

Choosing to Change

by Marshall Goldsmith

I've had the good fortune to work with some of the most successful people in the business world. One thing I've noticed about them is they have unflappable optimism—they believe they will succeed, even under tough circumstances. They tend to pursue opportunities with an enthusiasm others might find mystifying.

Successful people also have an intense need for self-determination. They believe they do what they do because they choose to do it—not because they have to do it! The more successful someone is, the more likely this is the case. These two characteristics are connected. When we do what we choose to do, we're more committed to it and enthusiastic about it. When we do what we are expected to do or even forced to do, we merely are compliant and more apt to go through the motions just to get it done.

You see the difference in attitude in any job, even when money isn't related to performance. When I attended high school in Kentucky, even an attitudinally challenged student like me could see some teachers had a calling for the profession, whereas others did it to make a living. Not surprisingly, the best teachers were the former. They were committed to teaching and to the success of their students—rather than being controlled by external forces, such as a steady paycheck or summer vacations. Successful people have a unique distaste for feeling controlled or manipulated. I see this in my work every day.

Even when I've gotten the greatest introduction as someone who can help others change for the better, I can still meet game-breaking resistance. I have made peace with the fact that I cannot make people change; I can only help them get better at what they choose to change.

Unfortunately, getting people who think "I have chosen to succeed" to add "and I choose to change" is not easy. The more we believe our behavior is a result of our own choices, the less likely we are to find behavioral changes desirable.

There's a reason for this, and it's one of the best researched principles in psychology. It's called cognitive dissonance, which refers to the disconnect between what we believe in our minds and what we experience in the world. The underlying theory is simple: The more committed we are to believing something is true, the less likely we are to believe the opposite is true, even in the face of clear evidence that demonstrates we are, in fact, wrong.

For example, if you deeply believe one of your colleagues is a jerk, you will filter everything he does through that belief, regardless of his actual conduct. No matter what he does, you'll see it through a prism that confirms your preconceived views. It might take years of saintly behavior on his part to overcome this negative perception. That's cognitive dissonance applied to others, and it can be a force of disruption and inequity in the workplace.

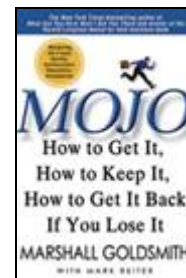
Yet, this same principle can actually work in favor of successful people when they apply it to themselves. It's the reason successful people won't buckle or waver when times get tough. Their commitment to their goals and beliefs allows them to view their reality through rose-tinted glasses and happily prevail over almost any hardship.

That's a good thing in many situations. Personal commitment encourages people to stay the course and not give up when the going gets tough.

Similarly, as you embark on changes large and small, try to keep your eyes on the prize and put a positive spin on setbacks. In other words, choose to change, and stick to it. Yet realize your very commitment is going to make it hard to hear negative feedback. Successful change occurs when we can walk the fine line between stubbornness and spinelessness – and demonstrate sincere commitment along with thoughtful openness.

Dr. Marshall Goldsmith recently been named by the American Management Association as one of 50 great thinkers and business leaders who have impacted the field of management. His 18 books include the Business Week best-seller, *The Leader of the Future* and *Global Leadership: The Next Generation*. Marshall is a world authority in helping successful leaders achieve positive change in behavior: for themselves, their people and their teams.

Marshall's latest best-seller, **MOJO**, is now available.



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