

# Leadership is Not a Popularity Contest



by Marshall Goldsmith

I often write about the importance of encouraging ideas from co-workers, but what if you are a manager with direct reports who already have strong opinions on a topic—and you wholeheartedly believe their suggestions just won't work? Here are my ideas on the subject:

First, my teacher and mentor Paul Hersey always taught me that "leadership is not a popularity contest." You, as a leader, have to focus on achieving the mission, which can sometimes mean disagreeing with your direct reports and taking a stand on tough issues.

On the other hand, as my friend and colleague Jim Kouzes points out, "leadership is not an *unpopularity* contest." Great leaders focus on building positive, lasting relationships with the people they lead, and they should be sensitive to how direct reports perceive them.



Begin with a philosophy of doing what is right while at the same time involving and empowering great people. Ask yourself a simple question: "Is winning this battle worth it?" If you believe this is an important issue for the company, stand your ground. If it is important to your direct reports and insignificant to the company, let it go.

## What If You're Wrong?

Another tip that will help you in many situations: Try not to prove that your direct reports are wrong. Chances are your direct reports are generally bright and interested in what they are doing—especially the ones who take the initiative to make suggestions. The fact that your ideas differ from their ideas does not always mean they are wrong. As difficult as it may be to believe, sometimes you are wrong.

Make it a point to listen and think before responding. Sometimes if you just back away and reflect, you will see things from a different and clearer perspective. And if you can execute components of their ideas, do so. Your direct reports do not expect you to do everything they suggest.

And, finally, if you just plain disagree, respectfully let them know that you have listened to their suggestions, thought carefully about them, and chosen not to execute their ideas at this time. Explain your logic. Let them know that well-meaning, intelligent people can disagree.

Don't win them all. Be open to going with their ideas when you can. When they disagree with you—and they prevail—support their ideas, just as you want them to support your ideas when you get your way.

I hope these ideas are helpful.

Life is good.

Marshall

My newest book, [MOJO](#), is a *New York Times* (advice), *Wall Street Journal* (business), *USAToday* (money) and *Publisher's Weekly* (non-fiction) best seller. It is now available online and at major bookstores.

## Does Your Self Image Match What Others See?



by Marshall Goldsmith

Can you see in yourself what others see in you, or do you see in others what you don't see in yourself?

As a Ph.D. student at UCLA in the 70s, I had a self-image of being 'hip.' I believed I was involved in discovering deeper human understanding, self-actualization, and profound wisdom.

Early in my Ph.D. program, I was a student in a class with 12 other people led by a wise teacher, Dr. Bob Tannenbaum. Bob had invented 'sensitivity training', published a popular article in the Harvard Business Review, and was a full professor.



In Bob's class, we could discuss anything we wanted. I started talking about people in Los Angeles. For three weeks, I did a monologue about how 'screwed up' people in Los Angeles were. 'They wear sequined blue jeans; they drive gold Rolls Royces; they are plastic and materialistic; all they care about is impressing others; they don't understand what is important in life.' (It was easy for me to be an expert on LA, since I grew up in small town Kentucky.) After listening to me babble for three weeks, Bob looked at me quizzically and asked, 'Who are you talking to?'

'I'm speaking to the group,' I said.

'Who in the group are you talking to?'

'I'm talking to everybody,' I said, not knowing where he was headed.

'When you speak, you look at only one person and address your comments toward only one person. You seem interested in the opinion of only one person. Who is that person?'

'That is interesting,' I replied. After careful consideration, I said, 'You?' He said, 'That's right, me. There are 12 other people in this room. Why don't you seem interested in any of them?' Now that I'd dug myself into a hole, I decided to dig faster. I said, 'Dr. Tannenbaum, you understand the significance of what I am saying. You know how 'screwed-up' it is to try to run around and impress people all the time. You have a deeper understanding of what is really important in life.'

Bob then asked me, 'Marshall, is there any chance that for the last three weeks all you've tried to do is impress me?' I was amazed at Bob's lack of insight! 'Not at all!' I declared. 'You haven't understood one thing I've said! I've told you how screwed up it is to try to impress other people. You've missed my point, and I'm disappointed in your lack of understanding!' He scratched his beard and concluded, 'No. I think I understand.' I looked around and saw 12 people thinking, 'Yes. We understand.' For six months, I disliked Dr. Tannenbaum.

I devoted much energy into figuring out his psychological problems and knowing why he was confused. Then it dawned on me that the person with the issue about impressing other people

wasn't him, or people in LA. The person with the issue was me. I looked in the mirror and said, 'Dr. Tannenbaum was right.'

### **Two Lessons**

I learned two big lessons:

- 1. It's easier to see our problems in others than to see them in ourselves.** Often when I become self-righteous or angry about some perceived injustice, I realize that the deeper issue is often not with them but in me.
- 2. Although we may deny our problems to ourselves, they may be obvious to the people who observe us.** There is often a discrepancy between the self we think we are and the self that the rest of the world sees in us. If we can listen and think about what others see in us, we can compare the self that we want to be with the self that we are presenting and begin to make the real changes that are needed to align our stated values with our actual behavior.

Today I help executives develop a profile of desired leadership behavior.

Then I provide them with confidential feedback that enables them to compare their behavior (as perceived by others) with this profile of desired behavior. I help them deal with this feedback in a positive way, learn from it, and become a better role model for the desired leadership behavior. The lesson I learned from Bob shaped the course of my life.

What really bothers you? Might some of your concerns be a reflection of your problems? How can honest feedback from others help you align your values with your behavior?

Life is good.

Marshall