

“Getting Better with one Lesson”

by Markku Kauppinen

About three years ago I started playing golf again. I had played some golf while I was in college, but the truth is, I was a poor hacker at best. Nevertheless, I enjoyed the game and wanted to start again. The difference was, this time I was going to do it right.

When I golfed in my early twenties, I never took a lesson. I did this for two reasons: 1) I believed I could learn the game on my own since I had done fairly well in other sports (How hard could this really be?), and 2) as a typical college student, there was no way I could afford a lesson. Instead, I decided to talk to people who, in my opinion seemed to play well. Of course, at the time just about everyone played better than I did and I was eager to ask everyone for their advice.

I found it was very easy to get golfers to shower me with wonderful tips. They all loved to help me.

“Markku, I see what the problem is. What you need to do is...”

“It is no wonder you lose three dozen balls per round on this course. That may be the worst slice I have ever seen. Let me help you Markku.” And so on.

The problem was that all of this made me play worse. A lot worse. During my swing I could hear over 50 people giving me well-intentioned advice and it completely messed me up. I was trying to do too many things at the same time and none of it worked. Golf was no longer fun. I quit and bought a motorcycle.

So this time I was going to do it right. I hired a coach, John, and I was committed to practicing at least twice a week. I took lessons from John almost every week. In a matter of weeks, I was getting better. In fact, I was getting quite a bit better. I was beginning to play well and instead of hearing people say: “that’s quite a slice you got there”, people would say: “Nice shot, Markku.”

I was having fun now and I was motivated to get even better.

My coach was a good teacher. He is a good golfer and it is a pleasure watching him hit the ball seemingly so effortlessly and yet very accurately. However, he is not a good enough golfer to make it in the pros. Actually, not even close. He is no Tiger Woods.

What if instead of taking my weekly lesson from John, I had somehow managed to get one lesson with Tiger Woods? What kind of impact would Tiger have had on my game?

While I am certain that a lesson with Tiger would have been a thrill, I am more certain that weekly lessons with John were a lot more effective. Of course, you and I both know that there is no substitute for consistent practice, reinforcement and follow-up. It is the only way to become more successful.

The same is true for changing behaviors, be they leadership, sales, customer service or other behaviors. You cannot and should not expect the behaviors of your employees to change after one-time training events. It simply does not happen. While I suppose it is possible that some participants are so strongly impacted by the message that they will make changes, the vast majority of your employees will be so distracted by their voicemails and emails waiting for them in the office the next day that nothing will change. The desired results are never achieved.

So what can you do? What can you do to ensure that the behaviors of your employees will actually change?

The answer is of course the same as with my golf game: You must provide reinforcement and follow-up. Your employees must practice. And the only way to make sure they practice is to provide reinforcement and follow-up.

If you are responsible for improving the behaviors of your employees (e.g. leadership, sales, customer service, team, etc.), you need to

develop a training strategy that is not built around isolated events.

I think we all know that this is true, but in practice it can at first appear a very daunting task. However, with a commitment to the process and the right support tools, it is actually not that difficult. Here are a few things you can do:

Help your employees to clearly identify the behaviors they need and want to develop/correct. This can be accomplished with self-assessments or 360-degree feedback tools. Keep the process simple by limiting the number of behaviors the employees will attempt to change. They should not try to attempt to change more than three behaviors – focusing on just one is often the best course of action.

Select training tools that support an on-going development process. This will allow you to use the same model or framework to build on. How often have you heard your employees ask: “How does this relate to the previous material?” Make sure that your training vendors *truly* understand the difference between events and an on-going development process.

Winston Churchill said: “However beautiful the strategy, you should occasionally look at the results.” Make sure that your training strategy includes follow-up and reinforcement. By doing so you will ensure that you will get the results you are looking for.

As for me, I still have an occasional bad slice and often find sand traps and water. But I am working to get better.

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“When I get better at....”

by Marshall Goldsmith

In my younger days, as a newly-minted Ph.D. and consultant in Organizational Behavior, I was very “gung ho”. I would challenge my clients to pick one-to-three areas for personal improvement. Then, as I grew older and more experienced, I began to realize that three was too many. The problem was not that my clients lacked motivation or intelligence – they are all very brilliant, dedicated leaders – the problem was that they were just too busy. They all had profitability goals, growth goals, quality goals, customer goals, health goals and on and on. Multiply each of the types of goal by three and you quickly reach a number of goals that are not only impossible to achieve – they are impossible to even remember!

This insight led me to change my aspirations. I then started teaching that my clients should work on one or two behavioral change goals.

Where am I now - in terms of setting goals for behavioral change? Pick one!

What I teach my clients now is to pick the one area for personal change that will make the biggest difference – and focus on that. If we pick the right area for behavioral change, increased effectiveness in this behavior will almost always influence many other aspects of our relationships with people. For example, let’s assume that you need to become a better listener. More effective listening will leader to higher scores in all kinds of related behaviors, such as: building teamwork, increasing customer satisfaction, treating people with respect, or even becoming a better friend and family member.

The other challenge that I give my clients – if you are only going to pick one behavior for change – pick one that really matters! Make sure that the benefits of this change are truly worth your effort.

My friend, Dr. Nathaniel Branden - a world-renowned, psychologist and author of about 20 books – has taught me a wonderful exercise that helps answer the “Is it worth it?” question.

The exercise is very simple. Between five and eight people are seated at a round table. Each person is asked to select one behavior that he or she may want to change. One person begins the exercise by saying, “When I get better at...” and completes the sentence by mentioning one benefit that will accompany this change in behavior. For example, one person may say, “When I get better at *being open to differing opinions* – I will hear more of other people’s great ideas.” After the first person completes her sentence, the second person talks about the behavior that he wants to change, such as “When I get better at *demonstrating patience* – my co-workers will feel more respected.”

After everyone has had a chance to discuss their specific behavior and the first benefit, the cycle begins again. Now each person mentions a second benefit that may result from changing the same behavior, then third benefit, then continuing benefits until the facilitator says “stop” (usually after 6-8 rounds). Finally participants discuss what they have learned and their reactions to the exercise.

When Dr. Branden first explained this exercise to me, I was polite, but skeptical. I couldn’t see the value of simply repeating the potential benefits of change – over and over. My skepticism quickly went away when I saw his process work!

Nathaniel and I were facilitators at a large conference which included many well-known leaders from corporations, non-profits, the government and the military. The Officer sitting next to me was a very important military leader. He was directly responsible for many thousand of troops. He was also highly judgmental – and seemed to be proud of it! For example, when conference participants discussed the topic of character, he growled, “I respect people with *real* character and organizations, like mine, with *real* values. I don’t believe in this situational crap!”

When we began Nathaniel’s exercise he flippantly picked, “When I become less judgmental...” as his behavior to change. I was amused and thought to myself, “This is going to

be interesting!” True to my expectations, the first time around he coughed and grunted a sarcastic comment. The second time around he was even more cynical.

Then something changed. When he described the potential benefit the third time around, he wasn’t being sarcastic anymore – rather, he started becoming serious. Several rounds later, he had tears in his eyes. He sadly sighed, “When I become less judgmental, maybe my children will speak to me again.”

Since that day I have conducted this exercise with several thousand people. Many people follow the same path as the judgmental military leader. They start with benefits that are “corporately correct”, such as *this change will help my company make more money*, and end with benefits that are more “human”, such as *this change will make me a better person*. I will never forget one hard-driving executive who chose, “When I get better at ‘letting go...” His first benefit was *my direct reports will take more responsibility* – his final benefit was *I will probably live to celebrate my 60th birthday*.

As the exercise progresses, one of two realizations tend to dawn upon participants. Some, like the two examples that we have mentioned, begin to see deep meaning and become convinced, “It is worth it!” My advice to these people is simple. Get started on changing now.

Others have a different realization – they begin to feel like they are just “making up” benefits to complete the exercise. It doesn’t seem real. My advice to them is equally simple. Don’t waste your time! If you feel you have to make up reasons why you should change, you won’t have your heart in the process – and you ultimately won’t put in the effort required to make the change last.

You don’t have to be one of my clients to do this exercise. You don’t even have to be in a group. You can do it by yourself. Pick a behavior that you may want to change. Complete the

sentence, “When I get better at...” over and over again. Listen closely as you recite potential benefits. You will be amazed at how quickly you can determine if this change is worth it for you!

As an executive coach, I have given up on trying to make people change. I have realized that the deepest source of inspiration for you – has to come from inside you. Take a little risk. Look inside yourself. You may find someone who has been waiting to give you some of the best advice you will ever hear.

***Dr. Marshall Goldsmith** recently been named by the American Management Association as one of 50 great thinkers and business leaders who have impacted the field of management. His 18 books include the Business Week best-seller, The Leader of the Future and Global Leadership: The Next Generation. Marshall is a world authority in helping successful leaders achieve positive change in behavior: for themselves, their people and their teams.*

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