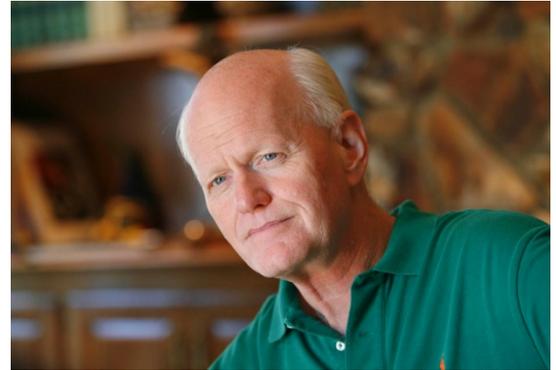




## When I Get Better At

In my younger days, as a newly minted Ph.D. and organizational behavior consultant, I would challenge my clients to pick one to three areas for personal improvement. As I grew more experienced, I began to realize that three was too many. The problem was not a lack of motivation or intelligence - these were brilliant, dedicated leaders. The problem was that they were just too busy. They all had profitability goals, growth goals, quality goals, customer goals, health goals and so on. Multiply each of the types of goal by three and you quickly reach a number of goals that is not only impossible to achieve, but also impossible to even remember.



What I teach my clients now is to pick the one area for personal change that will make the biggest difference, and to focus on that. If we pick the right area for change, increased effectiveness will almost always influence other aspects of our relationships with people. For example, more effective listening will lead to higher scores in all kinds of related behaviors, such as building teamwork, increasing customer satisfaction and treating people with respect.

Nathaniel Branden, Ph.D., a psychologist and author of about 20 books, has a wonderful exercise that helps answer the question, "Is this change really worth it?" Between five and eight people sit around a table, and each person selects one behavior to change. One person begins the exercise by saying, "When I get better at \_\_\_\_" and completes the sentence by mentioning one benefit that will accompany this change in behavior. For example, one person may say, "When I get better at being open to differing opinions, I will hear more great ideas."

After everyone has had a chance to discuss their specific behavior and the first benefit, the cycle begins again. Now each person mentions a second benefit that may result from changing the same behavior, then a third benefit, continuing until the facilitator ends the exercise (usually after six to eight rounds). Finally, participants discuss what they have learned and their reactions to the exercise.

When Branden first explained this exercise to me, I was polite, but skeptical. I couldn't see the value of simply repeating the potential benefits of change over and over. My skepticism quickly went away when I saw the process work.

Branden and I were facilitators at a large conference that included many well-known leaders from corporations, nonprofits, the government and the military. The man sitting next to me was a high-ranking military leader and directly responsible for thousands of troops. He also was highly judgmental and seemed to be proud of it. For example, when conference participants discussed the topic of character, he said, "I respect people with real character and organizations, like mine, with real values. I don't believe in this situational crap!"

When we began Branden's exercise, he said, "When I become less judgmental \_\_\_\_" as his behavior to change. I was amused and thought that this would be interesting. True to my expectations, the first time around he coughed and grunted a sarcastic comment. The second time around he was even more cynical. Then something changed. When he described the potential benefit the third time around, he wasn't being sarcastic anymore. Several rounds later, he had tears in his eyes, and said, "When I become less judgmental, maybe my children will speak to me again."



Since that day I have conducted this exercise with several thousand people. Many start with benefits that are "corporately correct," such as "This change will help my company make more money," and end with benefits that are more human, such as "This change will make me a better person." I will never forget one hard-driving executive who chose "When I get better at letting go." His first benefit was that his direct reports would take more responsibility, and his final benefit was that he would probably live to celebrate his 60th birthday.

As the exercise progresses, one of two realizations tend to dawn upon participants. Some see the deeper meaning and become convinced that it is worth it. My advice to these people is simple: Get started on changing now.

Others begin to feel like they are just "making up" benefits to complete the exercise. It doesn't seem real. My advice to them is equally simple: Don't waste your time. If you feel you have to make up reasons why you should change, your heart won't be in the process, and you ultimately won't put in the effort required.

Now, it's your turn to pick a behavior that you may want to change. Complete the sentence, "When I get better at \_\_\_\_" over and over again. Listen closely as you recite potential benefits. You will be amazed at how quickly you can determine if this change is worth it for you.

*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.*