



# What Got You Here Won't Get You There

How Successful People Become  
Even More Successful  
Part 1

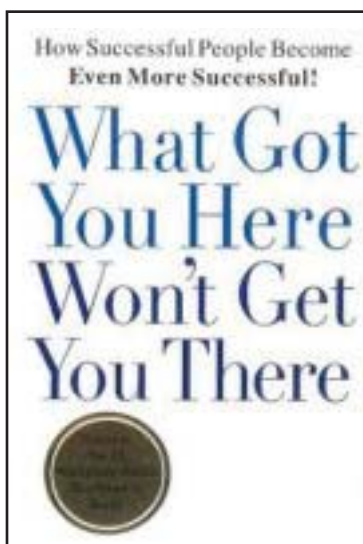
by Marshall Goldsmith

**Editor's Note:** Marshall Goldsmith may be the world's best known CEO coach. His new book, a chapter of which is adapted here, this week made #1 on the Amazon business bestsellers' list *even before its release*. His clients include Alan Mulally, who left the top position at Boeing to help revive Ford Motor Company, JP Garnier of Glaxo Smith Klein, Brian Walker of Herman Miller, John Hammergren of McKesson, and dozens more.

He spent countless hours with the late Peter Drucker thanks to his position on the Drucker Foundation board.

This adaptation is prepared just prior to the release of his long awaited book, *What Got You Here Won't Get You There*, . For the first time, Marshall outlines his approach to coaching and career success.

An exclusive interview with Senior Editor David Zweig will appear next week in the conclusion of this series.



## The Success Delusion, Or Why We Resist Change

A few years back the disability insurance company Unum ran a wonderful ad that depicted a grizzly bear on its rear legs, waist-deep in a mountain stream. Every sinew in its neck was straining, its eyes glared, and its enormous teeth were bared. Inches away from the gaping jaws of that bear, a fat pink salmon was jumping upstream.

The caption read: YOU PROBABLY FEEL LIKE THE BEAR.WE'D LIKE TO SUGGEST YOU'RE THE SALMON.

While the ad was designed to sell an insurance product, it struck me as a powerfully graphic statement about the way we delude ourselves in the workplace. Through the years, I've noticed how so many executives—even those who have risen to the level of CEO or other high positions:

- Overvalue their contribution to a project
- Assume credit or recognition for the victories and success that may rightfully belong more to other people
- Have an overinflated view of their standing and skills
- Conveniently ignore the miscues, cul-de-sacs, and ill-conceived timewasters they have created
- Unconsciously overinflate the positive financial impact of their actions because they tend to lighten the hidden and real costs that come with what they do.

Very successful people seem to think, "We own the benefits; someone else owns the costs."

For all us, these delusions would not appear if we weren't frequently successful. Success brings positive reinforcement, and we easily leap to justify the expectation that past success predicts an ongoing record of brilliance.

Such delusional thinking is not all bad. It provides a number of benefits: confidence in the face of risk or danger; and blindness to doubt and the possibility of failure. If we weren't so selectively perceptive, we might just stay in bed all day.

These delusions shift from assets into liabilities only when we need to change in order to move to a new level of performance. We sit around, god-like, convinced of our supreme excellence, and when people suggest we alter our approach, they are regarded with pure bafflement.

The response runs through three phases:

First, we presume the other party must be confused. Surely they are mixing us up with someone else. They don't know what they're talking about. Certainly, some people must change, but we are not among them.

Next, we become dimly aware that there might be some evidence underlying their suggestion that we change. So we dive into denial mode. If this criticism applied to us, we would not be the successes we are today. Our supposed 'flaws' can't really matter that much. If they did, how could we be so successful?

In phase three, everything else having failed, we go on the attack. Shoot the messenger. "Why should a winner like me," we ask, "give the time of day to a loser like you?"

Those responses only skim across the surface of the challenge; they are only denial mechanisms. But it's also known that highly successful people share four other attitudes about themselves. They put an unusually positive slant on:

- a. their past performance
- b. their uncanny knack for belief that their personal contribution is a major factor in the success in any process they're involved with (not luck, random chance or external factors).
- c. the surety that their prior success will extend well across the horizon into the future
- d. their belief in their mastery of their own destiny.

Denial-plus-delusion is a highly explosive compound, the Semtex of the corner office. And more often than not, the detonator is the need to change.

These four beliefs contain the paradox of success. Successful people believe in their own success. But these beliefs also carry the seed of our failures: the beliefs that carried us *here*—which can be a pretty great place—will impair our ability to progress *there*—which can be performance at the next level. Let's examine how each of these beliefs systems can hold us back from changing our sure-fire formula for success.

### **FIRST BELIEF: *I have succeeded***

In my work with successful people over the past few decades, I have noticed they seem to have one mantra coursing through their heads. If you could put some sort of stethoscope to their skulls and somehow "hear" their thoughts, these are the words that would come out: "I have succeeded. I have succeeded. I have succeeded." They believe in their talent. And in their skills.

You might think the preceding paragraph describes someone else. Not you! But now ask yourself how you manage to get out of bed each day and charge into work. Although success doesn't always come your way, is that what you remember? Do you run a tape of every rejection, screw-up, and failure that you've touched? Likely not. So how do you stoke that daily fire of optimism and competitive spirit? You do it by selecting the tapes you run:

Why  
what got  
you here  
won't  
get you  
there.

Were it not for this “charitable” self-perception, we might not see a reason to attempt much of anything. Ever.

you leave the failure reel in the stockroom and constantly replay your highlight film. Let’s look at the performances where you astounded all onlookers and shone as the star we all know you can be. The dazzling comment you launched five minutes before the meeting began. Why, your brilliance dominated the meeting. You could sit back and watch. And how about that memo that the CEO insisted the entire executive staff read before taking one more step! You’ve re-read that one more than five times, and it just gets better and better. No matter what the plot is, we like to be the hero who rides off into the sunset, and sing our song of victory to anyone who will listen long enough.

Listen to your successful friends. Do they regale you with their blooper reel? Or do they loop their Greatest Hits? Surely it’s the latter.

Of course nature has a purpose behind this. Were it not for this “charitable” self-perception, we might not see a reason to attempt much of anything. Ever.

A major league player provided me with a great example of this phenomenon. Every batter has at least a short list of pitchers whom they can seemingly knock around the park at will. “When I face a pitcher whom I’ve hit well in the past, I always go up to the plate thinking I ‘own’ this guy. That gives me confidence,” the player told me.

This should not surprise you. Successful people always see the past successes as prologues to their next string of victories. But the next thing he said did surprise me, when I asked about pitchers whom he doesn’t hit as well.

“It’s just the same. I go up to the plate thinking, yeah, I can hit this guy. Matter of fact, I’ve gotten hits off lots of guys better than him.”

This demonstrates an important point about successful people: they use their past successes to support their positive attitude even when the data suggests they’re due for a fall. Successful people drink from a cup that’s half full.

Even in a team undertaking, they tend to think it was their contribution that most contributed to the group’s success.

On one occasion I made this point by telling a group of doctors that I had done extensive research which had proven that exactly half of all MDs had graduated in the bottom half of their medical schools. Two of the doctors insisted that this was impossible!

Another time I asked three business partners to tell me the percentage of profits each of them brought into the partnership. The aggregate answer exceeded 150 percent! Now I happened to know the true figures, but each man thought he alone brought in more than half.

There’s nothing wrong with this attitude. Winners show it all the time. But as positive as this belief can be, it also becomes a serious obstacle when someone has to make major behavioral changes.

In my career I have asked 50,000 participants in my training programs to rate their performance against their peers. 80 to 85 percent of them frvlare

themselves to be in the top 20 percent. Seventy percent declare themselves to be in the top 10 percent. If you shift the population to people with higher perceived social status, such as investment bankers, airline pilots, or doctors, 90 percent of them place themselves in the top 10 percent of their profession.

Now, imagine trying to tell someone so delusional that they are doing something wrong and they are going to need to change.

### **SECOND BELIEF: I can succeed.**

Put another way, "I have the confidence to succeed."

Successful people believe that they can make anything happen. When pressed they will admit that they cannot bend a fork in the next room with the sheer power of mind. But when it comes to business, they believe they can tip the tables in their favor through force of their own will, talent, skill, personality, or brainpower.

Sometimes in sports, certain players like Michael Jordan would demand to get the ball at a crucial instant. Other players after the game say, "I'm glad they gave it to him. I wouldn't have wanted it in a situation like that."

This is the essence of self-efficacy. The successful person says, "I see an opportunity, not a threat. I enjoy uncertainty. I love to take a smart risk. I like large risks because there are larger returns when I win." Whenever they can, they bet on themselves.

Notice that the word "luck" appears nowhere. Successful people have a high "internal locus of control." They believe they are captains of their ships and masters of their destiny. Fate affects other people. Successful people drive toward the goal using motivation, natural ability, and usually hard work—but never luck, random circumstances, or other externalities.

A number of years ago six of my business partners asked me to approve of a very large deal. As the senior partner, my agreement was necessary. I told them it was an idiotic idea and I was thoroughly opposed to it. They pushed and pushed and I reluctantly agreed to go along with their crazy scheme. Subsequently I received the largest lump sum check of my life—all from this deal that I opposed. Amazingly, when told this story, my successful friends attributed my windfall to my years of hard work and dedication. It was just dumb luck. But successful people just don't see luck. They think that individual motivation and ability crowns us with success, even when the opposite is true.

As a Buddhist, I have a somewhat different view of cause and effect. In our Western society, however, successful people think that a link always exists between where they are and what they've done. It's only an empowering delusion.

The alternative to this delusion is worse. Consider people who buy lottery tickets. Everyone knows that state-run lotteries are "regressive taxes" on lower income wage earners. People who "knowledgeably" play the lottery know that it's a matter of pure luck, with very low probability of a positive payout.

Successful people don't believe in luck.

You don't see chauffeurs in 7-11 buying lottery tickets for their employers. They might buy them for themselves, but that's why they'll always be in the front seat of the car. Inveterate lottery players think they might get lucky and win millions if, over the years, they buy enough tickets. Studies show such people tend to be neither high achievers nor high wage earners.

Similarly, one often reads about lottery winners who go bankrupt. The same belief system that got them in front of the lottery machine leads them to make irrational investment decisions and to pursue crazy investments. They think that luck—rather than skill or intelligence—will strike twice and make them even richer. They lack the belief they can succeed on their own talents—and luck is all that's left.

Just as lottery addicts believe in their own luck or random chance, successful people believe in their own talent and in themselves. This otherwise positive belief can present a real challenge when it comes to behavioral change. The logic goes like this: "I am a big success. I behave in a certain way. I am successful because I behave this way." The challenge is to bring them to realize that sometimes their success occurs despite certain elements of this behavior.

Many successful people overcommit. This can be their undoing.

### **BELIEF 3: *I will succeed.***

Put another way, this means, "I am motivated to succeed."

"I have succeeded" refers to the past. "I can succeed" refers to the present. "I will succeed" refers to the future. Not only do successful people believe they can manufacture success, they believe it's practically due to them.

Consequently, successful people often pursue projects for reasons that mystify everyone else. They set a goal, publicly announced their intention, and then do "whatever it takes" to win. That's good. But this same attitude and easily mutate into an excess of optimism. It's often said, "if you want something done, give it to someone who is busy." Successful people are busy, and that's where they expose themselves to the danger of overcommitment.

Successful people often have difficulty walking away from desirable opportunities. A huge majority of executives with whom I work declare that they are as busy, or busier, today than they ever have been. Never have I heard one of my clients say, "I don't have enough to do." Much of this busy-ness does not come from dealing with problems. When I surveyed executives about their overcommitment, not one of them said they were trying to "save a sinking ship." They overcommitted because they were drowning in a sea of magnificent possibilities.

Has this happened to you? You meet with a big success at work. Suddenly, people emerge from everywhere you want to associate themselves with you and your success. Quite logically, they think that since you pulled off one huge score you can pull off many more. And they want you to pull it off with them. Opportunities appear at a dizzying pace. Without enough experience or discipline you agree to work with all of them. In due course, if you're not careful, you will be overwhelmed. That which made you rise will bring about your fall.

In my volunteer work, my favorite European client served as Executive Director of one of the world's leading human services organizations. His mission was to help the most vulnerable people in the world. Unfortunately (for all of us), his business was booming. People came to him for help in every manner of project, and he lacked the heart or inclination to say no to anyone. Driven by his belief in his own success, he overpromised and even the most dedicated staff couldn't deliver on his commitments.

Unchecked, this "we will succeed" approach brings about staff burnout, excessive turnover, and a depleted, weakened team. As a leader, my European client's biggest challenge was avoiding overcommitment.

As with the prior two beliefs, this 'I will succeed' approach can devastate the chances for success when the time arrives to change behavior. I will never apologize for my obsession about following up with clients to learn whether they actually get better by using my methods. Almost everyone who attends my leadership development programs intends to apply what he or she has learned upon their return to the job. Most do, and get better! Our research also shows that many do absolutely nothing. They may just as well have spent the time watching cartoons on television instead of attending my training program.

When we asked the "do-nothings" why they didn't implement the behavioral changes they promised they would, by far the most common answer is, "I intended to, but I just didn't have the time to get around to it." They were over-committed. They wanted to change. They agreed with the value of changing. They simply ran out of hours every day. When it comes to change, overcommitment can be as serious a problem as believing you don't need fixing, or that your flaws are part of the cause for your success.

#### **BELIEF 4: *I choose to succeed.***

Whatever successful people do, they believe they act in everything a matter of choice. The more successful they are, the more likely you'll find a high need for self-determination. Choosing what we do is commitment. Doing what we have to do is compliance.

The difference between commitment and compliance appears in any job, even when compensation is unrelated to performance. During my high school days back in Kentucky, even a skeptical wisecracking jokester like me could see the difference between teachers who had a calling and teachers who only had a job. The best teachers had a calling. They committed to the students instead of submitting to the control of external forces (like a paycheck).

Successful people have a distinct dislike for feeling controlled or manipulated. This shows up in my work every day. I may get the greatest advance build-up as someone who can help people change for the better— in other words, I'm good at helping— but I still meet resistance. I have come to terms with the fact that I cannot make people change. I can only help them improve at what they choose to change.

It's very difficult to connect prior success with future personal change.

Rick Pitino, the famous basketball coach, wrote a book called *Success is a Choice*. He's right. "I choose to succeed" directly correlates to achievement in virtually any field. People do not stumble across success; they choose it.

Unfortunately, it's not easy to get people to connect "I have chosen to succeed" with "...and I choose to change." It requires turning that powerful commitment upside down. Easy to say, hard to do. The stronger our belief that our behavior results from our own choices and commitments, the weaker is the desire to change our behavior.

The reason for this is one of the best-researched principles in psychology. Cognitive dissonance refers to the difference between what we believe and what we see or experience in real life. A simple fact underlies the theory. The more we commit to the belief that something is true, the less likely we are to believe that its opposite is true, even if overwhelming evidence shows us that we are wrong. For example, if you believe your colleague Larry is a fool, you will filter Larry's actions through that belief. No matter what he does, you'll view him through a prism that serves only to confirm that he is a fool. Even when he's not foolish, you'll interpret that as the exception that proves the rule that Larry is a fool. It may take years for Larry to overcome your perception. That's how cognitive dissonance applies to others. In the workplace it can be disruptive and unfair. But it's everywhere.

Yet when successful people apply cognitive dissonance to themselves, it actually works in their favor. The stronger our belief and our commitment to the truth of something, the less likely we are to accept that its opposite is true, even when the facts show we may have taken the wrong direction. That's why successful people don't crumble or waiver when the going gets rough. Thanks to their commitment to their goals and beliefs, they view reality through rose-colored glasses. In many situations, that's their salvation. Their deep personal commitment gives other people the courage to stay on their mission.

Naturally, this same dedication can torpedo successful people when the time comes to change their tack.

Next Week: The Fourth Believe, The Conclusion, and an exclusive interview with Marshall Goldsmith.

**About the Author: Marshall Goldsmith** is a world authority in helping successful leaders achieve positive, measurable change in behavior: for themselves, their people and their teams.

Recently, the American Management Association named Marshall as one of 50 great thinkers and leaders who have influenced the field of management over the past 80 years. His work has been featured in a *Harvard Business Review* interview, *Business Strategy Review* cover story (from the London Business School) and *New Yorker* profile. He has appeared in: the *Wall Street Journal*--as one of the top ten executive educators, *Forbes*--as one of five most-respected executive coaches, the *Economist*--as one of the



most credible consultants in the new era of business and Fast Company--as America's preeminent executive coach. His work has received national recognition from almost every professional organization in his field, including: the Academy of Management, American Society for Training and Development and the Society for Human Resource Management.

Dr. Goldsmith is one of the few consultants who have been asked to work with over 70 major CEOs and their management teams. He conducts workshops for executives, high--potential leaders and HR professionals. His Ph.D. is from UCLA. He has been asked to teach in executive education programs at Dartmouth, Michigan, Wharton, UCLA, MIT, Oxford and Cambridge.

Marshall is a founder of Marshall Goldsmith Partners, which (in alliance with Hewitt Associates) is providing coaching for leaders around the world. He served as a member of the Board of the Peter Drucker Foundation for ten years.

Recently the graduate business school at Alliant University was named after him.

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