of us may be just as accurate—or even more so—than our view of ourselves.

Of course, we don't always have a good sense of what people really think of us. A negative opinion is usually left unexpressed rather than shared (under the polite theory that "If you can't say something nice, say nothing at all"), leaving us ignorant of the many ways that misinformation or misinterpretation may be shaping our reputation.

For one thing, in forming an opinion of you, people usually bring their own agenda to any interpretation of your actions. If you do something that affects them in a negative way—however proper, well-intentioned, or for the greater good it may actually be—that negative impact will color their opinion of your action. Have you ever tried to help someone, only to have your efforts end up being resented or misinterpreted by the person you were trying to help? For example, you invite a colleague to join your group on a project, thinking that he or she would like to be included in an opportunity to work on something different, whereas the object of your kind attention thinks you're piling on the work or scheming to get him or her to do your job. What you intended as genuine helpfulness comes off as meddling.



If we could accurately predict how people will respond to what we do, we'd never have to employ the apologetic phrase, "I was only trying to help."

Our actions are also distorted by people's acceptance of the conventional wisdom about us—through what they've heard or casually observed firsthand. It is the filter through which they interpret our actions. This isn't necessarily bad; it can work to our advantage: If you're in any public forum where you are perceived as the most authoritative voice on a particular subject, you will be accorded a greater level of deference by others in the room, no matter how inane or misguided your comments—at least initially. Continue the trend by stringing together several silly comments in a row, and even the least knowledgeable person in the room will begin to question your perceived authority.

The flip side is also true. If people have heard bad things about you, they'll be looking for signs of bad behavior. Even when you fail to sink to their low expectations, they may put a negative spin on behavior that they would otherwise excuse in someone with a more positive reputation. If people have heard that you are a difficult person, that's the prism through which they'll interpret your actions. You may be in a meeting thinking you're engaging in a healthy—and much-needed—debate about a decision, while all the others at the meeting, already predisposed to seeing you as difficult, are indulgently nodding their heads while thinking, What a jerk.

These nuances of interpersonal dynamics—mostly other people's preconceptions—help mold our reputation. Taken in small doses, their impact is limited. If we allow them to accumulate unchecked over time—through our ignorance or neglect—they inevitably become a "reality" with which we have to deal.

That's when we must confront the million-dollar question: Can you form or change your reputation?

The short answer is yes. But it's not easy, and it takes time. The first thing to know is that your reputation is rarely if ever formed by a one-time catastrophic event—people can be extremely forgiving. Screw up once in a major way, and people will take notice, but they often won't let that single incident permanently brand you. I remember a friend in the entertainment business who made an enormous bet, involving many millions of his company's dollars, on a project with a TV star. The project was a failure, and the company's entire investment went down the drain. The thinking among all who knew him was that our friend was doomed: His reputation would be forever tarnished.

It didn't turn out that way. At first, people felt sorry for him. Then nostalgia took over; people started to joke about his epic bomb in the same way that families a year or two later will laugh about a disastrous vacation that was anything but funny at the time. Finally, and weirdly, the whole episode actually gave his reputation a favorable bounce. Within the company, he came to be seen as a daring swashbuckler, someone unafraid to swing for the fences while others chipped away for singles and doubles. He was a fellow who was comfortable "playing in the big leagues." Before long, his catastrophe was perceived as a big bet that simply didn't work out.

Paradoxically, people can be less generous after a one-time triumphal event. If you do something terrific early on—in your career or in a new job—people will certainly credit that to your emerging reputation. But they'll be watching to see whether you can repeat the success. Anything less, and they'll think your success was a fluke. This is how one-hit-wonder reputations are formed.

Repeat After Me

Reputations are formed by a sequence of actions that resemble one another. When other people see a pattern of resemblance, that's when they start forming your reputation.



For example, one day you're asked to make a presentation in a meeting. Speaking in public may be many adults' greatest fear, but you manage to avoid either choking or crumbling. You give a great presentation, magically emerging as someone who can stand up in front of people and be commanding, knowledgeable, and articulate. Everyone in attendance is impressed. They never knew this side of you. That said, this is not the moment when your reputation as a great public speaker gels into shape. But a seed has been sown in people's minds. If you repeat the performance another time, and another, and another, your reputation as an effective speaker will solidify.

Negative reputations form in the same unhurried, incremental way. Let's say you're a fresh-faced manager looking at your first big crisis at work. You can react with poise or panic, clarity or confusion, aggressiveness or passivity. It's your call. In this instance, you do not distinguish yourself as a leader. You fumble the moment, and your group takes the hit. Fortunately for you, this is not the moment when your reputation as someone who can't handle pressure is formed. It's too soon to tell. But again, the seed has been sown—and people are watching, waiting for a repeat performance. Only when you demonstrate your ineffectiveness in another crisis, and then another, will your reputation for wilting at crunch time take shape.

What's really puzzling about this is how little thought many of us give to the power of repeat behavior in our own actions. We're always on the lookout for it in others, scanning for patterns in how they respond to us, the way a poker player looks for an opponent's "tell." If you're a salesman, it's knowing, after many dealings with a customer, that the customer always buys if you drop a hint that someone else is interested. If you're a manager, it's knowing, after repeated crying jags, that your assistant responds to your sarcasm with tears. If you're an assistant, it's knowing, after repeated blowups, not to bring a problem to the boss until he's had his morning coffee.

We're shrewd, alert, and sometimes insightful in the mini-reputations we assign to the people with whom we work. But we rarely apply that insightfulness to ourselves. The customer who pants like a craving dog when he hears that others are interested in the same deal probably doesn't know that about himself; if he did, he'd change his ways. Likewise, the boss who needs coffee to settle down at the start of day is probably in the dark about how his assistant is "managing" him.

Because we don't keep track of our repeat behavior, we never see the patterns that others see. These are the patterns that shape our reputation—and yet we're largely oblivious to them and, in turn, to our reputation. You may feel an impulse to challenge this contention. But when was the last time you conducted your own behavioral review—and literally kept track of your "repeat performances," the good and the bad? If you had six occasions in the year when you came up with a universally acknowledged great idea in a meeting, have you analyzed those six moments to measure their impact on your reputation as a great "idea person"? Do you even know if you have that reputation, although you privately believe you deserve it?

In my experience, few if any of us do this sort of thing. We're too busy moving forward, dealing with immediate challenges, to look back for the patterns that are so obvious to others.

How to Change Your Reputation

Reputation—yours or anyone else's—doesn't happen overnight. In the same way that one event can't form your reputation, one corrective gesture can't reform it either. You need a sequence of consistent, similar actions to begin the rebuilding process.



It's doable, but it requires personal insight and, most of all, discipline. When I first start working one-on-one with clients to change their behavior, they want instant results. If their issue is, say, making sarcastic comments, they assume they can stop the sarcasm overnight and their colleagues will instantly applaud them for it. It doesn't work that way. People's negative impression was formed over a period of months or years, and they'll need to see a long period of non-sarcastic behavior to undo that impression.

If you're known as a sarcastic boss, you must bite your tongue for a long time for people to recognize the change and start accepting the new you. You can go for weeks without deviating, but just one encounter with the old sarcastic you and people may forget you've changed at all. It's the same with any reputation. You have to be consistent in how you present yourself—to the point where you don't mind being guilty of repeating yourself. If you abandon that consistency, people will get confused. The reputation you're trying to form will get muddled by conflicting evidence and eventually lose its sharp focus.

No one knows this better than politicians. When they're campaigning for office, their primary goal is to settle on a message and then repeat it ad nauseam. That's what political strategists mean when they praise their candidate for "staying on message." It's the only way office-seekers can establish what they stand for and, by extension, their reputation. Reluctant as I am to cite any political tactic as an example of model behavior, staying on message is one that I've come to respect. I tell my clients it's the easiest, most effective way to seize control of the impression you're trying to make—and maintain it. Take a look around you at work: Who are the colleagues who have clear, positive reputations, and what are they doing to achieve this enviable position? You won't have to probe too deeply to see that consistency in their message is often their primary virtue. Without that consistency, we'd never see the pattern they're creating. And more than likely, that consistency is not accidental—it's something they chose and articulated to themselves.

I used to marvel at an executive who rose to the highest ranks of his company and did it all within the hours of 8:30 to 5:30. Bill didn't work late, and he didn't work weekends. He decided early on in his corporate career that his family was more important to him than work, so he set a personal goal of always being home by dinnertime—which meant that, despite being as ambitious as the next person, he had to get all his work done during regular hours. And yet his results were excellent, and he was liked and admired by everyone with whom he worked, which went some way toward explaining his ascent at the company.

But it didn't explain everything.

"How did you do it?" I asked him.

"I always knew that my family came first," Bill said, "so I vowed that I wouldn't be one of those people who love trading office gossip or need to demonstrate that they're in the loop about all the company intrigue. If I could cut all that out of my workday—the small talk on the phone, the water-cooler distractions, the beer after work, the impromptu sessions to complain about senior management—I figured I'd save a lot of time each day. I could do my job and get home at a normal hour. And I pretty much kept my vow.

"It's funny, though," he continued. "At first I was the company oddball. I was capable and got good performance reviews. People saw me as no fun, no frills, a late-model Ward Cleaver. The only thing missing was the cardigan. But I was consistent and steady, and over time, that sober persona became my signature—and a virtue. People started to think of me as someone who could be counted on like clockwork. I was 'dependable,' which is a reputation I'll take anytime. Because I didn't traffic in office small talk, my bosses grew to consider me as someone who could be trusted with confidential information—which is ironic: The less interested I was in other people's secrets, the more comfortable they were in sharing them with me. Eventually, my serious demeanor made people think I had leadership potential. People were willing to follow someone steady and dependable like me. I suppose they thought I wouldn't let them down. And once people are willing to follow you, the sky's the limit. All because I wanted to clock out at 5:30."



Bill may be being modest. Whatever qualities others have responded to, consistency clearly has been key to his success. His repeat behavior gave people an unambiguous way of viewing him—which is what happens when you're disciplined about your objectives and follow through in your actions. After a while, people lock into one way of interpreting your actions—because you have locked into it by choice—and your reputation falls neatly into place.

Another interesting fact about Bill: Even though his kids are now grown and out of the house and he doesn't always have to leave work by 5:30, he still sticks to his schedule. That's the best thing about creating a reputation for yourself: Do it right the first time, and you may never have to change your ways.

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.