CHANGING THE BEHAVIOR OF *SUCCESSFUL* PEOPLE: A KEY CHALLENGE IN LEADING FOR INNOVATION

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We have recently completed a review of research related to the topic of helping *successful* people[1] change their behavior. Most of the research on behavioral change has been done concerning reasonably dysfunctional behavior (e.g. alcoholism, drug addiction, severe over-eating or smoking). Quite a bit has been written on *why* successful people are successful. Not surprisingly, very little has been written on the unique challenges involved in helping successful people change.[2]

In our role as executive coaches, the people we are asked to work with are all extremely successful. They are usually key executives in major organizations. They are almost always very intelligent, dedicated, and persistent. They are committed to the success of their organizations, their customers and their co-workers. They have high personal integrity. Many are financially independent. They are not working because they *have* to work. They are working because they *want* to work. *Intellectually*, they realize that behaviors that were acceptable for the success of yesterday may not be the behaviors that are needed to achieve innovation for tomorrow. While they understand the *theory* of the need for behavioral change, they often have difficulty applying it to themselves!

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[1] When the term "successful people" is used, it will be referring to successful people *in general* or the characteristics that are *generally* associated with successful people. There will be specific cases where these generalizations do not apply. For example, dedication is generally associated with successful people. There may be specific examples where dedication is not related to success.

[2] Please accept the suggestions in this chapter as ideas based upon existing research. Much more research needs to be done in developing a complete model for helping successful people change

Our assumption is that you, the reader of this chapter, are also a successful person. (We have seen profiles of our readers, and more often than not, this is the case.) You may not be the CEO of a major corporation or be financially independent; however, you are probably 1) seen as successful by most socio-economic standards, 2) a leader in your work (or have the potential to become a leader), and 3) interested in leading for innovation. In this chapter we will frequently use the word "you". This will refer to "you" as a typically successful person. It should be interesting for you to see how closely the "you" we are describing matches your own behavior.

On the surface, it may seem that it would be easy to help successful people to become even better. However, it is both easier and more difficult to help you (as a successful person) to change. This chapter will review: 1) why it is *easier* to help successful people to change behavior; 2) why it is *more difficult* to help successful people to change behavior and 3) a model for helping successful people to change behavior.

Why it may be *easier* for successful people to change their behavior.

Successful people have high self-esteem. You are not "threatened" by the world. You realize that the need to change does not negatively reflect on your worth as a human being. You believe that you are worthwhile and that you deserve the success that you have achieved. You believe that you can make the changes needed to help you continue to be successful.

Successful people have a high aptitude to change. You are intelligent. You are a "quick learner" and have the ability to learn new behaviors. You have the potential to acquire new interpersonal skills if you see the value of these skills.

Successful people have a learning orientation. You have a positive view toward learning new concepts. You can process multiple approaches to achieve a goal. You are frequently scanning the environment for new opportunities. You like to hear suggestions and new ideas.

Successful people believe that they can achieve goals. If you "set your mind" to an objective, you believe that you can "make it happen". You have a high need for achievement and a history of achieving goals. Your belief in your ability to achieve goals helps lead to your actual goal achievement. This combination of belief and reinforcement creates a "virtuous cycle" that leads to more achievement and more belief in future success.

Successful people take responsibility. You have a high "locus of control". You believe that you can make a difference in the world. You do not feel like a helpless victim or a martyr who is being controlled by outside events. You see success as being more a function of ability and effort than as a function of luck, random chance or external factors.

Successful people strive for internal consistency. You want to behave in a way that is consistent with your values. You want your behavior to be closely aligned with your personal priorities and beliefs.

Successful people are persistent. You do not give up when "the going gets tough". You keep trying in the face of adversity. You see failures as "opportunities for learning" or "challenges to overcome" not permanent defeats.

Given all of these positive factors, it would be tempting to believe that helping successful people (like you) to change behavior is easy! Unfortunately, successful people also tend to have several

unique qualities that can make behavioral change quite challenging.

Why it may be *more difficult* for successful people to change behavior.

Successful people often confuse correlation with causation. You may fall into this trap. You may think, "I behave this way. I am successful. Therefore, I must be successful because I behave this way." This confusion of correlation with causality is what leads to "superstitious" behavior. Almost all successful people are successful *because of* many of their behaviors and *in spite of* some of their behaviors. You may fear that changing any of your behaviors may "break the string of successes" that has gotten you to where you are today.

A key executive in a hugely successful corporation was perceived as being overly defensive and a poor listener. He informed us that one of the keys to his success was *not* listening to others (who were often "confused") and quickly letting those who disagreed with him know that they were wrong. He saw his behavior as being "assertive" and "decisive". His co-workers saw his behavior as being "disrespectful" and "counterproductive". We have conducted or reviewed hundreds of studies on the desired qualities of future leaders. "Poor listening" has never been cited as one of these desired qualities! In fact, this executive's own company publicly noted that they valued listening and encouraged employees to "challenge the system"! Even this executive saw the value of these concepts for his organization. He just did not see how *his* demonstrated behavior was inconsistent with the stated values of his organization.

Successful people tend to attribute success to personal motivation and ability - not to luck, random chance or external factors. This attribution is generally a positive quality associated with achieving success. It makes you want to try harder because you believe that *you* will be a key factor in the achievement of goals. However, this same type of attribution can be a detriment when change is needed. Successful people may have trouble realizing that their success is sometimes caused by external factors and that their leadership behavior may, in fact, be doing more harm than good. For example, a leader who is working with a fantastic product in a great market may have a hard time *not* achieving success.

Successful people's persistence can make it harder for them to change. Many successful people have been brought up with the "quitters never win" mantra. While this philosophy is generally useful, it can become a problem when change is required. Sometimes even the best leaders' approaches do not work. It can be difficult for you to "let go" of a behavior that has long lost its' usefulness.

Successful people tend to remember their successes and de-emphasize their failures. One common characteristic of goal achievers is that they tend to focus on the potential for future success and not fixate on past failures. Goal achievers are more likely to de-emphasize their failure (or attribute failure to "external" causes) than less successful people. When a person who feels like a "loser" experiences failure, it is easy for him/her to think, "that is just the way I am!" When a person who feels like a "winner" experiences failure it is easy for her/him to think, "no one could have succeeded in that environment!" This characteristic may lead to unwillingness to assume personal responsibility for problems as well as a tendency to see the cause of success as internal and the cause of failure as external.

Successful people's high self-esteem may be misdirected. It is generally very valuable to have a high opinion of yourself as a human being. As was stated previously, people with high self-esteem tend to be more likely to achieve goals than those who have low self-esteem. However, it is important to be wary of how the term "self" is applied. Many of us have a list of behaviors that define our personalities. We think of these characteristics as defining "who we *really* are". For successful people, most of these characteristics are typically associated with achievement (e.g. "hard-worker", "smart", etc.). However, some behaviors of even the most successful people may not be associated with achievement (e.g. "poor listener"). Let us assume that this "smart", "hard working", "poor listener" tries to become a "good listener". The person's first reaction to the new behavior may be to feel "unreal" or "phony". Why? Because this new behavior may be perceived as being "not the *real* me". It can be very hard for a person who has received recognition and admiration to change the definition of "me" that seems to have been so closely associated with success in the past.

Successful people consistently over-rate their performance relative to their peers. We have asked thousands of very successful professionals to "rate yourself" relative to your professional peers. 80-85% of all successful professionals rate themselves in the "top 20%" of their peer group (who are, by the definition of the exercise, equally successful). Over half rate themselves in the "top 10%". Professionals with perceived higher social status (e.g. physicians, pilots, professors, investment bankers, CEOs) tend to have even higher self-assessments relative to their (equally successful) peers. If we over-rate our performance relative to our peers, we may have a tendency to "discount" their opinion of our behavior and the importance of our need to change.

Successful people (and companies) are increasingly "benchmarked" to illustrate "best practices". This trend has become very pronounced in the past 20 years. The phenomenal success of *In Search of Excellence* (by Peters and Waterman) has led to a huge market for publications that study successful people and companies. These publications generally suggest that almost anyone can benefit from emulating the attributes of leading corporations and/or executives. The fact that several of these "benchmark" companies (like IBM) later experienced failure did not cause a reduction in this trend. Books such as *The Jack Welch Way* or *The Warren Buffet Way* continue to be very popular. The trend toward emulation has been expanded to include executives in many successful organizations. Social admiration can be a huge detriment when change is needed. The CEO of a "Fortune 100" company (who has had "ups and downs" on the "admiration scale") noted that, "Success can lead to arrogance. Arrogance can lead us to stop listening. In today's changing world this inability to listen can lead to failure."

Given some of the unique challenges of helping successful people change behavior, what are some strategies that can be applied to help successful people to change?

A Model for Helping Successful People Change Behavior

Involve the successful person in determining a profile of desired behavior. It is hard for anyone to achieve desired behavior unless there is a clear definition of what the desired behavior looks like. Successful people not only have a high "locus of control," they also have a high need for *self-determination*. In other words, you want to change because *you* want to change. One reason that successful people tend to deny the validity of behavioral feedback is that they were not involved in determining the desired behavior for a person in their position. The more you are involved in determining what desired behavior is, the more likely you are to

"buy in" to the validity of demonstrating this behavior. Successful people are very responsive to achieving goals that they have set. They tend to resist changes that make them feel "judged" or "manipulated" to do things that they do not "own". Successful people also have a desire for internal consistency. By involving the person in defining the desired behavior, we increase their odds of actually demonstrating this behavior in relating to their co-workers.

From our experience in developing leadership profiles, we have found that almost all executives will develop a great profile of their "desired" behaviors. Their challenge is usually not in *understanding* how to behave; their challenge is in *doing it*!

Involve the successful person in determining who can provide meaningful feedback on their behavior. The first reason that people deny the validity of behavioral feedback is "wrong behaviors". The second reason is "wrong raters". If you select the people who will provide feedback on how well you demonstrate the behavior that you have chosen you will be much more likely to accept the validity of the feedback. Most executives respect the opinion of *most* of their key colleagues. By allowing the successful person pick the raters one can avoid the potential reaction of "why should a winner like *me* listen to a loser like *him*?" It is very difficult to deny the validity of behavioral feedback when you both choose the behaviors and you select the raters!

Have the successful person receive confidential feedback (from self-selected colleagues). You will tend to respond very well to feedback on the behaviors that you have identified as assessed by the raters that you have selected.
Have the successful person write down behavioral change goals and publicly announce these goals to colleagues. Successful people do not like to fail. They especially do not like to fail *in*

public. By writing down goals for behavioral change, publicly acknowledging the importance of these goals and committing to improve, you have dramatically enhanced your odds on achieving long-term success.

Connect behavioral change goals with the successful person's business and personal goals. The desire to obtain the skills associated with success is more highly correlated with achievement than the desire to achieve success itself. Successful people are ambitious. You are changing your behavior for a reason. You need to know how your behavioral change will help you achieve the business goals that are critical to your personal and professional life. You should understand how progress in demonstrating desired behaviors is connected with "achieving your vision" and "living your values". Successful people have a strong desire to have an integrated life. Achieving this integration in goals will help in ensuring long-term commitment to change.

Train the successful person's co-workers to be helping coaches, not cynics, critics or judges. Unlike other forms of achievement (e.g. doing well in academic pursuits), behavioral change is dependent on an interpersonal *relationship* that involves more than one person. If you feel that you are being helped (in a supportive way) by the people around you, you will "stick with it" and try to achieve long-term behavioral change. If you feel that you are being judged or manipulated you will tend to become hostile to the process and stop your efforts to change. Successful people respond very well to being supportively coached. They respond very poorly to being judged or manipulated.

Have the successful person involve their colleagues in the behavioral change process. Ongoing involvement from supportive colleagues in the behavioral change process is almost always associated with successful long-term change. Colleagues

are much more likely to help if their support is *requested* (as opposed to *expected*).

Give ongoing suggestions that help the successful person envision a great future not focus on a past mistake. Successful people will be more likely to change if suggestions are worded in terms of "ideas to help you achieve your goals in the future" as opposed to "commentary of what you did wrong in the past". The analogy used with racecar drivers is, "Focus on the *road*, not on the *wall*!"

Help the successful person realize that behavioral change is "non-linear" and be prepared for "set-backs". One of the keys to helping you achieve a positive long-term change in behavior is to help you realize that you will have "ups and downs". It is very easy for a successful people to "revert back" to behaviors that they perceive (rightly or wrongly) were correlated with success in the past. One of the keys to long-term change is the continued realization that "set-backs" are a natural part of the change process and are not signs of "permanent failure".

Focus more on recognizing the successful person's improvements than pointing out failures. You are more likely to change by getting positive reinforcement when you improve than by getting negative reinforcement when you fail. Successful people will tend to attribute more validity to sincere recognition of success than to sincere acknowledgment of failure. One way to help ensure that successful people "stick with" their behavioral change program is to help make them feel like "winners" as they participate in the process of change.

In summary, helping successful people change behavior is both easier and more difficult than helping less successful people change. By understanding the unique issues and challenges of helping successful people, organizations can get a huge "return on

investment" from their development efforts. There is generally a "normal distribution" curve for almost all types of achievement. The "marginal gain" for helping a highly successful person move from the "top 2%" to the "top 1%" can be greater (to the organization) than the gain from helping an "average" performer move from the "top 50%" to the "top 20%". This is especially true with "knowledge workers" who represent one of the greatest sources of value for the organization of the future. While much more research needs to be done on this topic, there is a clear body of evidence to help make the best performers even better!