

**Marshall Goldsmith's *What Got you Here, Won't Get you There*, Hyperion 2007**  
**Review by Mitch McCrimmon, February 2007**

The real greatness of this book is its laser beam focus on what blocks executives and their organizations from being as successful as they could be. The issue is simply stated: the drive to win that propels executives up the ladder can prevent them from learning to win through others. Their excessive need to be right, to win every debate, alienates the only people who can help them make the leap to greater heights.

Being too competitive keeps executives from listening and giving others the credit they deserve. They shoot the messenger and fail to thank people or apologize. They argue needlessly just to add their 2 cents or have the last word. Goldsmith shows how 20 such bad habits can be changed through the rigorous application of a number of practical steps. The key is measurement, before, after and during the change effort. Goldsmith is a relentless counter of behaviors when he is striving to eliminate his own bad habits and he pushes his clients to do the same. Stakeholders are enlisted to provide 360 feedback before and after. Goldsmith is not interested in how you got to where you are or any personal problems you might have. He drives his clients to focus on the future and forget the past. Accountability is a core value for him and he pushes his clients to follow suit.

Goldsmith gives himself an A+ in gratitude for being so religious in remembering to thank people. But he should also give himself an A+ in wisdom, generosity and integrity. Wisdom leaps out at you from every page of this fascinating book. Giving away his trade secrets like this is more than ample evidence of his generosity. Integrity is shown in the numerous places where he admits his own errors and weaknesses.

Goldsmith demonstrates his commitment to accountability when he attacks the bad habit of making excuses but also when he encourages clients to advertise their development plans to all of their important others. Recognizing that changing bad habits is not easy, he is adamant that no improvement will occur without a public declaration of intent, continual measurement and follow up. Goldsmith doesn't explicitly refer to behavior modification principles but his approach is clearly behavioral. He recognizes that people are motivated by self-interest, what gets rewarded, what they want and value. Hence, he encourages clients to set up rewards and punishments to help them stay focused on their personal development plan.

I found this book inspiring and helpful on both a personal and professional basis. I can see that I could be a better listener and better at thanking others for their contributions. So, I must say: Thank you Marshall for this insightful book! It deserves to be widely read.

One of the bad habits Goldsmith rightly attacks is the need to add your 2 cents worth to someone else's idea. Clearly, always having to have the last word and never accepting anyone else's idea as it stands is a bad habit. But this cannot mean that it is *never* OK to challenge, or try to improve, another person's thinking. Active debate is one of the best ways of improving ideas. In this spirit, I would like to say a few words on how we might build on Goldsmith's insights. One thing I noted is that Goldsmith does not say much about how executives might channel their competitive urges more productively. He states that they need to learn how to win through others, but his book mainly focuses on what they need to STOP doing, not what alternative behaviors they should cultivate. Given that the bulk of our work today revolves around smarter thinking, making better decisions, solving problems and being innovative, perhaps the best way to get this work

done through others is to ask them questions such as: "What do you think?" In other words, executives might be well advised to reframe the basis of their contribution from being a goal scorer or solution generator to that of drawing solutions out of others with facilitative questions. They need to stop trying to win as individual goal scorers, in other words, and start winning as coaches. There is nothing new in this if you focus only on the doing of tasks versus delegating, but when you view our work as thinking, the goal is to be more of a question-asker, less of an answer-giver. Winning coaches need to be competitive to win. They just need to channel the bulk of their competitive urges toward external competitors. The key point here is to recognize the asking of facilitative questions as a valuable way of making a contribution, that offering your own opinions is not the only way to add value.

Many of the bad habits Goldsmith discusses revolve around having the identity of a solution generator, someone who has all the answers and who is never wrong. While stopping the excesses of such behavior is a laudable right step forward, executives might find it easier to change if they had an alternate identity and behavioral repertoire to call upon so that they still feel that they can contribute and be winners without having to know it all.

This realization then suggests that Goldsmith's coaching style, one of proposing his own solutions, does not role model the type of behavior that executives need to display. By giving executives the impression that promoting one's own definitive solutions, as he seems to do, is an appropriate way to behave, he may unwittingly be reinforcing the very behavioral style that he is trying to change. The alternative coaching style is to place more emphasis on drawing solutions out of clients and playing down a bit the inclination to offer one's own solutions as an expert coach.

The bottom line, however, is that all executives will benefit from reading this book. It was a breath of fresh air to me to see someone showing how so much executive behavior stems from one source: the excessive need to win. Too many coaching books promote the idea that everyone is unique with no awareness of how much counterproductive executive behavior is similar.