

# Learning + Follow-up = Results!

**The challenge for HR nowadays is not helping executives to better understand the practice of leadership; but rather getting them to practice their understanding of leadership. In other words improving leadership effectiveness is not so much a matter of more 'Know-How', but in most cases more a matter of 'Show-How'.**

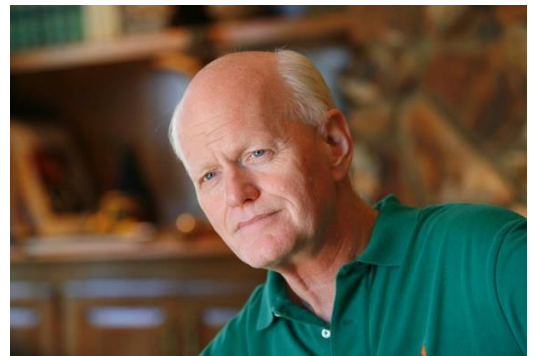
One of the most annoying aspects of the Western culture is our love for slogans, buzzwords and the "program of the year". I asked one of my clients, "How much money has your company spent on the program of the year?" He confidently responded, "Tens of millions of dollars." I then asked, "How much money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

**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 awareness and knowledge of the importance of diet and exercise has gone up dramatically, yet 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, where it was Governor 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, encourage innovation and much more. 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.

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



Marshall Goldsmith has recently been recognized as the #1 leadership thinker in the world and the #7 business thinker in the world by Harvard Business Review.

Marshall has coached more than a hundred CEOs and other top executives of Fortune 500 companies to measurably improve their leadership effectiveness and that of their executive teams

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 measurable change than staying home and watching TV.

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. 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.

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

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 speakers.** They only get better if they pick something important to improve on, 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.

This is a critical insight for HR and business leaders. It is the basis of our Stakeholder Centered Coaching methodology which puts these concepts into a clear 7-step process: involving those around a leader to help the leader improve in specified leadership growth areas through consistent feedback and follow-up. In our experience when organizations make coaching an HRD process available inside the organization the results are phenomenal.

This article is based on earlier publications by Marshall Goldsmith, Will Linssen, Frank Wagner & Chris Coffey.