



# MEASURED Success

*Executive educator and author Marshall Goldsmith takes a straightforward approach to driving improvement*

BY **JAKE POINIER**

**D**o you *really* believe you can turn flabby abs into a sexy six-pack by spending a few minutes a day on an exercise contraption? Or that you can have a body like Cindy Crawford or Chuck Norris just by making a few easy payments of \$29.95?

Expecting people to make effortless, life-altering behavioral changes in the afterglow of your speeches is equally naïve, says Marshall Goldsmith, one of *Forbes* magazine's top five executive coaches and a main stage speaker at this year's National Speakers Association convention in New York City. "You can't make a long-term change based on a brief interaction—that requires work," he says. "We all want that to be possible, but that's not realistic. You don't get better because you've listened to a speech; you have to do the stuff that was discussed in the speech."



## There's some truth in the old

Riffing further on the fitness analogy, Goldsmith notes that his best-selling *What Got You Here Won't Get You There*, a Best of 2007 Top 25 Customer Favorite for all books on Amazon.com and Amazon's No. 1 Best Seller for the year on Leading People, was outsold 10 to one by the top diet book. "Americans get fatter and fatter, and yet they read more and more diet books," he says. "If reading diet books made you thin, we'd be the thinnest people in the world instead of the fattest. What we want is to do anything other than work, and the reality is that you need to do something."

When providing food-for-executive-thought during speeches and coaching sessions, Goldsmith strives to make his information as actionable as possible. His goal is to help audience members achieve positive long-term changes in behavior: how to do the work, how to talk to people, how to follow up, how to listen and how to apologize for mistakes. The most critical aspect, however, is arguably the

most daunting: measuring whether people improve after listening to him talk.

"There's some truth in the old saying that what gets measured gets done," Goldsmith says. "But very few speakers ever measure anything other than whether the participants thought they were a good speaker—so you're the only one being evaluated." In contrast, Goldsmith has performed research on tens of thousands of participants to see if they got better, and if they achieved long-term changes in behavior—as judged by the people around them, not just themselves. The results, he says, are overwhelmingly positive.

So, should you start measuring post-speech impact after your next presentation? It's a worthwhile goal, says Goldsmith, with a couple of caveats. "You need to have the confidence that it's going to work," he says. "If you don't believe in it, you don't want to do it. You also need support from the executive level to make it effective over the long haul."

### On Getting Support from Your Peers

"Every year for the past 11 years, a group of my 'speaker' friends has gotten together in San Diego to talk about life. Actually, we started out talking about business, but then we had plenty of business. Then we were going to save the world, but we figured maybe we couldn't do that, so now it's a support group.

"What do we come away with? The reality is that all of the benefits have been unintended positive consequences. We help each other in ways we never planned. Speakers are as human as anyone else—we have a spouse with cancer, a kid with drug problems, friends die, etc. We have all the problems of any other group, yet we don't always have anyone to talk to because we need to be upbeat and positive. So it's nice to be in a group where you can just talk to each other."

—Marshall Goldsmith

### THE EDUCATION OF A SPEAKER

Thirty years ago, as a young college professor, Goldsmith was mentored by Paul Hersey, who wrote *Management of Organizational Behavior* and developed the concept of "situational leadership" with Ken Blanchard. Hersey also gave Goldsmith his big break. "One day, Paul got double-booked on one of his speeches and he asked if I could fill in," he says. "At the time, I was making \$15,000 a year, and he said he'd pay me \$1,000 for the day. I said, 'Sign me up!'" After being ranked the top speaker after two weeks of presentations, Goldsmith was sold on the idea of adding speeches to his business repertoire.

Of course, there was room for improvement. En route to becoming the go-to guy for *Fortune* 500ers needing help, Goldsmith has constantly honed his presentation approach—indeed, into the complete opposite of what it once was. "I was a college dean at age 29—a typical young PhD college professor," he says. "So what was my goal at that point? To teach people everything. Now that I've worked with hundreds of major CEOs around the world, what's my goal? To teach people *anything*."

Goldsmith describes himself as having become a realist in his older years—eliminating abstract theory and more focused on concepts that are positive, simple, focused and fast, and things that people can immediately put to use. He also subscribes to the perspective that people don't get better simply because of something he says or does; it comes from within. "You want a humbling experience?" Goldsmith asks. "The client I coached that improved the most is the


# saying that what gets measured gets done

one I spent the least time with. So I asked him what could I learn from him? He said don't make coaching or teaching about me, make it about my clients. That's good advice for anyone in the speaking business."

It's a concept that Goldsmith underscores with his Buddhist philosophy. "Buddha said, 'Only do what I teach if it makes sense in the context of your own life,'" Goldsmith says. "When I coach people, I tell them I'm going to give them ideas—tell me what works for you and let's do it. If it's not going to work, you're not going to do it anyway."

Goldsmith hopes that speakers can challenge themselves to improve not just what they say and how they say it, but how it can make a positive change in someone else's life. "I think we often make the mistake of focusing on the speaker or coach or author, rather than the participant," he says. "It's all about the person sitting there, what he or she

chooses to do. It's not about how clever the speaker is, how funny the presentation is, how clever the author is, or if the coach is a good listener. It's really about the person and whether she does what's taught.

"All of the people in our organization talk about good things," he says. "If people do them, they almost all work. If they don't, they're just like all those diet books sitting on shelves and exercise machines collecting dust." 

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## On Learning from Your Audience

"I always teach people to try something with their children—ask them directly what they can do to be a better parent. Well, this one woman contacted me who had applied it in reverse with her mother. She simply asked her, 'What can I do to be a better daughter?' The mom answered, 'I live way out in the country, all alone since your dad died, and I have to take this long walk up the drive to the mailbox and it's almost always empty. It makes me lonely. It would mean so much to me if you sent me something, a picture or a card, so that when I go to the mailbox there might be something in it.'"

"So she took this advice to heart, and started doing it, and what did it mean to her mother? Everything. What did it cost her? Nothing. And so this woman called me and just said thank you. She and her mom have a better life. What's that worth?"—*Marshall Goldsmith*

## Sneak Preview

At the 2008 NSA Convention, Marshall Goldsmith will take audience members through an experiential activity based on the concept he coins as "feedforward" in *What Got You Here Won't Get You There*. He'll also offer tips on how to implement the technique yourself at home and in the office.

Here's the drill: Attendees will need to pick a specific area for personal improvement, and then talk to as many people as possible in five or 10 minutes to solicit ideas on how to make those improvements. The rules are simple: The receiver of ideas isn't allowed to judge or critique them, and the deliverer of ideas can't talk about the past, only suggesting ideas for the future.

"Whatever ideas you get, you have to shut up, listen, take notes and simply say thank you," says Goldsmith. "That can be hard for speakers, because we love to talk all the time." He notes that this exercise differs from most self-improvement activities, since it's focused on a future that can be changed, rather than dredging up the past. "People describe the process as positive or even fun," he says. "How many times have you heard that about getting feedback?"