GENERAL

marshall goldsmith what got you here

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Introduction

Leadership is an ever evolving journey, and one of the most profound lessons in modern executive coaching comes from the simple, yet powerful, phrase: **“What got you here won’t get you there.”**This concept, popularized by renowned coach Marshall Goldsmith, challenges leaders to recognize that the habits, strategies, and mindsets that propelled them to success in the past may become obstacles to future growth. In this article we explore Goldsmith’s philosophy, the practical steps leaders can take to apply it, and real world examples that illustrate why this mindset shift is essential for sustained excellence.

Who Is Marshall /Goldsmith?

Marshall Goldsmith is a globally recognized executive coach, author, and thought leader in leadership development. With a career spanning over four decades, he has worked with CEOs, board members, and senior executives from Fortune 500 companies, governments, and non profits. Goldsmith earned his Ph.D. in psychology and later founded the Marshall Goldsmith Group, a consulting firm that specializes in coaching, assessment, and leadership transformation.

His bestselling books, including *What Got You Here Won’t Get You There* and *Triggers*, have sold millions of copies worldwide. Goldsmith is also a frequent speaker at industry conferences, and his research on behavior change has been cited in academic journals. His approach blends psychological insight with actionable tools, making his teachings both scientifically grounded and highly practical.

The Core Principle: “What Got You Here Won’t Get You There”

Understanding the Paradox

The phrase itself is a paradox: it acknowledges that past achievements are valuable, yet warns that clinging to the same behaviors can hinder future progress. In leadership, this often manifests as:

- Overreliance on a single decision making style.
- Resistance to new ideas because they challenge established successes.
- Failure to adapt to changing market dynamics or team expectations.

Goldsmith argues that the most effective leaders are those who can separate the core competencies that earned them their current position from the specific tactics that may no longer be relevant. This distinction allows them to evolve without losing the essence of their leadership identity.

Scientific Backing

Goldsmith’s insights are grounded in behavioral science. Studies in organizational psychology show that **habit loops**—cue, routine, reward—are powerful drivers of performance. When a leader’s routine is tightly linked to a specific reward (e.g., recognition for decisive action), the brain reinforces that behavior, making it harder to change. By consciously recognizing these loops, leaders can intentionally disrupt them and create new, more effective patterns.

Applying the Principle in Everyday Leadership

Step 1: Self Assessment

Begin with a candid evaluation of your leadership style. Goldsmith recommends using 360 degree feedback tools that gather input from peers, subordinates, and superiors. The goal is to identify:

1. Strengths that have been instrumental in past successes.
2. Behavioral habits that may be limiting growth.
3. Patterns that consistently lead to positive outcomes versus those that create friction.

Tools like the *Goldsmith Leadership Practices Profile* or the *DISC assessment* can provide structured insights.

Step 2: Identify "Triggers"

Goldsmith's book *Triggers*expands on the idea that certain situations ignite automatic responses. Recognizing these triggers involves:

- Monitoring your emotional and physiological reactions during high pressure moments.
- Noting recurring patterns that lead to less effective decisions.
- Seeking feedback on how your reactions affect team dynamics.

Once identified, you can develop strategies—such as pausing, reframing, or delegating—to manage these triggers constructively.

Step 3: Set Targeted Behaviors

Rather than attempting a wholesale change, Goldsmith advises focusing on specific behaviors that need adjustment. For example:

- If you tend to micromanage, set a goal to delegate 30% of routine tasks.
- If you're prone to interrupting, practice active listening for one meeting per week.
- If you rarely seek input, commit to asking at least two questions before making a major decision.

Each behavior should be measurable, time bound, and aligned with broader leadership objectives.

Step 4: Create a Feedback Loop

Change is sustained only when it is reinforced. Establish a continuous feedback loop by:

- Scheduling regular check ins with a trusted mentor or coach.
- Soliciting honest feedback after key projects.
- Reviewing progress against your behavior targets weekly.

Goldsmith emphasizes that feedback should be specific, actionable, and delivered in a supportive tone to maximize learning.

Real World Examples of the Principle in Action

Case Study 1: A Tech CEO's Transformation

When a Fortune 500 technology company faced rapid market disruption, its CEO—who had built the company on aggressive product launches—realized that this same urgency was stifling innovation. By applying Goldsmith's principle, he:

- Identified his "launch first" habit as a trigger.
- Implemented a "slow down" protocol for new product pipelines.

- Encouraged cross‑functional teams to propose incremental improvements.

The result was a 25% increase in successful product iterations and a renewed culture of experimentation.

Case Study 2: A Non‑Profit Board Chair

A board chair of a global non‑profit had always taken a top‑down approach to fundraising. After a series of donor disengagements, she adopted Goldsmith's framework:

- Conducted 360‑degree feedback to uncover a tendency to dominate conversations.
- Set a target to ask open‑ended questions in every donor meeting.
- Established a quarterly "learning session" where board members shared best practices.

Donor retention improved by 18%, and the organization secured a new multi‑year partnership.

Common Misconceptions About the "What Got You Here" Mindset

Misconception 1: It Means Forgetting Past Successes

Many leaders fear that the phrase implies abandoning everything that worked. In reality, it encourages **distinguishing core competencies from specific tactics**. The skills that earned you your position—strategic vision, emotional intelligence—remain valuable; what changes are the behaviors that no longer serve the organization.

Misconception 2: It Requires a Complete Role Change

Goldsmith's principle is not about shifting to a new job; it's about evolving within your current role. A senior manager can still lead effectively by updating communication styles, decision‑making processes, or team‑building approaches.

Misconception 3: It Is a Quick Fix

Behavioral change is a gradual process. Goldsmith stresses that leaders must commit to ongoing reflection and adjustment. Patience, persistence, and a willingness to fail are essential components of lasting transformation.

Tools and Resources for Continuous Growth

- Goldsmith Coaching Sessions – One‑on‑one coaching to identify triggers and set behavior targets.
- 360‑Degree Assessment Platforms – Tools like Gallup StrengthsFinder or Hogan Assessments provide comprehensive feedback.
- Behavioral Journals – Daily logs of triggers, reactions, and outcomes help reinforce learning.
- Peer Learning Groups – Regularly scheduled meetings where leaders share challenges and successes.
- Books – What Got You Here Won't Get You There, Triggers, and What Matters Most for deeper insight.

Integrating the Principle into Organizational Culture

Leaders who adopt Goldsmith's mindset can influence their entire organization by modeling adaptive behavior. Strategies include:

- Embedding behavioral change goals into performance reviews.
- Providing training on self‑awareness and emotional regulation.
- Encouraging a culture where constructive feedback is valued over criticism.
- Celebrating small wins that demonstrate new, effective behaviors.

When an organization collectively embraces the idea that past successes are not guarantees of future results, it becomes more agile, innovative, and resilient.

Conclusion

Marshall /Goldsmith's insight that**'What got you here won't get you there"**serves as a timeless reminder that leadership is not a static state but an ongoing process of learning and adaptation. By conducting honest self assessment, identifying behavioral triggers, setting targeted change goals, and creating robust feedback loops, leaders can transform their habits into catalysts for future success. Whether you are a seasoned executive, a mid level manager, or a nonprofit board chair, embracing this principle will help you navigate the complexities of today's business environment and unlock your full potential.

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