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Now Go Out And Lead!

In his new book, *What Got You Here Won't Get You There*, executive coach Marshall Goldsmith writes about being a better leader. Here are two tips for starters.

At the new year, we all make resolutions. We'll shed those extra pounds, spend more time with the family, lower our handicap, call our Mom more often, read *War and Peace*. The list of resolutions is as endless as the imperfections we see in the mirror. We ask ourselves: How can we be better, more successful? Funny thing is, in striving to be better human beings, we rarely resolve to do better in our interpersonal relationships--at least not in any specific way to stop doing things that annoy other people. And yet, in almost two decades as an executive coach, I've learned that changing one or two interpersonal habits can have a make-or-break impact on someone's ability to lead, and to get ahead. My book identifies 20 habits that rub people the wrong way and tells how to break them. Here are two:

ANNOYING HABIT NO. 1: CLINGING TO THE PAST

There is a school of thought among psychologists that we can understand our errant behavior by delving into our past, particularly our family dynamics. This school believes "when it's hysterical, it's historical." If you're a perfectionist, it's because your parents never said you were good enough. If you operate above the rules, it's because your parents doted on you and inflated your importance. If you freeze around authority figures, it's because you had a controlling mother. And so on.

I refuse to attend any school that clings to the past--because going backward is not about creating change. It's about understanding. One of my earliest clients spent hours telling me, "Marshall, you don't understand. Let me explain why I have these issues. Let me explain my mother and father." It was one long unendurable whine. Finally, I reached into my pocket for a coin and said, "Here's a quarter. Call someone who cares."

Don't get me wrong. There's nothing wrong with understanding. Understanding the past is perfectly admissible if your issue is accepting the past. But if your issue is changing the future, understanding won't take you there. My experience tells me that the only effective approach is looking people in the eye and saying, "If you want to change, do this."

It takes me a long time to convince clients that they can't change the past, or make excuses for it. All they can do is accept it and move on. But for some reason, many people enjoy living in the past, especially if going back there lets them blame someone else for anything that's gone wrong in their lives. That's when clinging to the past becomes an interpersonal problem. We use the past as a weapon against others.

I learned this from my daughter Kelly. She was 7 years old. We were living in a nice house in San Diego (still my home). One day, annoyed over a professional setback, I came home and took out my annoyance on Kelly. I trotted out the speech that begins, "When I was your age..."

I started yammering about growing up in Kentucky and how we didn't have money and how hard

I had to work to become the first person in my family to graduate from college. Contrasting this, of course, with all the wonderful things Kelly had. She listened to my diatribe, instinctively letting me vent. When I was finished, she said: "Daddy, it's not my fault you make money."

That stopped me in my tracks. She was right. How could I expect her to know what it's like to be poor--when I was damn sure she never would be? I chose to work hard and make money. She didn't. In effect, I was bragging about how clever I was to have triumphed over adversity--and masking that boasting by dumping my frustrations on her. She called me on it.

Stop blaming others for the choices you made.

ANNOYING HABIT NO. 2: REFUSING TO EXPRESS REGRET

Expressing regret, or apologizing, is a cleansing ritual, like confession at church. You say "I'm sorry"--and feel better. That's the theory at least. But it's hard for many of us to do.

We think apologizing means we have lost a contest. It feels humiliating to seek forgiveness, because we think it suggests subservience. We believe that apologizing forces us to cede power when, in reality, it's a great control tactic.

Whatever the reasons, refusing to apologize causes as much ill will in the workplace, and at home, as any other interpersonal flaw. Just think how bitter you have felt when a friend failed to apologize for hurting you or letting you down--and think of how long that bitterness festered.

If you look back at the tattered relationships in your life, I suspect many began to fray at the moment when one person couldn't summon the emotional intelligence to say: "I'm sorry." People who can't apologize at work may as well be wearing a T-shirt that says: "I don't care about you."

The irony, of course, is that apologizing turns adversaries into allies, even servants. It is one of the most powerful and resonant gestures in the human arsenal--almost as powerful as a declaration of love. If love means, "I care about you, and I'm happy about it," then an apology means, "I hurt you, and I'm sorry about it." It compels people to move forward into something new and, perhaps, wonderful together.

The best thing about apologizing is that it forces everyone to let go of the past. In effect, you are saying: "I can't change the past. All I can say is I'm sorry for what I did wrong. I'm sorry it hurt you. There's no excuse and I will try to do better in the future." That's tough for even the most cold-hearted to resist.

My client Beth was the highest-ranking woman at a Fortune 100 company. Her bosses loved her. So did her direct reports. By contrast, she was loathed by some of her peers. When I surveyed her co-workers I learned that she had a particularly toxic relationship with a hard-boiled division chief named Harvey. (Both of these names have been changed.) Beth was a smart, know-it-all young hotshot brought in by the CEO to stir things up. Harvey, however, saw her as arrogant and felt she didn't respect the company's history and traditions. The two were in a perpetual turf war, and it brought out the worst side of her personality: a mean, vindictive streak. We agreed that this was a fault we had to fix.

The first thing I made Beth do was apologize--to Harvey. I could see her bristle at the suggestion, but argued that she had to do this to improve the situation. The thought of yielding to Harvey was so distasteful to her that I actually scripted the apology. I didn't want misgivings to creep in and pollute the apology, which would destroy the effect. To Beth's credit, she followed the script. She said: "You know, Harvey, I've got a lot of feedback here, and the first thing I want

to say is that I'm positive about a lot of it. The next thing I want to say is that there are some things at which I want to be better. I've been disrespectful to you, the company, and its traditions. Please accept my apologies. There is no excuse for this behavior and..."

Harvey cut her off. She looked at him with alarm, poised for another fight, until she noticed tears in his eyes. "Beth, it's not just you," he said. "It's me. I have not been a gentleman in the way I've treated you. I know that it was hard for you to tell me these things, and they are not all your problems. This is my problem, too. We can get better together."

That's the magic in this process. When you declare your dependence on others, they usually agree to help you. And in the course of making you a better person, they inevitably try to become better people themselves. This is how individuals change, teams improve, and companies become world-beaters.

If you want to become even more successful in 2007, start by letting go of the past and learning to say: "I'm sorry."

Excerpted from What Got You Here Won't Get You There*, by Marshall Goldsmith and Mark Reiter, to be published Jan. 9 by Hyperion Books.*