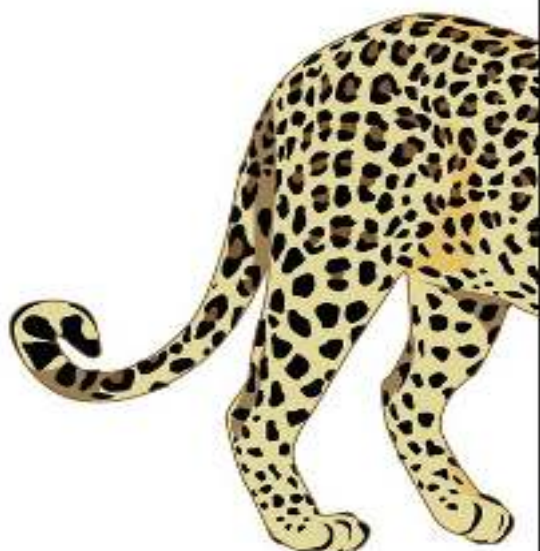


The  
Six Questions  
You Should  
Ask Yourself  
Every Day



CREATING  
BEHAVIOR  
CHANGE  
THAT  
LASTS

BECOMING  
THE  
PERSON  
YOU  
WANT  
TO BE



# Triggers

Marshall Goldsmith

BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *WHAT GOT YOU HERE WON'T GET YOU THERE*

AND Mark Reiter

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# What Great CEOs and Thought Leaders Have to Say About TRIGGERS and Working with Marshall Goldsmith

“I have had the great fortune of working with Marshall for several years. He has helped me in so many ways. *Triggers* represents a natural progression in Marshall’s work and many of the ideas in it have already helped me and many of his other clients. As with all of his books, I know that Marshall’s focused, practical, and insightful approach will help you in leadership, but even more important, it can help you live a better life!”

—Jim Yong Kim, twelfth president of the World Bank

“Marshall Goldsmith is a great author and world-renowned executive coach. His contribution to our group has been immense, and we have greatly benefited from his unparalleled experience and his knowledge. In *Triggers*, he shares illuminating stories from his work with great global leaders. He helps us transform our lives and become more holistic human beings. This is a book worth reading for every practicing professional and for those who aspire to leadership.”

—G. M. Rao, CEO, GMR Group (India), Indian entrepreneur of the year

“How do we create the change we need for our organizations and for ourselves? Marshall Goldsmith is the master of helping us all find the right path, avoiding the negative triggers and building upon the triggers that bring out our best. Here, again, he teaches with his unique insight, warmth, and positive energy. Our job is to learn and do better, for a better outcome for all, which this book helps guide.”

—Tony Marx, CEO, New York Public Library

“You can’t teach an old dog new tricks...without Marshall Goldsmith’s help. With his coaching, you can change your old behavior to create new outcomes.”

—Deanna Mulligan, CEO, Guardian Life, *Fortune* 50 most powerful women in business

“We place a premium on developing strong leaders at McKesson and over the years we have relied greatly on Marshall’s leadership insights to support our executive talent development across the company. No matter what role a person plays in an organization, *Triggers* provides a hands-on framework for helping people live with intention and greater purpose, both professionally and personally.”

—John Hammergren, CEO, McKesson, *Harvard Business Review* 100 top performing CEOs in the world

“No one can match Marshall’s massive footprint in helping people become who they want to be. He is the top thought leader in executive coaching because he drives new thinking about self-motivation. The importance of self-awareness, self-engagement, and positive behavioral change is best captured in *Triggers*. It will help light up many lives!”

—Fred Hassan, managing director, Warburg Pincus, former CEO, Pharmacia and Schering Plough, chairman, Bausch & Lomb

“*Triggers* is fantastic! It is a summary of all the things that Marshall has taught me over the past years...that we can’t really reach our personal goals until we move away from self-centered goals. In order to become the person we aspire to be, we need to embark on a journey of awareness that requires attention, action, and discipline.”

—David Chang, James Beard Foundation outstanding chef award winner, founder and CEO, Momofuku Group

“I’ve known Marshall for years and love working with him. Reading *Triggers* reminds me of being coached by Marshall. It makes me laugh, causes me to reflect, and, most important, gets me to do something positive.”

—Liz Smith, CEO, Bloomin’ Brands (Outback, Fleming’s, Roy’s, Carrabba’s, and Bonefish restaurants)

“This is a great book. Building on his brilliant career as an author and executive coach advising CEOs on how to become more successful leaders, Marshall here tackles a much more important and fundamental challenge: How can we each become the person we really want to be? Read this book and find out.”

—Mark Tercek, president and CEO, The Nature Conservancy, former managing partner, Goldman Sachs, author of *Nature’s Fortune*

“I had the great privilege of being coached by Marshall. He has been able to trigger change in my life and help me move to the next level of leadership. He has changed my life and my career. *Triggers* could do it for you!”

“Marshall has taught me the importance of making a positive difference in every aspect of my life. His coaching techniques and valuable lessons empower you to extract greater meaning from interpersonal relationships and provide a superior understanding of the great results that can be achieved through positive leadership.”

—David Kornberg, CEO, Express

“Another phenomenal book from Marshall, full of practical advice to change behaviors for the better. A fun and very enlightening read.”

—Jan Carlson, CEO, Autoliv (Sweden), world leader in auto safety

“Imagine that for the cost of a book, you can receive personal career guidance from the world's best coach. Marshall Goldsmith is that coach. *Triggers* is that book. Marshall reveals how you can identify and remove blockers to your personal growth. But the key is the doing, not the planning. So buy the book and start the doing!”

—Jim Lawrence, CEO, Rothschild North America

“Marshall continues on his journey of creating tools to develop effective leaders. In *Triggers*, he presents simple and effective methods that we can use to reinvent ourselves. Once there's an understanding of the behaviors that will get you to the next level, Marshall shows how to ensure continued success. A must-read for leaders and those who aspire to be very successful leaders.”

—Joe Almeida, CEO, Covidien

“Marshall's coaching invites leaders to focus relentlessly on their behavior. The leader's behavior as well as the team's behavior becomes the basis for great results and continuous improvement. This will be a key to success for the connected, global, knowledge-driven companies of the future. *Triggers* accelerates our focus on creating the change we need to succeed.”

—Aicha Evans, VP and general manager, Intel, *Fortune* top ten next generation of female leaders

“*Triggers* is just like Marshall—a combination of great coaching and a fun personality!”

—Jonathan Klein, founder and chairman, Getty Images

“Marshall Goldsmith's *Triggers* is a wonderful read. By using real-world examples to teach key leadership points he adds tremendous credibility to the valuable leaders' lesson contained throughout the book.”

—Nils Lommerin, president and CEO, Del Monte Foods, Inc.

“Once again Marshall Goldsmith proves why he is not just one of the top ten *business* thinkers but one of the top ten all-around thinkers. What I love most about this book is that it's not just for business leaders, it provides a clear path to improvement for anyone who wants to make positive change in their lives. Thanks again Marshall for helping me make positive and lasting improvements in my behaviors and my life. My family thanks you, too!”

—Fred Lynch, CEO, Masonite International

“*Triggers* is this year's must-read for leaders who want to learn what they can do to generate lasting, meaningful change for their organizations—and themselves. Marshall has this seemingly effortless way of guiding people to what really matters. He has taught me, he has countless others, how to bring rigor and compassion to being a leader. For me, life is good because Marshall is in it.”

—Sandy Ogg, operating partner, Blackstone Group

“Marshall is an amazing coach who helped me become a better leader and a better person. He has a unique blend of intelligence, insight, and practical steps to improve performance. As he says in his new book, *Triggers*, there is a big difference between understanding and doing. We all understand what to do, but Marshall gives us the tools to actually change for the better.”

—Robert Pasin, CEO, Radio Flyer

“In *Triggers*, Marshall helps us understand behavioral traps we are constantly exposed to, and how to either avoid them or turn them into positive experiences. As usual, he is logical and intuitive—it all makes sense, but that does not mean that change is easy. You have to want it. I enjoyed reading this book. As with my coaching sessions with Marshall, I have come away with valuable insights which will help nudge me toward becoming the person I want to be. Life is good.”

—Soren Schroder, CEO, Burlington

“*Triggers* is Marshall at his storytelling best. Marshall has a unique ability to enable leaders to put down their well-developed guards, to stop focusing on what is wrong, but what is possible if they dedicate themselves to getting better. This is a must-read for anyone who wants to get better at work and life.”

—Brian Walker, president and CEO, Herman Miller

“If you want to change your behavior, become the best person you can be, overcome bad habits that get in your way, and have less regret in your life, then read this book—and apply its advice immediately. Marshall Goldsmith’s *Triggers* is the most straightforward, clear, candid, no-fads, practical advice you’ll ever get on how to make change happen in your life. Marshall brings to this book the full force of his nearly four decades of coaching experience and shares profound insights, compelling stories, and powerful techniques that you can put to use now that will benefit your career, your relationships, and your peace of mind for years to come. His questioning routines alone are worth the price of the book. *Triggers* is Marshall Goldsmith’s finest work yet, and I highly recommend it.”

—Jim Kouzes, coauthor of the multimillion seller *The Leadership Challenge*, Dean’s Executive Fellow of Leadership, Leavey School of Business, Santa Clara University

“At the *Thinkers50* we have long appreciated Marshall Goldsmith’s blend of practical advice and timeless human insight. *Triggers* is his best book yet.”

—Stuart Cramer and Des Dearlove, cofounders, *Thinkers50*, world leaders in the evaluation and dissemination of management thinking

“I’m a raving fan of Marshall Goldsmith—and you will be, too, when you read *Triggers*. Marshall promises that if he does his job as author and you do your job as reader/learner, you will move closer to becoming the person you want to be and also have fewer regrets. Not too bad! So read it!”

—Ken Blanchard, one of the bestselling nonfiction authors in history, coauthor of *The One Minute Manager* and *Refire! Don’t Retire!*

“I have known and worked with Marshall for thirty years. Packed with awesome real truths about how we are with ourselves and how to make life better, *Triggers* is the next step forward in his amazing career.”

—David Allen, world leader in personal productivity, multimillion selling author of *Getting Things Done*

“In *Triggers*, Marshall Goldsmith distills wisdom gained from decades of helping people—clients and friends—struggle with truly changing their behavior. Though the book is written in an engaging, approachable way, it is nonetheless profound. Marshall is more than just a coach. He’s a provocateur, a humorist, and a challenger. If it’s feedback you need to hear to ‘trigger’ the change you need to make, Marshall would be my top choice.”

—Rita Gunther McGrath, *Thinkers50* most influential strategic thinker in the world, author of *The End of Competitive Advantage*

“There are things about myself that I want to change or improve but I always flameout after a little while, blaming work, travel, family responsibilities, etc. Well now I have no excuse! In *Triggers*, Marshall not only distills the obstacles to change, he provides a simple (but not necessarily easy) process that allows us to overcome the main roadblocks to positive change: consistency and the environment. After reading this book, I am ready to try!”

—Chris Cuomo, Emmy, Peabody, and Edward R. Morrow award-winning news reporter, host of CNN’s *New Day*

“I have seen Marshall perform magic, helping an executive break through and realize her potential, and now in *Triggers*, he generously shares his secret sauce. A must read.”

—Keith Ferrazzi, #1 *New York Times* bestselling author of *Whose Got Your Back* and *Never Eat Alone*

“My professional career has been devoted to helping organizations create strategy, implement strategy, and achieve breakthrough innovation. *Triggers* can help you create a strategy for your life, implement your strategy, and achieve breakthrough innovation.”

—Vijay Govindarajan, Coxe Distinguished Professor at Dartmouth Tuck School of Business, Marvin Bower Fellow at Harvard Business School, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Reverse Innovation*

“There is a reason Marshall is the world’s number one executive coach, it’s because he understands people and how to get them performing at their best. This book is a breakthrough in how you and your people reach peak levels of performance and then stay there. Just one strategy we implemented has the productivity of my executive team soaring. As the chairman of the world’s largest business coaching company, I read a lot of books on business and personal success, and very, very few deliver the way Marshall has.”

—Brad Sugars, president, chairman, and founder, ActionCOACH

“*Triggers* is your must-read road map to become the person you deserve to be! It’s like having the world’s top executive coach as your personal mentor, with rich stories and breakthrough research that give you just the practical tools you need to take your career to the next level.”

—Mark Thompson, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Admired*, *Success Built to Last*, and *Now, Build a Great Business*

“No one applies the principles of quality and continuous improvement to human interaction better than Marshall. *Triggers* represents a fantastic next step in his thinking!”

—Subir Chowdhury, first recipient of the Philip B. Crosby Medal from the American Society for Quality, author of thirteen books on quality management

“A wise book with delightful stories on how to self-actualize.”

—Philip Kotler, S. C. Johnson Distinguished Professor of Marketing, Northwestern University Kellogg School of Management, world leading thinker in marketing

“Marshall Goldsmith is well-known as one of the world’s top thinkers on leadership. Once you read *Triggers*, you’ll realize that he is a one of the world’s top observers of smart, driven people and their many behavioral quirks. I promise you, you’ll recognize your own ticks in many of Marshall’s telling anecdotes—I sure saw many of my own—and if you pay attention to what Marshall says, you’ll see what you need to do to change that behavior for the better.”

—Eric Schurenberg, president and editor in chief, *INC* magazine

“Marshall Goldsmith is the most disciplined thought leader I know. He personally practices what he preaches, with great results. *Triggers* is his latest gift to leaders who want to achieve positive behavioral change.”

—Geoff Smart, chairman, ghSMART, *New York Times* bestselling coauthor of *Who* and *Power* books

“*Triggers* is both a powerful wake-up call to be the extraordinary person you were meant to be, as well as a pragmatic blueprint for self-renewal, restoration, and realization. Get ready for a roller coaster ride on the most important adventure of your life.”

—Chip Bell, author of *Sprinkles* and *Managers as Mentors*

“Marshall and Mark have done it again!!! They have ‘done their best’ to prepare insightful, useful, and practical tips to ensure sustainable behavioral change. Reading this book feels like having Marshall ‘knee-to-knee’ coaching me. What a privilege it is to learn from his insights, savor his stories, and fully engage in positive personal change. Marshall is truly a gift to all of us who want to be better.”

—David Ulrich, professor, University of Michigan, bestselling author and world’s #1 thinker in human resources

## Marshall Goldsmith’s work has been recognized by:

- *Thinkers50*—world’s most influential leadership thinker, top ten business thinker, top rated executive coach
- *INC* magazine—America’s #1 executive coach
- Institute for Management Studies—lifetime achievement award for management education
- National Academy of Human Resources—Fellow of the Academy (America’s top HR recognition)
- *Forbes*—one of five most respected executive coaches
- *Economist*—most credible thought leaders in the new era of business
- *Wall Street Journal*—top ten executive educators
- *BusinessWeek*—fifty great American leaders
- American Management Association—fifty great leaders who have impacted the field of management over the past eighty years

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ALSO BY MARSHALL GOLDSMITH WITH MARK REITER

*What Got You Here Won't Get You There*

*Mojo*

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# Triggers

Creating Behavior That Lasts—

Becoming the Person

You Want to Be

Marshall Goldsmith

and Mark Reiter



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*Also by Marshall Goldsmith with Mark Reiter*

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*This book is dedicated to  
Avery Reid Shriner and Austin Marshall Shriner—  
my new twin grandchildren.  
They represent my hope for the future!*

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I saw a beggar leaning on his wooden crutch,  
He said to me, “You must not ask for so much.”  
And a pretty woman leaning in her darkened door,  
She cried to me, “Hey, why not ask for more?”

—*Leonard Cohen, “Bird on a Wire”*

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## Introduction

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**M**y colleague Phil tripped down his basement steps and landed hard on his head. For a few moments as he lay on the floor, his arms and shoulders tingling, he thought he was paralyzed. To wobble to stand up, he sat against a wall and assessed the damage. The tingling in his limbs meant he still retained feeling (a good thing). His head and neck were throbbing. He could feel blood trickling down his back from a lacerated scalp. He knew that he needed to go to an ER so they could clean up the wound and check for broken bones and internal bleeding. He also knew he was in no shape to drive himself.

It was a Saturday morning. Phil's wife and grown sons were not home. He was alone in his quiet suburban house. He pulled his cell phone out to call for help. As he scrolled through names he realized he didn't have a single friend nearby whom he felt comfortable calling in an emergency. He'd never made the effort to know his neighbors. Reluctant to call 911 since he wasn't gushing blood or having a heart attack, Phil tracked down the home number of a middle-aged couple a few houses away and dialed. A woman named Kay answered, someone he acknowledged on the street but had rarely spoken to. He explained his situation and Kay rushed over, entering Phil's home through an unlocked back door. She found Phil in the basement, helped him to his feet, and drove him to the local hospital, staying with him during the five hours he was examined. Yes, he'd suffered a concussion, the doctor said, and he'd be in pain for a few weeks, but nothing was broken and he'd recover. Kay drove him back to his house.

Resting in his dark house later that day, Phil thought about how close he had come to disaster. He recalled the moment when his head hit the floor, the bright brittle sound at impact, like a hammer coming down on a marble counter and shattering the stone into tiny pieces. He remembered the electrical charge coursing through his limbs and the terror he felt at the prospect of never walking again. He thought about how lucky he was.

But Phil's fall triggered more than gratitude for not being crippled. He also reflected on the remarkable kindness of his neighbor Kay, and how she had selflessly given up her day for him. For the first time in years, he thought about how he was living his life. Phil told himself, "I need to get better at making friends." Not because he might need people like Kay to save him in the future, but because he wanted to become more like Kay.

Not all of us require a violent life-threatening knock on the head to change our behavior. It often seems that way.

||

This is a book about adult behavioral change. Why are we so bad at it? How do we get better at it? How do we choose what to change? How do we make others appreciate that we've changed? How can we strengthen our resolve to wrestle with the timeless, omnipresent challenge any successful person must

stare down—becoming the person we want to be?

To answer these questions, I'll begin by focusing on the triggers in our environment. Their impact is profound.

A trigger is any stimulus that reshapes our thoughts and actions. In every waking hour we are being triggered by people, events, and circumstances that have the potential to change us. These triggers appear suddenly and unexpectedly. They can be major moments, like Phil's concussion, or as minor as a paper cut. They can be pleasant, like a teacher's praise that elevates our discipline and ambition—and turns our life around 180 degrees. Or they can be counterproductive, like an ice-cream cone that tempts us off our diet or peer pressure that confuses us into doing something we know is wrong. They can stimulate our competitive instincts, from the common workplace carrot of a bigger paycheck to the annoying sight of a rival outdistancing us. They can drain us, like the news that a loved one is seriously ill or that our company is up for sale. They can be as elemental as the sound of rain triggering a sweet memory.

Triggers are practically infinite in number. Where do they come from? Why do they make us behave against our interests? Why are we oblivious to them? How do we pinpoint the triggering moments that anger us, or throw us off course, or make us feel that all is right in the world—so we can avoid the bad ones, repeat the good ones? How do we make triggers work for us?

Our environment is the most potent triggering mechanism in our lives—and not always for our benefit. We make plans, set goals, and stake our happiness on achieving these goals. But our environment constantly intervenes. The smell of bacon wafts up from the kitchen, and we forget our doctor's advice about lowering our cholesterol. Our colleagues work late every night, so we feel obliged to match their commitment, and miss one of our kid's baseball games, then another, then another. Our phone chirps, and we glance at the glowing screen instead of looking into the eyes of the person we love. This is how our environment triggers undesirable behavior.

Because our environmental factors are so often outside of our control, we may think there is not much we can do about them. We feel like victims of circumstance. Puppets of fate. I don't accept that. Fate is the hand of cards we've been dealt. Choice is how we play the hand.

Despite a hard knock on the head, Phil didn't bend to circumstance. His *fate* was to fall, hit his head, and recover. His *choice* was to become a better neighbor.

||

There's an emotion we're all familiar with hovering over these pages rather than coursing through them. It's not explicit. But that doesn't mean it's less real. It's the feeling of *regret*. It's implied every time we ask ourselves why we haven't become the person we want to be.

A big part of my research for this book involved asking people the simple question, "What's the biggest behavioral change you've ever made?" The answers run the gamut, but the most poignant ones—guaranteed to raise the emotional temperature in the room—come from people recalling the behavior they should have changed but didn't. They're reflecting on their failure to become the person they wanted to be. And it often overwhelms them with desolate feelings of regret.

We are not like Jane Austen's overbearing Lady Catherine de Bourgh (from *Pride and Prejudice*), who boasts of her natural taste in music, then without a sixteenth note of irony, says, "If I had ever learnt, I should have been a great proficient." Unlike Lady Catherine, we feel regret's sharp sting when we reflect on the opportunities squandered, the choices deferred, the efforts not made, the talents never

developed in our lives. Usually when it's too late to do much about it.

Regret was definitely in the air when I interviewed Tim, a once-powerful executive producer of a network sports division. Tim's network career ended prematurely when he was in his mid-forties because he didn't get along with his superiors. A decade later, in his mid-fifties, Tim was getting by with consulting jobs. He still had an expertise that companies needed. But he would never find the stable executive position he once had. He has a reputation: *doesn't play well with others*.

Tim has had years to confront the reasons for this reputation. But he never articulated them until the day his daughter asked for fatherly advice before she started her first TV job.

"I told her the greatest virtue is patience," Tim said. "You're operating in a business where everyone is looking at the clock. A show starts and ends precisely at a given time. The control booth screens display everything in hundredths of a second. And it never stops. There's always another show to do. The clock is always ticking. This creates an incredible sense of urgency in everyone. But if you're in charge, it also tests your patience. You want everything done *now*, or even sooner. You become very demanding, and when you don't get what you want, you can get frustrated and angry. You start treating people as the enemy. They're not only disappointing you but making you look bad. And then you get angry."

That was a triggering moment for Tim. Until he said it he hadn't realized how much his professional impatience was influenced by a savage network TV environment—and how it had seeped into other parts of his life.

He explained: "I saw that I'm the kind of guy who emails a friend and gets mad if I don't hear back within the hour. Then I start harassing that friend for ignoring me. Basically, I'm treating my friends the way I used to treat production assistants. It's how I face the world. That's no way to live."

Tim needed an intimate father-daughter encounter to trigger an insight that fed the powerful feeling of regret. "If I could change anything about my life," he concluded, "I'd be more patient."

Regret is the emotion we experience when we assess our present circumstances and reconsider how we got here. We replay what we actually did against what we should have done—and find ourselves wanting in some way. Regret can hurt.

For such a penetrating and wounding emotion, regret doesn't get much respect. We treat it as a benign factor, something to deny or rationalize away. We tell ourselves, "I've made stupid choices but they've made me who I am today. Lamenting the past is a waste of time. I learned my lesson. Let's move on." That's one way of looking at regret—if only as a form of self-protection from the pain of knowing we missed out. We're comforted by the fact that no one is immune to regret (we're not alone) and that time heals all wounds (the only thing worse than experiencing pain is not knowing if and when the pain will go away).

I want to suggest a different attitude, namely embracing regret (although not too tightly or for too long). The pain that comes with regret should be mandatory, not something to be shooed away like an annoying pet. When we make bad choices and fail ourselves or hurt the people we love, we *should* feel pain. That pain can be motivating and in the best sense, triggering—a reminder that maybe we messed up but we can do better. It's one of the most powerful feelings guiding us to change.

If I do my job properly here and you do your part, two things will happen: 1) you will move closer to becoming the person you want to be and 2) you'll have less regret.

Shall we get started?



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## Part One

# Why Don't We Become the Person We Want to Be?

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## Chapter 1

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# The Immutable Truths of Behavioral Change

As an executive coach, I've been helping successful leaders achieve positive lasting change in behavior for more than thirty-five years. While almost all of my clients embrace the opportunity to change, some are a little reluctant in the beginning. Most are aware of the fact that behavioral change will help them become more effective leaders, partners, and even family members. A few are not.

My process of helping clients is straightforward and consistent. I interview and listen to my clients and key stakeholders. These stakeholders could be their colleagues, direct reports, or board members. I accumulate a lot of confidential feedback. Then I go over the summary of this feedback with my clients. My clients take ultimate responsibility for the behavioral changes that they want to make. My job is then very simple. I help my clients achieve positive, lasting change in the behavior that *they* choose as judged by key stakeholders that *they* choose. If my clients succeed in achieving this positive change—as judged by their stakeholders—I get paid. If the key stakeholders do not see positive change, I don't get paid.

Our odds of success improve because I'm with the client every step of the way, telling him or her how to stay on track and not regress to a former self. But that doesn't diminish the importance of these two immutable truths:

**Truth #1:** Meaningful behavioral change is very hard to do.

It's hard to initiate behavioral change, even harder to stay the course, hardest of all to make the change stick. I'd go so far as to say that adult behavioral change is the most difficult thing for sentient human beings to accomplish.

If you think I'm overstating its difficulty, answer these questions:

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- *What do you want to change in your life?* It could be something major, such as your weight (a big one), your job (big too), or your career (even bigger). It could be something minor, such as changing your hairstyle or checking in with your mother more often or changing the wall color in your living room. It's not my place to judge what you want to change.
- *How long has this been going on?* For how many months or years have you risen in the morning and told yourself some variation on the phrase, "This is the day I make a change"?
- *How's that working out?* In other words, can you point to a specific moment when you decided to change something in your life and you acted on the impulse and it worked out to your satisfaction?

The three questions conform to the three problems we face in introducing change into our lives.

*We can't admit that we need to change*—either because we're unaware that a change is desirable, or more likely, we're aware but have reasoned our way into elaborate excuses that deny our need for change. In the following pages, we'll examine—and dispense with—the deep-seated beliefs that trigger our resistance to change.

*We do not appreciate inertia's power over us.* Given the choice, we prefer to do nothing—which is what I suspect our answers to "How long has this been going on?" are couched in terms of years rather than days. Inertia is the reason we never start the process of change. It takes extraordinary effort to *start* doing something in our comfort zone (because it's painless or familiar or mildly pleasurable) in order to *start* something difficult that will be good for us in the long run. I cannot supply the required effort in this book. That's up to you. But through a simple process emphasizing structure and self-monitoring, we can provide you with the kick start that triggers and sustains positive change.

*We don't know how to execute a change.* There's a difference between motivation and understanding and ability. For example, we may be *motivated* to lose weight but we lack the nutritional *understanding* and cooking *ability* to design and stick with an effective diet. Or flip it over: we have understanding and ability but lack the motivation. One of the central tenets of this book is that our behavior is shaped, both positively and negatively, by our environment—and that a keen appreciation of our environment can dramatically lift not only our motivation, ability, and understanding of the change process, but also our confidence that we can actually do it.

I vividly recall my first decisive behavioral change as an adult. I was twenty-six years old, married to my first and only wife, Lyda, and pursuing a doctorate in organizational behavior at the University of California, Los Angeles. Since high school I had been a follicly challenged man, but back then I was loath to admit it. Each morning I would spend several minutes in front of the bathroom mirror carefully arranging the wispy blond stands of hair still remaining on the top of my head. I'd smooth the hair forward from back to front, then curve them to a point in the middle of my forehead, forming a pattern that looked vaguely like a laurel wreath. Then I'd walk out into the world with my ridiculous comb-over convinced I looked normal like everyone else.

When I visited my barber, I'd give specific instructions on how to cut my hair. One morning I dozed off in the chair, so he trimmed my hair too short, leaving insufficient foliage on the sides to execute my comb-over regimen. I could have panicked and put on a hat for a few weeks, waiting for the strands to grow back. But as I stood in front of the mirror later that day, staring at my reflected image, I said to

myself, “Face it, you’re bald. It’s time you accepted it.”

That’s the moment when I decided to shave the few remaining hairs on the top of my head and live my life as a bald man. It wasn’t a complicated decision and it didn’t take great effort to accomplish. I had a short trim at the barber from then on. But in many ways, it is still the most liberating change I’ve made as an adult. It made me happy, at peace with my appearance.

I’m not sure what triggered my acceptance of a new way of self-grooming. Perhaps I was horrified at the prospect of starting every day with this routine forever. Or maybe it was the realization that I wasn’t fooling anyone.

The reason doesn’t matter. The real achievement is that I actually decided to change and successfully acted on that decision. That’s not easy to do. I had spent years fretting and fussing with my hair. That’s a long time to continue doing something that I knew, on the spectrum of human folly, fell somewhere between vain and idiotic. And yet I persisted in this foolish behavior for so many years because (a) I couldn’t admit that I was bald, and (b) under the sway of inertia, I found it easier to continue doing my familiar routine than change my ways. The one advantage I had was (c) I knew how to execute the change. Unlike most changes—for example, getting in shape, learning a new language, or becoming a better listener—it didn’t require months of discipline and measuring and following up. Nor did it require the cooperation of others. I just needed to stop giving my barber crazy instructions and let him do his job. If only all our behavioral changes were so uncomplicated.

## **Truth #2:** No one can make us change unless we truly want to change.

This should be self-evident. Change has to come from within. It can’t be dictated, demanded, or otherwise forced upon people. A man or woman who does not wholeheartedly commit to change will never change.

I didn’t absorb this simple truth until my twelfth year in the “change” business. By then I had done intensive one-on-one coaching with more than a hundred executives, nearly all successes but a smattering of failures, too.

As I reviewed my failures, one conclusion leapt out: *Some people say they want to change, but they don’t really mean it.* I had erred profoundly in client selection. I believed the clients when they said they were committed to changing, but I had not drilled deeper to determine if they were telling the truth.

Not long after this revelation, I was asked to work with Harry, the chief operating officer of a large consulting firm. Harry was a smart, motivated, hardworking deliver-the-numbers alpha male who was also arrogant and overdelighted with himself. He was habitually disrespectful to his direct reports, driving several of them away to work for the competition. This development rattled the CEO, hence the call to me to coach Harry.

Harry talked a good game at first, assuring me that he was eager to get started and get better. I interviewed his colleagues and direct reports, even his wife and teenage children. They all told the same story. Despite his abundant professional qualities, Harry had an overwhelming need to be the smartest person in the room, always proving that he was right, winning every argument. It was exhausting and off-putting. Who could say how many opportunities had vanished because people loathed being pummeled and browbeaten?

As Harry and I reviewed his 360-degree feedback, he claimed to value the opinions of his co-workers.

and family members. Yet whenever I brought up an area for improvement, Harry would explain point by point how his questionable behavior was actually justified. He'd remind me that he majored in psychology in college and then analyze the behavioral problems of everyone around him, concluding that *they* needed to change. In a mind-bending display of chutzpah, he asked me for suggestions for helping these people get better.

In my younger days, I would have overlooked Harry's resistance. Mimicking his arrogance and denial, I would have convinced myself that I could help Harry where lesser mortals would fail. Fortunately, I remembered my earlier lesson: *Some people say they want to change, but they don't really mean it.* It was dawning on me that Harry was using our work together as another opportunity to display his superiority and to reverse the misperceptions of all the confused people surrounding him, including his wife and kids. By our fourth meeting I gave up the ghost. I told Harry that my coaching wouldn't be helpful to him and we parted ways. (I felt neither joy nor surprise when I later learned that the firm had fired Harry. Evidently the CEO had concluded that an individual who actively resists help has maxed out professionally and personally.)

I often call up my time with Harry as a stark example that, even when altering our behavior represents all reward and no risk—and clinging to the status quo can cost us our careers and relationships—we resist change.

We're even defeated by change when it's a matter of life and death. Consider how hard it is to break a bad habit such as smoking. It's so daunting that, despite the threat of cancer and widespread social disapproval, two-thirds of smokers who say they'd like to quit never even try. And of those who do try, nine out of ten fail. And of those who eventually quit—namely the most motivated and disciplined people—on average they fail six times before succeeding.

Compared to other behavioral changes in our lives, smoking is a relatively simple challenge. After all, it's a self-contained behavior. It's just you and your habit, a lone individual dealing with one demon. You either lick it or you don't. It's up to you—and only you—to declare victory. No one else gets a say in the matter.

Imagine how much harder it is when you let other people into the process—people whose actions are unpredictable, beyond your control—and their responses can affect your success. It's the difference between hitting warm-up tennis balls over the net and playing a match where an opponent is rocketing the balls back at you.

That's what makes adult behavioral change so hard. If you want to be a better partner at home or a better manager at work, you not only have to change your ways, you have to get some buy-in from your partner or co-workers. Everyone around you has to recognize that you're changing. Relying on other people increases the degree of difficulty exponentially.

Let that last sentence sink in before you turn the page. This is not a book about stopping a bad habit such as smoking cigarettes or dealing with your late-night craving for ice cream. Nicotine and ice cream aren't the target constituency here. It's about changing your behavior when you're among people you respect and love. They are your target audience.

What makes positive, lasting behavioral change so challenging—and causes most of us to give up early in the game—is that we have to do it in our imperfect world, full of triggers that may pull and push us off course.

The good news is that behavioral change does not have to be complicated. As you absorb the methods in the following pages, do not be lulled into dismissiveness because my advice sounds simple. Achieving

meaningful and lasting change may be simple—simpler than we imagine.

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But *simple* is far from *easy*.

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## Chapter 2

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# Belief Triggers That Stop Behavioral Change in Its Tracks

During the twelve years he was mayor of New York City, from 2001 to 2013, Michael Bloomberg was an indefatigable “social engineer,” always striving to change people’s behavior for the better (at least in his mind). Whether he was banning public smoking or decreeing that all municipal vehicles go hybrid, his objective was always civic self-improvement. Near the end of his third and final term in 2012, he decided to attack the childhood obesity epidemic. He did so by banning sales of sugary soft drinks in quantities greater than sixteen ounces. We can debate the merits of Bloomberg’s idea and the inequities created by some of its loopholes. But we can all agree that reducing childhood obesity is a good thing. In one small way, Bloomberg was trying to alter the environment that tempts people to overconsume sugary drinks. His rationale was unassailable: if consumers—for example, moviegoers—aren’t offered a thirty-two-ounce soft drink for a few pennies more than the sixteen-ounce cup, they’ll buy the smaller version and consume less sugar. He wasn’t stopping people from drinking all the sugary beverage they wanted (they could still buy *two* sixteen-ounce cups). He was merely putting up a small obstacle to alter people’s behavior—like closing your door so people must knock before interrupting you.

Personally, I didn’t have a dog in this race. (I am not here to judge. My mission is to help people become the person that they want to be, not tell them who that person is.) I watched Bloomberg’s plan unfold purely as an exercise in the richness of our resistance to change. I love New York. The good citizens didn’t disappoint.

People quickly lodged the “nanny state” objection: where does this Bloomberg fellow come off telling me how to live my life? Local politicians objected because they hadn’t been consulted. They hated the mayor’s high-handed methods. The NAACP objected to the mayor’s hypocrisy in targeting soft drinks while cutting physical education budgets in schools. So-called “mom and pop” store owners objected because the

ban exempted convenience stores such as 7-Eleven, which could put the mom-and-pops out of business. Jon Stewart mocked the mayor because the two-hundred-dollar ticket for illegally selling supersize sodas was double the fine for selling marijuana.

And so on. In the end, after a barrage of lawsuits, a judge struck down the law for being “arbitrary and capricious.” My point: even when the individual and societal benefits of changing a specific behavior are indisputable, we are geniuses at inventing reasons to avoid change. It is much easier, and more fun, to attack the strategy of the person who’s trying to help than to try to solve the problem.

That genius becomes more acute when it applies to us—when it’s our turn to change how we behave. We fall back on a set of beliefs that trigger denial, resistance, and ultimately self-delusion. They are more pernicious than excuses. An excuse is the handy explanation we offer when we disappoint other people. Not merely convenient, it is often made up on the spot. We don’t exercise because “it’s boring” or we’re “too busy.” We’re late for work because of “traffic” or “an emergency with the kids.” We hurt someone because we “didn’t have a choice.” These excuses, basically variations on “The dog ate my homework,” are so abused it’s a wonder anyone believes us (even when we’re telling the truth).

But what should we call the rationalizations we privately harbor when we disappoint ourselves? Merely “excuse” is somehow inadequate to describe these inner beliefs that represent how we interpret our world. An excuse explains why we fell short of expectations after the fact. Our inner beliefs trigger failure before it happens. They sabotage lasting change by canceling its possibility. We employ these beliefs as articles of faith to justify our inaction and then wish away the result. I call them belief triggers.

## 1. If I understand, I will do.

Everything that I am going to suggest in this book works. It doesn’t “kind of” work or “sort of” work. It works. My suggestions will help you understand how to close the gap between the “ideal you” and the “real you.” However, this does not mean that you will do it.

People who read my writing sometimes tell me, “It’s common sense. I didn’t read anything here that I don’t already know.” It’s the default critique of most advice books (you may be thinking it right now). My thought is always: “True, but I’ll bet that you read plenty here that you don’t already do.” If you’ve ever been to a seminar or corporate retreat where all attendees agreed on what to do next—and a year later nothing has changed—you know that there’s a difference between *understanding* and *doing*. Just because people understand what to do doesn’t ensure that they will actually do it. This belief triggers *confusion*.

It also pervades the fourteen belief triggers that follow. You may be familiar with them. You may think they don’t apply to you. This is a belief worth questioning, too.

## 2. I have willpower and won’t give in to temptation.

We deify willpower and self-control, and mock its absence. People who achieve through remarkable willpower are “strong” and “heroic.” People who need help or structure are “weak.” This is crazy—because few of us can accurately gauge or predict our willpower. We not only overestimate it, w



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