

# Stop: Apologize and Listen

UNDERSTANDING BEHAVIOURS TO PUSH US FORWARD

By Craig Dowden, Ph.D.

**D**r. Marshall Goldsmith is the author or editor of 35 books, which have sold more than two million copies, been translated into 30 languages and become bestsellers in 12 countries. He is also a top-rated executive coach and influential business thinker. His newest book is *Triggers: Creating Behavior That Lasts – Becoming the Person You Want to Be*.

In February 2016, Amazon.com recognized the 100 Best Leadership and Success Books. Two of Dr. Goldsmith's books (*Triggers* and *What Got You Here Won't Get You There*) made this list. Notably, he is one of only two authors with two books on the list.

Craig Dowden, Ph.D., recently spoke with Goldsmith about his latest bestseller and its most important lessons for readers.

**Craig Dowden: What motivated you to write *Triggers*?**

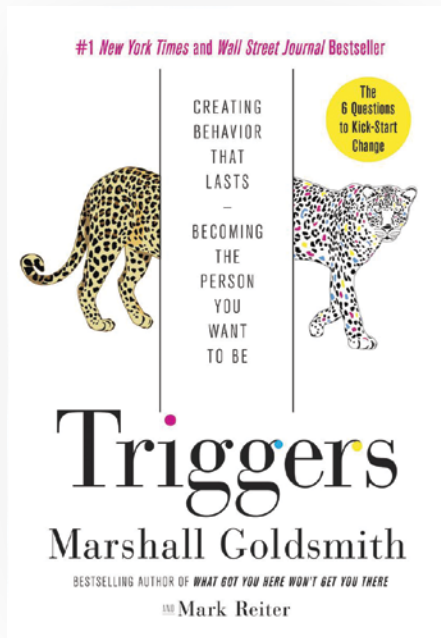
**Marshall Goldsmith:** We all have a good idea of the person we would like to become: dedicated, hardworking, a great family member, nice, thoughtful, courteous, in perfect physical condition, etc. Despite this picture, very few of us actually achieve that ideal. I was interested in what prevents us from being who we want to be.

**CD: That brings us to *Triggers*.**

**MG:** Exactly. A trigger is any stimulus that impacts behaviour and can push us towards, or in most cases against, the person that we want to become. Unfortunately, we seldom understand, appreciate or anticipate the impact of these triggers as we plan our lives.

We believe that if we understand, we will do. However, there's a huge gap between understanding and doing. When my book, *What Got You Here Won't Get You There*, was the number one selling business book in America, the number one selling diet book sold ten times as many copies. Americans keep getting fatter and fatter while purchasing more and more diet books. You don't lose weight because you purchase a diet book. You actually have to go on a diet.

Another delusion is that we never plan for low probability events, like a car wreck or somebody getting sick because they are, by definition, low probability. The problem is there are probably one million low probability events that can occur, and while the odds of one occurring are quite slim, the odds of something



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happening are virtually certain, yet we never plan for it. We plan as if today will proceed smoothly without any interruptions or any problems.

We also grossly overestimate our willpower. We underestimate our need for help as well as our need for structure. In my workshops, I often ask, “Who among you feels you need to be a better listener?” People raise their hands. I’ll call on someone and ask, “How many years have you needed to be a better listener?” And they will say, for example, “Twenty.”

I’ll say to them, “Repeat after me. My name is Joe. I need to be a better listener. I’ve not fixed this by myself in 20 years. Who am I kidding? I’m not going to fix this by myself in the future. I need help, and that’s okay.”

Once we realize we all need help and structure and get over the shame associated with this, we’re much more likely to successfully change.

**CD:** In *Triggers*, you say that apologizing is a “magic move.” Why is that and why don’t more executives and organizations use this magic move more often?

**MG:** We all make mistakes and it’s nothing to be ashamed of. So, when I make a mistake, I should stand up and take responsibility,

apologize and ask people to help me move forward. Historically, leaders desire a “macho” image and are hesitant to do this.

However, if a leader wants everybody else to take responsibility, the best thing a leader can do is to take responsibility themselves. Don’t blame other people. If you want everybody else to take responsibility, let them watch you do it first.

**CD:** What would you say to executives who might think that apologizing shows weakness or incompetence?

**MG:** I would say they’re wrong and I have the data to prove it. In a research study called “Leadership is a Contact Sport,” I found that leaders who get feedback, openly talk about what they want to improve, follow up on a regular basis and get input from their co-workers and employees are seen as more effective. It’s important to note that the original study involved 86,000 – and we are now up to almost a quarter of a million – people who contributed.

**CD:** Does this idea apply outside of North America?

**MG:** There’s no country where this doesn’t work. I have been to 97 countries, and my coaching process is used around the world. There’s no level of management for which it doesn’t work – frontline supervisors all the way up to CEOs.



It also makes a lot of sense. If you had a leader who asked you for your ideas, listened to you, took responsibility and apologized when they made a mistake and followed up with you and really worked at getting better, would you feel worse or better about that leader? I think the answer is pretty obvious.

**CD:** What are some of the most important lessons you hope people take away from reading *Triggers*?

**MG:** Lesson one is that behavioural change is incredibly difficult. As I said earlier, change is very easy to talk about and yet very difficult to do.

Lesson two is if you apply clear, structured direction and get help, you can achieve positive, lasting behavioural change. It's like being in shape. You can't get in shape and then stop. Look at Arnold Schwarzenegger. He already has muscles, but he still needs to lift weights to keep them.

Last but not least, these strategies and approaches are not only applicable at work, they are equally relevant at home as well. If we don't listen well at work, we probably don't listen well at home. I receive lots of letters from people about how the book helped them become better parents, better husbands, better wives and better friends. ■