

How to Learn the Truth About Yourself

By Marshall Goldsmith

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Remember the character Gordon Gekko in the movie Wall Street? Michael Douglas won an Oscar for his portrayal of this rude, larcenous wheeler-dealer. Well, I worked with a real-life investment banker who in some ways could have inspired the Gekko character.

A significant part of my practice as an executive coach is working with supremely successful people who may need to change some behaviors to achieve the next level of success. The man I coached -- let's call him Mike -- wasn't amoral and unethical like Gekko, but he had some competitive fires burning within his soul that made him treat people like gravel in a driveway. They were the pebbles; he was the SUV. Mike's score for treating direct reports and colleagues with respect was an astounding 0.1%. That is, out of 1,000 managers rated, he was dead last!

But Mike put up equally astounding numbers with his trades. His profit contribution was so vast that the CEO promoted him to the company's management committee. This should have been the apex of Mike's young career. Instead, it exposed his bad side as well. The firm's leaders, who had been insulated from Mike's behavior, were suddenly in a position to get a firsthand dose of his "lead, follow, or get out of my way" style. In meetings, they saw that there was often no checkpoint between Mike's brain and mouth. He was surly and offensive to everyone, even mouthing off to the CEO (his biggest supporter), who called me in to "help him change now."

When I met Mike, the most obvious thing about him was his delight in his success. He was making more than \$4 million a year, so professional validation was coursing through his veins like jet fuel. I suspected that breaking through to Mike by challenging his performance would be tough. He was delivering results, and he knew it. So I sat down with him and said, "I can't help you make more money. You're already making a lot. But let's talk about your ego. How do you treat people at home?"

Mike insisted that he was totally different outside the office, that he was a great husband and father. "I don't bring my work home," he assured me. "I'm a warrior on Wall Street but a pussycat at home."

"That's interesting," I said. "Is your wife home right now?"

"Yes," he said.

"Why don't you give her a call and see how different she thinks you are at home than at the office?"

He called his wife. When she finally stopped laughing at her husband's statement, she concurred that Mike was a jerk at home, too. Then he got his two kids on the line, and they agreed with their mother.

"I'm beginning to see a pattern here," I said. "As I told you, I can't help you make more money. But I can get you to confront this question: Do you really want to have a funeral that no one attends other than for business reasons?"

For once, Mike looked stricken. "They're going to fire me if I don't make my numbers, aren't they?" he asked.

"Not only are they going to fire you," I said, "but several people will be dancing in the halls when you go."

Mike thought about that for a minute and then said, "I'm going to change, and the reason I'm going to change has nothing to do with money and it has nothing to do with this firm. I'm going to change because I have two sons, and if they were receiving this same feedback from you in 20 years, I'd be ashamed to be their father."

Within a year, Mike's scores on his treatment of people shot up past the 50th percentile, above an already high company norm. He probably deserved even better, since he started so far down in the ditch. He also doubled his income.

The lesson: Our flaws at work don't vanish at home.

The moral: Anybody can change, but they have to want to change. Sometimes you can deliver that message by reaching people where they live, not where they work.

The action plan for leaders (and followers): If you really want to know how your behavior comes across to your colleagues and clients, stop looking in the mirror and admiring yourself. Let your colleagues hold the mirror and tell you what they see. If you don't believe them, do the same with your loved ones and friends -- the people in your life who are most likely to be agenda-free and who truly want you to succeed. We all claim to want the truth. This is a guaranteed delivery system.

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