

# “When I Get Better at...” A Simple Exercise for Changing a Behavior to Achieve Results

*By Marshall Goldsmith*

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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 lead 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 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 thousands 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.

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