

The Life-Changing Power of Daily Questions



Dr. Marshall Goldsmith outlines the importance of simple, fundamental questions that have the power to transform the objective and purpose of an individual.

After 35 years as an executive coach, I have learned one key lesson that has near universal application: no one, no matter how determined or passionate, can change his or her behavior without structure.

You might wake up every morning, sure that you will spend your day listening better or watching less television (or whatever your goal happens to be). But without external structure – a person or a plan to guide you – it will be almost impossible to stay on track. Willpower alone won't keep you from flipping on the TV or tuning out while people are talking.

That's because we chronically underestimate the difficulty of making even small changes in our behavior, as I argue in my book, "Triggers: Becoming the Person You Want to Be" (with Mark Reiter, Crown, 2015). 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 stimuli are more powerful than we realize.

Triggers can be good, spurring us on to achievements large and small. They can also be bad, luring us away from meeting our goals. 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. Before we know it, we've missed one of our kids' baseball games, and then another, and then another. Our phone chirps and we glance at the glowing screen instead of looking into the eyes of the person we love.

Structure is our best defense against the triggers in our environment. Creating a structure is a big part of what I do as an executive coach, helping successful leaders achieve positive lasting change in behavior.

My process is straightforward and consistent. I interview and listen to my clients' 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. They 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 their chosen key stakeholders. In other words, I assist them to become the person that they want to become. 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. While personal coaching is tremendously effective, it's not possible for everyone. But anyone can use a basic structure to achieve behavioral change. Over the course of my career, I have created and refined structures that work. One of the most efficient is the Daily Questions. I teach it in my seminars, recommend it to my clients – and I use it for myself.

My ritual goes like this: at a pre-arranged time, I get a phone

call from a person who I have hired solely for the purpose of listening to me report my scores on a brief self-test. The questions (43 of them, at last count), which I wrote myself, function as a simple checklist of my life's top priorities. They ask whether I've done my best to exercise, set goals, have positive interactions with others, etc. My caller listens politely, perhaps offers a few general words of encouragement and hangs up.

This process keeps me focused on becoming a happier, healthier person. It provides discipline I sorely need in my chaotic working life as a coach, teacher, and speaker, which involves traveling 180 days out of the year to countries all over the globe. At the seminars I teach, I encourage students to try it for themselves by writing their own questions. Most of them are eager to participate. To date, almost 5,000 have completed an online version of the daily questions.

When I encounter a skeptic, he or she usually asks why I need to pay another person to remind me of such simple things. Shouldn't I, a fully functional adult, remember to exercise and be a good husband and father? I even have a question about whether I flossed my teeth – surely I don't need a reminder for that! But I do, and so do we all, although we don't always like to admit it. Perhaps because our culture lionizes independence and willpower, we tend to ask for help only for complex or very difficult problems – things we believe we can't possibly be expected to know already.

So why test me on these basics day after day? Not only that, I merely ask whether I've done my best to achieve my goals – that's a pretty soft standard. The only scale of success is, "Did I try?" It sounds simple, and it is. But just because something is simple doesn't mean it's easy. In fact, the daily questions are a very tough test, one of the hardest there is.

But the people who stick with the process reap tremendous rewards – not least, knowing that they have done their best to live their values, every single day.



Dr. Marshall Goldsmith was recognized by *Thinkers50* as the world's #1 leadership thinker and #1 executive coach. His latest book, "Triggers" was a *New York Times* and *Wall Street Journal* bestseller, as well as an *Amazon Best Business Book of the Year*.